

**Jewish and Arab Voices Speak of Peace
By Stephen Witt**

**Park Slope Courier
February 24, 2003**

Forsan Hussein, a diminutive man with movie star looks, had the sanctuary audience in the synagogue on the edge of their pews as he told his tale of growing up in Galilee as a Palestinian-Israeli.

"The first time I met a Jew, I was about 10 and was walking in the Olive Grove which separated my village and the Jewish village and I was shocked to see no horns on the guy's head because I always thought Jews have horns," Hussein said, shaking his head slowly.

"Later on, I realized that my Jewish friends thought we Arabs have tails and therefore wear those big wide gowns – to hide our tails," he added.

Hussein was at the Park Slope Jewish Center on 14th Street and 8th Avenue last week as part of the non-profit Dialogue Project, which seeks to open discussion on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

On this day the Rev. Khader El-Yateem, pastor of Bay Ridge's Salam Arabic Lutheran Church, joined Hussein as the predominantly Jewish audience heard about Palestinian experiences in Israel and the West Bank.

"It's about building trust and building relationships between people who normally would not speak to each other," said Marcia Kannry, founder of the Dialogue Project.

Kannry said the idea is to form an alliance in America out of the violent Middle East with those Palestinians and Jews who have family back in that trouble spot and from a model between them.

That model can hopefully form delegations and go back to the Middle East to see if they can't help break the cycle of violence, Kannry said.

"This is the synagogue where the project started about two years ago with about 200 Palestinians and Jews sitting here hearing a model dialogue. We now have six circles and a waiting list of 700 people to come into these monthly dialogues," Kannry said.

As for Hussein, he spoke about a future Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but said he is also a proud Israeli and even after that state is established will remain an Israeli citizen. Israel is where his village is located as it has been for the past 14 generations, he said.

Hussein noted that Israel, despite being a Jewish state, is also a diverse society with about 20 percent or 1.2 million of its 6 million people being Palestinian-Israelis, Hussein said.

Hussein said he identifies with the Palestinian part of himself as he speaks with a Palestinian-Arabic accent and follows old Palestinian customs and culture.

However, I'm also an Israeli citizen whether I like it or not, but I think we have to work on it because I'm not a proud citizen, but I am a Palestinian with a lot of pride," Hussein said.

"I have only one country in this world and it is Israel. I have rights and responsibilities for this state. I can vote if I want to and I go to the Israeli consulate if I have a problem here," he added.

Hussein, who is studying for his master's degree at Brandeis University, counts an Israeli who goes to the same school as one of his best friends. He is also a communications associate for the Abraham Fund, a foundation dedicated to pursuing coexistence, tolerance and pluralism in Israel.

Hussein said that much of the hatred, prejudice and stereotyping of the two cultures stems from basic misunderstandings and misperceptions.

“For instance, I grew up thinking the Israeli flag represented conquest and Arabs being kicked out of their homeland,” said Hussein. “That the two blue lines on the flag represented the Nile River in Egypt on one side and the Euphrates River in Iraq on the other side and the Jewish star represented all the land in between as the greater Israel.”

Hussein said with this impression he grew up wondering where countries such as Syria, Lebanon and Iraq would go. However, a few years ago, he learned that the lines actually came from the Jewish prayer shawl.

“The point of the story is we need to look deep into our narratives and find out these things, these perceptions we have about the other,” Hussein said.

El-Yateem, who comes from the West Bank, told tales of his jailing and torture at the hands of the Israelis even though he is a Christian.

“Even our elders, who we were raised to respect, were mistreated by young Israeli soldiers,” El-Yateem said.

In the question and answer session following Hussein and El-Yateem’s story, several American Jews asked about the torture and killing of innocent Israeli-Jewish civilians. The two Palestinians responded that the killing and torture came from both sides.

The meeting is part of a monthly series and ended with those in attendance shaking hands and chatting while enjoying juice and pastries.

Kannry said the Dialogue Project can’t take a political stand because it would invalidate people’s different perspectives. However, a citizen’s committee was formed from all the different dialogues, she said.

The committee does legislation monitoring and tries to set up meetings with law-makers.

For more information on The Dialogue Project call 718 768 2175.