



Listening

An underestimated tool for peace

Much has been tried to bring about peace and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. Peace negotiations are attempted steadily, but each time they have come to a standstill. War is repeatedly attempted, declaring "the others must understand that they must give up," but it has only led to more hatred and more violence. The calls for boycotts, the calls for justice, the calls for solidarity activities – the words and actions often only confirm the enemy image and victimhood on both sides and in practice lead to an even deeper level of conflict. "We've tried everything," is often heard. However, there is another very underrated tool. This article is about that.

The challenges

For those who have not experienced war first hand, it may seem easy to end a conflict. Firstly, one must end the vicious circle of vengeance; simply decide that from 10:00 on a certain date there should no longer be killing or harming of one another. An infraction becomes a criminal offense responded to by police, not soldiers. Both parties sit down together to find the best and safest solutions for both peoples in conflict. Some of the Norwegian BridgeBuilder participants do this at the start.

Eastern participants have a completely different starting point. They do not look outside but live in the middle of it. From birth they get to hear the stories about what happened from hostilities or acts of terrorism that struck their family or their community. In kindergarten and school, both sides hear stories about their own people, how heroic their own people have been and how much suffering they have been subjected to. Both parties are convinced that they see the whole picture. And why should they be involved or feel responsible? It's the other side who is to blame. They should change and create a basis for successful peace talks. "My people want peace. It is the other which creates difficulties – and they've always done it. One cannot trust them. "Known facts" about threats by "the others" and victimhood in relation to their own people reside deep. Several participants in the reconciliation program have said that when they each have their own cultural evening and the flag of "the other side" hangs on the wall, they have become physically nauseated.



Conversation: Kjell Magne Bondevik has repeatedly met Salim, head of Musalaha, and stresses that reconciliation at the grassroots level is very important in a peace process

"Nice that they meet and become friends"

"It is so nice that they meet and become friends," some say dismissively. But that simplicity disregards wisdom. With that attitude, sitting down around a table to talk about the situation and how it can be solved would not work. Chances are high that participants would be separated by a stronger hostility than they had before they met. Rather, it requires insight into the situation and cultures on both sides, not to mention required professional knowledge of conflict resolution and reconciliation. There is a separate subject. It requires an understanding of how each party thinks and feels, and how best they can meet each other in a constructive way to face the challenges that inevitably arise.

A Palestinian minister told about an initiative he had taken with all the world's good intentions. He invited a Jewish youth group to be with his own Palestinian youth group, and in the beginning they had it really nice with good humor. They ate falafel and drank cola. The atmosphere was good. But then one of the Palestinians asked an Israeli peer: "If you had been ordered to shoot me, would you then shoot me?" The soldier replied slightly embarrassed "Yes." None of the leaders were able to give them the key to understanding each other, and they parted with a stronger hatred than before they met.

What is important to teach?

There is education about identity, fear, power, communications, about listening, about conflict resolution and forgiveness, and about how to be a peace agent. There is talk about becoming familiar with each other's cultures. And it is an important part of the scheme to gain confidence in one's own identity, pride, and culture, while also gaining respect for and attention to the culture of the 'others.'

But education alone is not enough. We must see each other as human beings. It is important to have experiential activities that join people together to laugh, learn to trust each other, and open up about each other's studies, job, and family situations. This means sitting down and listening openly to a person who you think is ignorant or somehow inhuman.



Surprises

Norwegian participants have a special role to play, just by being present. The first big surprise – and shock – for Middle East participants is when the Norwegian youth ask, "Are you Israeli or Palestinian?" They may reply, "Is it not possible to see right away that I am a Palestinian? Or Israeli?"

As the hours pass they get one ah-hah experience after another from all the similarities of Palestinians and Israelis. Until now they have only focused on differences and what separates, but the Norwegians add both group's glue and the opposites of both Palestinians and Israelis. Norwegians do not speak so loudly, they don't gesture when they talk, they eat an awfully lot of bread (bread meals twice a day are a bit much for people coming from the Middle East) and they are traditional outdoor enthusiasts. Moreover, they question "Why do you think so?" about social issues, and thus insist on clarification in a different way than together one's own where everyone thinks the same. Beyond differences, BridgeBuilders daily discover similarities. In a tight circle it becomes fun to be together.

"But education alone is not enough. We must see each other as human beings."

Shock

Participants wait a few days before addressing difficult issues, because first trust must be built. Then gradually comes the next shock that these new friends are still ingrained Israelis and Palestinians. "She that I paddled with has been a checkpoint soldier." Or "He that I found humor with threw stones at my fellow soldiers." Israelis still turn out to be Israelis, and Palestinians still

prove to be Palestinians. "Is that how you see us? Do you think it's okay to do it or say it?" In order to progress, it's incredibly important that participants be taught and thoroughly experience listening – the underrated tool in reconciliation and peace work.

To listen and be listened to

Often when one is immersed in a heated debate, the next argumentative barrage is being prepared while the first person is speaking. We are not listening. We "know what's coming." If we Europeans have a tendency to this, it can be multiplied by ten when you come to the Middle East. Points are argued with finger-pointing, then repeated with more gesturing. Eventually, the discussion may descend to consciously choosing the words known to hit the hardest blow, wound, or provoke. And at the moment it is the common reaction from one who has been previously wounded or angered.

Listening is not just usual listening, it's about listening to hear – to honor and respect the one who talks and let the message sink in before responding. Here, instructions are needed for putting into words that which is difficult, not as a complaint against the listener but as thoughtful reflection about what we ourselves are experiencing painful. Because a person becomes vulnerable when expressing personal pain, it is absolutely essential that the listener has an open attitude.

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"It did so much good when they listened to me," said one of the BridgeBuilder participants. "I felt as if something inside me was healed when I sat there and put into words some of the greatest pain I've experienced, without being interrupted or contradicted. To the contrary, they listened intently, and I could look at them. They felt my hurt too. They had even been soldiers, but they did not get defensive about what the soldiers had done to me or what I said that they had done to others." It was so quiet that one could hear a pin drop while Shireen spoke.

Jewish David says that it was also painful to listen to. He knew that he was angry and would defend the soldiers. There was certainly a reason why for what they did. He had to remind himself of the words, "First you should just listen and hear how the other experienced this." Also, he had become familiar with Shireen. David knew she was not telling this to attack, but to share with them what was a pain to carry within her. For the first time he was able to perceive and familiarize himself with how it is to be "on the other side."

Then were Sara's words. She starts a bit tentative. She has been a soldier at the checkpoint and knows how difficult it is. She starts by saying that it was painful to listen to what Shireen shared. Sara first had looked forward to being a soldier at a checkpoint because it certainly would provide an opportunity to get acquainted with some Palestinians. When the first car with Palestinian Muslim men rolled up, she bent down and smiled broadly: "Good morning! How are you?" They looked quite astonished, but afterwards she received a harsh message from superiors that said she could not behave that way. It would be too easy for those who had something to hide, if they were greeted with kindness. Did she not understand that in any car that passed, there could be a suicide bomber, and that it was her responsibility to expose it before anyone got hurt? Slowly but surely it crept under her skin that she neither could nor should rely on any Palestinians. Those who intended to

sneak through with explosives could be those who would try acting innocent just to succeed in getting through. Eventually Sara had more fear and the attitude of distancing herself stuck. It was very difficult for Sara, because she knew that the vast majority who passed were innocent everyday people.

Shireen at first was disgusted when Sara said she worked as a checkpoint soldier. She despised them. And she feared them. She would cry out accusations: "How can you consider putting on such a uniform and defending that kind of system ??" But then she reminded herself of the teaching they had received earlier that it was so important to listen attentively and wholeheartedly to those who shared something that was important to them. And precisely because Sara had first sat and listened so openly to her when she spoke, Shireen now was extra open to hear Sarah's story. She had never before seen life from that side. And Sara says she must admit that, yes, it has happened that suicide bombers have tried to pass into Israel, and that they even have blown themselves up at the checkpoints. Although Shireen had never done it herself, she had been thinking that "it is the only way out." But not against Sara and David, of course. They had climbed the rock wall and paddled together.



Gradually many took the floor, from one side and from the other. It was important to share and important to listen. They were becoming extra fond of each other. Eventually it grew into a shared thought that "they are humans on the other side also." Then comes the painful recognition from both sides: "My people have made your people hurt." Until now there has never been a problem because "they only got what he deserved," but then it becomes increasingly clear to participants that this conflict affects innocents on both sides. It is a painful realization that

shakes up limited identity understandings that "we are victims, you are enemies." So it turns out that there are victims and enemies on both sides. This understanding can make a difference. Listening is a painful, healing, and liberating process.

Forgiveness

As an extension of listening comes the challenge to forgive – forgive others who have harmed themselves or one's own people. Recently Angelica Micoyan in Oslo spoke of forgiveness. Angelica is a Messianic Jew and has been involved both as a participant and leader in BridgeBuilders. She emphasizes that forgiveness is a voluntary act, and also a process. Forgiving others is not the same as saying that "it was no big deal" or "it did not matter." If there is a need for forgiveness, it is because someone has done a person harm or caused grief, the pain or consequences of which may be carried within throughout life. Even Angelica experienced losing her father when she was 7–years–old. He was killed in a civil violence episode in the street. She can forgive those who did it, but she cannot get her daddy back. To live in forgiveness does not mean forgetting or excusing what was done. But it means that one gives up seeking revenge. The person leaves judgment to God. Herein lies the key to liberation, reparation, and inner healing, she says. She adds that it can be hardest to forgive oneself. But what Jesus did at Calvary was also for our own sins and failures.

Jesus paid an outrageously high price that we should be set free. Forgiving oneself is something God wants us to do, for he has already paid the price to set us free.

Forgiveness is a process of liberation. Hate and revenge are surrendered for the sake of desired changes and so the other should thrive. Then the former checkpoint soldier in Jerusalem can send a text message to "stone thrower" in Ramallah, because she is so worried about her little brother who just finished military training is waiting to be sent with the first ground force into Gaza during the war that has broken out – and the "stone thrower" calls back and says: "Let us pray right away!" Then throughout the war they call each other and pray together on the phone for each other's people and each other's families. Or the Israeli girl who on the day after returning from BridgeBuilders visits a hospital with the most affected children from Gaza to play the flute for them, give them a smile, and encouragement – and shares with Palestinian friends how painful it was to meet them. They start to look around and ask themselves what they can do as peace agents – that both parties will have a good future.

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Myth: "Normalization is harmful to the peace process."

Some argue that there should not be any contact between Israelis and Palestinians "until the occupation is ceased" because the activity would act as a normalization of the situation and thus perceived as an acceptance of the conditions. This is a devastating barricade to the goal. It incorrectly assumes that the Israelis understand the Palestinian situation or vice versa. They see everything from their own people's understanding of reality and history. If they should have the opportunity to actively desire peace and "win over" the other with a peace that is for the benefit of both parties, then they must have the opportunity to get to know and to listen openly to each other – in an atmosphere that has already built up confidence between them.

Without meeting with new listening, polarization only intensifies and lessens opportunities to find great peace solutions that will be good for both sides. Threats increase and victimhood is reinforced. It is imperative that adversaries are provided



Wall: The physical wall makes contact difficult, but the invisible wall is equally difficult to rise above.

meeting places and meeting opportunities to see each other as dignified people. Traditional reconciliation work alone will not bring peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Required will be a lot of good efforts by politicians, religious leaders, security officials, contact with militia groups, news media, and schools on many levels contributing simultaneously. For all these groups, a new quality of listening will be an essential tool if we are to achieve the goal of communicating and living together. And only with reconciliation at the grassroots level will we succeed.

A necessary and natural part of the Great Commission

We asked General Secretary Rolf Gunnar Heitmann if this really isn't misguided. Israel Mission's task is to bring the Gospel back to the Jews. Many will think that it is a bit of a berry-picking conducting reconciliation.

On the contrary, says Heitmann. God reconciled us humans with one another, and the Bible is clear that it is no longer "Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female." We belong to the same body. Therefore reconciliation is a necessary and natural part of the Great Commission, says Heitmann. And it becomes a very strong testimony, he adds, when other people like Palestinians and Israelis meet Jesus believers and begin to love each other. We have met several who have come to faith through this experience.

This is how we can be a light to the world – to make God's will for reconciliations visible through words and deeds.



Brave peace agents: Last October when it began to get very tense on the streets with terrorist car, stabbing, and firearms attacks, Arthur and Jamil came forward together on Facebook to say: "My name is Jamil and this is my friend Arthur . We may have different political views , but we condemn both hatred and racism, and we refuse to accept what is happening now . We encourage you to live together in peace and coexistence. " In addition, they quoted from 1 Corinthians 13, written first in Arabic then in Hebrew and English .



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