

Seeking understanding ... one dinner at a time

In "living room dialogues," Jewish and Arab Americans talk as they eat – and work toward peace and harmony

By Janet Saidi

Special to The Christian Science Monitor February 6, 2002



TALKING IT OVER: Majeed Khoury, a leader in San Diego's Arab community, chats with Rabbi Moshe Levin at an Arab-Jewish Dialogue dinner party.

SAN DIEGO — It looks like an ordinary party - guests are arriving and greeting one another with hugs; many of them are carrying dishes of food. There is general joking, teasing, and catching up on what has happened the past few weeks. People help carry food out to the table in the living room, where a TV screen flickering in the corner adds to the casual, informal mood.

But a closer look reveals that the TV is tuned to an Arabic station - a first hint that this is not your usual neighborhood gathering. The real tip-off, though, is Jamal Kanj's guest list: Of the 10 or so people coming to his San Diego home this night, about half are Arab and half are Jewish.

And so, as Mr. Kanj, who grew up in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, rushes to find a plate for his friend Miko Peled, grandson of founding Israeli Zionists, it's clear that the most important thing on the menu is the conversation.

This get-together is a once-a-month affair, an opportunity for Jews and Palestinians in the San Diego area to meet over tabouli, falafel, and latkes, and talk frankly - sometimes uncomfortably - about the historic divide that has kept their people at war for two generations.

It's part of Arab-Jewish Dialogue, a grass-roots movement that began in the 1980s and that has picked up new momentum in the United States

since the Palestinian intifada began anew in 2000.

The idea behind these "living-room dialogues," as they're known, is that Jews and Arabs who come to know one another, who hear all the personal stories and dearly held beliefs, can help to build a will for peace.

The forum is nonpolitical, but the hope is that, as the circle of relationships widens, the political process will eventually respond to the popular will.

Arabs and Jews move beyond stereotypes



MAKING A POINT: Through an Arab-Jewish Dialogue group in San Diego, Rabbi Moshe Levin has met and become friends with Palestinian Americans for the first time, but he sometimes finds the encounters - with their candid give and take - frustrating.

The national hub for these groups is in the Bay Area of northern California, where organizers Len and Libby Traubman are in the middle of their 10th year of Palestinian-Israeli dialogue.

In San Diego, there are four groups - two of them started in the past year by James Rauch and Doris Bittar, a married couple who are Jewish and Lebanese, respectively, and deal with the Middle East conflict on the most personal of levels..

"I'm an economics professor at the University of California, San Diego," says Mr. Rauch. He begins the meeting with introductions for the benefit of at least one new attendee. Others follow, introducing themselves by their professions: "I'm an artist." "I'm a lawyer." "I'm a karate instructor."

As it comes to Rabbi Levin's turn, someone points out that perhaps they should be introducing themselves by stating whether they're Jewish or Arab.

"I'm Moshe Levin," says the rabbi, "and I think it's amazing that we went through four people without anyone saying that. I'm a rabbi commuting between San Diego and La Jolla."

Someone jokes: "But are you Jewish?"

Tonight's agenda is to take a frank look at the discussions so far, focusing what has worked and what hasn't. Mr. Levin and Palestinian Majeed Khoury talk of meaningful new relationships, but both want things to move forward, getting to more practical results.

Mr. Khoury complains that Levin asks him repeatedly what he thinks of Palestinian leadership, and then he announces in his booming voice: "I want him to tell me, once, what he thinks of Sharon and Jewish leadership."

People pause briefly at this outburst, then continue munching.

Levin begins his turn by saying, "I'd never established a relationship with Palestinians before, at least not in this country ... getting to know Palestinian people and their narratives, to understand the pain they've gone through - losing their homes - and [to] come to grips with the fact that Israelis may have something to do with that pain...."

Then Levin goes on to admit that he's frustrated at what he thinks has become the main story: "Palestinian suffering and why Israel is responsible." He says he'd like to hear fewer excuses and more accountability about Palestinian violence.

Debbie Seid says: "One of the things that's struck me every time I come to an Arabic home is how similar it is to a Jewish home. But I look on the wall, and it's Arabic instead of Hebrew - it's the Koran instead of the Torah."



Jamal Kanj, who's Arab, welcomes Randy Sturman, a Jew, to his home.

Haifa Khoury says of her recent Jewish acquaintances, "Now I know what you eat. I've never known what Jewish people eat...." But she feels it's going to take more than sharing meals to make a difference. She'd like to see more intense debate, emphasizing how important it is for the group's members to be honest with each other.

The solemnity of Mrs. Khoury's statements is interrupted momentarily as Kanj appears with a huge platter of a traditional Arab dessert called *knafa*, which is met with exclamations from all. Then it's back to the agenda, as Debbie's husband, Colin Seid, who's from South Africa, admits that he's not sure why he's still attending, that the process often seems futile.

"We've been to each other's houses, we've seen the art on the walls.... But what now?" he asks.

When Peled's turn arrives, he says calmly, "I think I have the answers."

This is met with laughter, but he continues in earnest, "No, really. The goal is dialogue - not peace in the Middle East. This is what [Arab-Jewish] Dialogue is, this is what dialogue is all about. This is the process. This is the solution - to get together and talk about these things."

It's a surprise to no one in the group that he feels this way. For Peled, understanding the other side and initiating dialogue has been a lifelong process, and it's a cause he inherited from his father, whose position as a general in the Six Day War made him an Israeli hero, and who co-founded the Israeli Council for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, in 1975.

Meanwhile, the Traubmans, organizing their groups in northern California, have also encountered feelings of futility on the part of members over the past 10 years: "People are used to wanting expedient results," explains Mr. Traubman. "But this change is much more profound. We're talking about deep-seated relationships. That change really is permanent. And the action is building relationships.... The number of people in Dialogue has to increase, and this circle of Dialogue participation has to grow. It has to become so powerful, and so intellectual, and so compelling, and so clear, that people will want to live that way."

Dinners aren't the only activities that Dialogue members participate in. On another evening, Peled has organized a panel meeting at Temple Beth Shalom, a conservative Jewish congregation in the San Diego community of

Chula Vista. The meeting has been full of good-natured banter between the Arab and Jewish Dialogue members, who have come to share information about the process.

Jews and Palestinians meet to talk frankly – sometimes uncomfortably – about the historic divide between them



Miko Peled and Colin Seid share viewpoints about whether such get-togethers can have an impact on peace in the Middle East.

But now the room has gone quiet, as Peled says, "In 1997, a tragedy struck our family."

He halts and looks down at the table, determined not to let emotion get in the way of his message. He has, after all, told this story a thousand times to make the same point. As he looks up and continues, people in the audience shift uncomfortably.

Peled explains that in 1997 his 13-year-old niece was killed by a suicide bomber when she and friends went into downtown Jerusalem to buy books. They were running from one bomb when another bomb went off in the area they approached.

In the days that followed, the apartment of Miko's sister, Nurit Peled, was swamped with members of the media. Nurit, who has since become an outspoken and award-winning Israeli peace activist, told the press that she felt "any kind of retaliation, any kind of killing, would solve nothing."

Peled explains later: "My sister said of the bomber, 'It's not him that I'm angry at. It's the thing that caused it - the occupation.' "

Palestinian Dialogue member Menal Swairjo believes that it is because Peled's identity is so firmly bound up in Israel's past that he is so passionate about future peace through dialogue.

Ms. Swairjo is a scientist at the Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, and has participated in Dialogue since 1989, first as a graduate student at Boston University.

Swairjo's parents, who were science educators, fled Gaza in the 1948 war, and her childhood was spent as a refugee in Kuwait and in Egypt. She speaks with fondness of Peled. "Miko was one of the people [in Arab-Jewish Dialogue] who really shocked me," she says. "He resembles a part of the conflict that I'd never looked at, which I think may now hold the best hope - and that is the powerful side."

Swairjo, however, says she is often worn out by dialogue, and she is boggled by the magnitude of the problems in the Middle East.

The dialogue meetings are stressful, she says. "It's not like going to a nightclub and having a good time. You feel you're a speck in the ocean. What can you do to make things happen? ... How do I feel about dialogue, honestly? I'm not in the right state of mind tonight. I feel like ... Let them annihilate each other."

Swairjo, who advocates nonviolent Palestinian activism, laughs, grits her teeth, and adds: "And bin Laden with them, too.' "

Peled, however, doesn't believe in dialogue as just a good thing - he is convinced it is possibly the only thing that will bring peace.

"We know deep down inside that dialogue is the only way," he explains, when asked later whether he thinks the organization is likely to make a difference.

"It creates all these possibilities for knowing each other and realizing that we're not that far apart. Peace will only come through dialogue," he says passionately. "Peace is not going to come from Arafat and Sharon getting together - there has to be the will. That's so important. If [Arab-Jewish] Dialogue just grew and grew, we could say [to the politicians], 'We can do this. Why can't you do this?' "

After the two-hour Temple Beth Sholom presentation, the host, Rabbi Leonard Zoll, remains decidedly unimpressed: "I didn't like the panel," he says. "I want to hear facts.... All these people are terrific ... but it's not what we need to hear."

Peled, who has been debating about Hizbullah and terrorism with the rabbi for the past few minutes, quietly nods and whispers: "Step by step."

He doesn't expect to see impressive changes overnight because of Arab-Jewish Dialogue groups. But he's certain they're important enough to continue, and that they will eventually make a difference - one meeting at a time.

This article is on the Web at

<http://traubman.igc.org/sandiegodialogue.pdf> and at the *Christian Science Monitor*
<https://www.csmonitor.com/2002/0206/p11s01-lihc.html>

Talking Peace is a 2005 documentary film about this Jewish-Palestinian Living Room Dialogue that streams online:

<https://archive.org/details/TalkingPeace>