

Meeting Mohammed

Beginning Jewish-Palestinian Dialogue

by Libby and Len Traubman

We first met Mohammed — as did hundreds of Jewish educators — at the 2002 Conference on Alternatives in Jewish Education. It was a hot summer week in San Antonio, Texas.

He was tall, dark, and imposing. A tattoo of a Kalishnikov rifle was on his right forearm from earlier days as a relentless advocate for his Palestinian people's human rights and national aspirations, in the Middle East and after he emigrated to America.

Mohammed Alatar — grandson of a Muslim imam, with family roots in Jenin as many centuries back as anyone can remember — began teaching us much about anti-Semitism and how to prevent it — not from a distance, but by personal, face-to-face Dialogue and education. It begins, we've discovered, with compassionate listening to each other's stories, seeing one another as human and equal, and finally beginning to want the best for one other.

“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.”

This is, to us, the life of Shema. Listening and truly hearing not just ourselves but all others, even our “enemy.” And not only when it's easy, but when the wind is blowing a hundred miles an hour. Listening — one of the great acts of healing and of love.

And this compassionate listening was welcomed at last at CAJE, as the successful Dialogue endeavors of Californians and Texans combined to offer six workshops to the 1,600 teachers from the Americas and Israel. Sessions included: (1) “Story as Entry to Dialogue,” (2) “Seeking Peace and Pursuing It, with the Children of Abraham,” (3) “The Stories of Our Cousins,” (4) “Beginning, Maturing, and Growing a Dialogue,” and (5) “The Process of Social Change Through Dialogue and Expanding Identification.”

Then several hundred participants viewed the Emmy Awards Best Documentary film, *“Promises,”* about the importance, challenge, and promise of Palestinians and Jews meeting face to face. In the discussion, many Jews expressed themselves freely. Then one Orthodox educator in the corner burst out: “We've listened enough to ourselves. Let's hear Mohammed. We never get to be with Palestinians.”

“I didn't hear about the Holocaust until I was 28 years old.”

He startled the packed auditorium. “It may surprise you, but I didn't hear about the Holocaust until I was 28 years old. After that, I spent two years studying to be sure it was true. I simply didn't want to believe it, because then I'd have to see the Jew as a victim, like myself. And human, like me. I'd have to change my whole way of thinking about you.”

In front of those Jewish women and men, Mohammed was that changed man. “Instead of wasting our time apart, dehumanizing one another, we must start coming together like this, understanding each other's stories and histories.”

“I'm learning yours,” he said. “And all I ask is that you hear mine. And that we become closer and more like the neighbors and great partners we can become.”

The moment reminded us of the instructive words we'd heard from Rabbi Andrea Cohen-Kiener, in Hartford, Conn.:

**"There are two stories here and
there is a quality of transcendence - seeing
beyond the 'Jewish Narrative' or the 'Palestinian Narrative' - to a perspective that can
humanize both sides and hear the 'other' story.
A transcender after all has
abandoned the exclusive quality of his or her narrative of origin."**

Mohammed's first invitations to this "public peace process" were from Rabbi Julie Danan, a former West Bank resident, who co-founded the successful Palestinian-Jewish Dialogue of San Antonio with Muslim Imam Nadir Faris, and from Barbie Gorelick, founder of the Tri-faith Dialogue of San Antonio. Now Mohammed is a member of the Jewish Community Center, so his two sons will grow up differently, appreciating Jews and inventing a different future side by side.

Once "against Jews," Alatar now says "every time that I meet a Jew, I learn something new about them — their history, humanity, terrors, and dreams."

"Just in return please listen and understand me and my people — how we experience unspeakable injustices, humiliation, malnutrition, lost education, and despair under an unkind military domination of decades."

He pleads, fairly, that we also appreciate the intelligence, beauty, culture, and dreams of his fine people.

Most Jews and Palestinians, here and in the Middle East, have never had an in-depth, sustained relationship with the other. There is a "big disconnect" that allows us to live by our stereotypes and inherited agendas, and to continue to disregard, dehumanize, discredit, and disenfranchise one another. And to do unspeakable acts of violence, mirroring one another, the cousins and Semites that we are.

For Mohammed and us, Dialogue has been the transforming activity.

Our 10-year-old Jewish-Palestinian Living Room Dialogue

Here at home, we two are part of a 10-year-old Jewish-Palestinian Living Room Dialogue Group here on the San Francisco Peninsula — 30 women and men; young and old; Holocaust survivors and 20th generation Palestinians — preparing for our 127th meeting, learning to change strangers into friends, "enemies" into partners, while initiating concrete projects that help people and invigorate the public peace process, here and overseas.

Now there are six Dialogues in our area and over 40 others nationwide. The idea is moving into new towns, and onto university and high school campuses coast to coast.

We have offered educational videos and published Dialogue guidelines without charge, and personal guidance. The materials have gone to 1,300 people, representing 700 institutions in 490 cities, 41 states, and 35 nations.

Something new is happening. People are seeing that one cannot simply "demand an end to anti-Semitism" or "want peace."

Conditions to be fulfilled

There are conditions to be fulfilled. And they include building human relationships.

We cannot want peace and not relationships. And ending anti-Semitism cannot be legislated or demanded. Peace will arrive and anti-Semitism will atrophy as human contact increases and deepens.

Extending a hand and an ear to the other requires a new kind of courage — a new kind of soldier.

And the fear is not just of the “enemy,” but of misjudgment from one’s own for being misperceived as a “traitor” instead of a healer of wounds, a bridge-builder, an inventor of a future that benefits not just “mine” but all.

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.”

Is not God the largest frame of reference? If we do not include the “other” and our neighbor in our vision of the future, then is our life about God or something else?

Meeting Mohammed again

In October, 2002 we initiated a Jewish–Palestinian Dialogue All–Day in Washington, DC. That Monday participants from 14 states arrived. And so did Mohammed.

It followed the First National Conference on Dialogue and Deliberation which seemed to fasten to North America the essential activity of Dialogue in human relationships.

Tuesday, Mohammed and we met at the Israeli–Palestinian Affairs Office of the U.S. Department of State. It affirmed our belief that a key reason for the failure of treaties was the “big disconnect” between the people, who still live at a distance with their bigger–than–life fears, and those dark stereotypes and inherited agendas.

That night we presented the model of Dialogue to students at Georgetown University. Relationships had been poor, alienation everywhere — typical of the sign–wars, shouting, finger–pointing, taking sides, and rallies that have added up to nothing at all on campuses nationwide.

A night of diminished anti–Semitism to remember

But at Georgetown that night was the diminishing of anti–Semitism — anti–anybody.

To everyone’s surprise, this was the University’s first unifying moment like this, co–sponsored in their beautiful Copley Formal Lounge by all the key student organizations:

Jewish Student Association (JSA)
Muslim Students Association (MSA)
Young Arab Leadership Alliance (YALA)
Georgetown Israel Alliance (GIA)
Students for Middle East Peace (SMEP)

Listening finally began between Muslims, Jews and Christians, especially including Palestinians and other Arabs. The eighty students had responded to the event’s flyer: “Palestinian–Jewish Living Room Dialogues.”

The evening started — naturally — with a generous spread of desserts, fruit, and drinks for a half–hour. Already, conversation was noisy, and people were glad to be together.

The presentation began with an understanding of the “public peace process” and of Dialogue — what it is and is not — by Libby Traubman.

Then a Palestinian and a Jew — Mohammed Alatar and Len Traubman — told their “stories” about their ancestors, early lives, what they were taught about the “other,” how they came into Dialogue, and how they have changed.

Then the room was open for students’ comments and questions, and their own stories, with Libby facilitating.

“An enemy is someone whose story we have not heard.” — *Gene Knudsen-Hoffman*

It was an amazing, breakthrough experience, with a bearded Palestinian student standing up and reaching his hand out to a Jewish classmate from whom he had been totally alienated since an altercation.

The Jewish student responded in kind with his own public apology for his earlier insensitive language and poor spirit.

People cried.

Maher, a young man newly here from Deheishe Refugee Camp, stood to describe his five years in an Israeli prison, yet coming to the conclusion that Dialogue and building unbreakable human bonds was the only way into the future.

Then a Jewish student stood to tell his story about wanting to demonstrate proudly in rallies for Israel, yet looking out at Arab students for whom he felt such affection, partly because of his own family's Arabic cultural and language roots in Damascus, Syria. He broke into tears, and Mohammed walked across the room to embrace him sympathetically.

And that's what the evening was like, with many more narratives. And that is what caused about all the student participants to sign up to begin their five new Dialogues on campus.

“People become the stories they hear and the stories they tell.” — *Elie Wiesel*

We tell and re-tell these stories to show that Jews and Palestinians have settled for far too little. Our conflicts are not “intractable.” Together, we can become “more.” Together, we're better.

There is a way through our present dilemma. The life of Dialogue, of Shema — listening as we've never listened before. For this is our dearest prayer for a very good reason: it is a pragmatic step toward our ideal, very attainable goals.

It works in everyday life because, in our experience, everyone has a soul whose oldest memory is of union, and whose deepest longing is for reunion.

So after over 10 years of seeing anti-Semitism diminish around us, what is our prescription for others?

Find a Mohammed. Listen to each other. Grow together.

Libby Traubman, B.A., M.S.W. is a retired clinical social worker and co-founder of the Jewish-Palestinian Living Room Dialogue Group

Len Traubman, D.D.S., M.S.D. is a retired pediatric dentist. He authored and published The Oreckovsky Family: From Russia to America.

The Traubmans are on the Web at <http://traubman.igc.org/> and can be reached by e-mail at LTraubman@igc.org.

1448 Cedarwood Drive, San Mateo, CA 94403
Tel: 650-574-8303 Fax: 650-573-1217

Published by CAJE in *Jewish Education News*, Winter 2002-2003
2003 Common Ground Award for Journalism in the Middle East—Western press—Honorable Mention