

# AN ISRAELI - PALESTINIAN YOUNG WOMEN'S DIALOGUE

By Antonio F. Ledesma, Ph.D.

*The following narrative describes a conflict-dissolving process that provided Israeli, Palestinian, and American women a structure to listen to each other's nationalistic and interpersonal conflicts. The author delineates a story of a Palestinian girl's doll and the girl's experiences in the Middle East conflict, and an Israeli girl reciting a poem lamenting the death of Israeli children. These shared experiences inspired them to share each other's humanity.*

Since the events of September 11, 2001 Americans have wanted to know more about the Middle East. In our attempt to understand the Middle East, the violence in the everyday lives of the Israeli-Palestinian people emerges. Personal stories of violence that seemed so removed from us are no longer. I offer the following stories of personal violence from the perspective of two young women from the Middle East who were born into violence to help us understand not only the tragedy of their conflict, but the futility of violence in human conflict. We must examine their conflict if we are to understand why the ramifications of the daily pain and suffering of Israeli and Palestinian lives is part of the source of our own pain and suffering that 9/11 brought to our lives.

Who would have thought listening to a child's poem and another's story of a doll would symbolize the tragedy and futility of the Middle East conflict? But that is exactly what happened when Tal, an Israeli, recited a poem lamenting the death of Israeli children in a Jewish settlement, and Amira, a Palestinian, related the story of her childhood doll, Patricia, during a young women's peace-building dialogue at a summer peace camp in the United States.

Tal, a seventeen-year-old from Jerusalem, stood proud and intelligent while speaking about the Israeli people and their quest to live free in their homeland, safe from the threat of annihilation. Only one generation removed

from the horrors of the past, she iterated the horrors of today through a child's poem commemorating the present-day death of children in Israel.

"Patricia doll, my angel of dollies," as Amira phrased it, is the story of a doll her aunt gave her when Amira was six years old. The doll was the aunt's most beloved possession. Amira described the doll as having auburn hair, a rosy colored face, and brown eyes. She could have been describing herself except for her light green eyes. Although Amira was sixteen, she spoke of her doll with a childlike innocence: "I loved Patricia so much; I prayed she would talk." I could not help but see Amira as someone suspended between two warring communities and between reality and a dream.

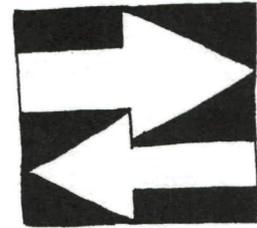
Tal and Amira were participants in the Building Bridges for Peace (BBFP) program, a non-profit community organization based in Denver, Colorado. BBFP was co-founded in 1994 by two community social workers, one a Jewish-American and the other a Christian (Methodist), along with an Arab-American Muslim. The program brings Israeli and Palestinian young women to the United States to interact with American women at a peace camp in Colorado's Rocky Mountains. Israeli participants come from rural and urban areas. Palestinian participants live in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Israel (Palestinian-Israelis or Arab-Israelis, as they are called, live within the borders of Israel since their

families did not leave their homes in 1948 or after the 1967 war.) All the young women from the Middle East and America are high school aged. Criteria for Middle Eastern participants are basic proficiency in spoken and written English and a driving desire to meet and communicate with women from the "other side." Most of the Americans reside in Denver while others live elsewhere in the U.S. They participate based on their wish to interact with people from the Middle East and a willingness to talk about American interpersonal and intercultural conflicts.

My work with Israeli and Palestinian youth began in 1996. As a clinical social worker and educator at the graduate school of social work at the University of Denver, I was introduced to the director of BBFP by a former student. Meeting with the director, I learned of her concern that the conflict resolution and mediation workshops she had used had not created the intimacy and understanding between participants, that she desired. I suggested using a marital conflict-dissolving approach as a conflict-intervention dialogue with the participants because it facilitated two people deepening their relationship. The dialogue process I proposed would serve to create a peace-building relationship between and among the participants. This interaction would also serve moving away from their "conflict positional discourse" (Winslade & Monk, 2000) to co-creating an alternative discourse of mutual understanding.

To create the opportunity for this alternative dialogue to occur, I outlined my work with the couples dialogue mirroring process as an alternative conflict-processing methodology for the participants at the summer peace camp. Drawing from my marital relationship certification in Harville Hendrix's Imago Relationship therapy, I outlined how I could adapt the conflict-dissolving process for the BBFP participants. This theory purports that conflict intervention

occurs best through a one-to-one dialogical interaction (Hendrix, 1988; Hendrix, 1992; Hendrix & Hunt, 1997). Consequently, I utilized the couples mirroring dialogue from the Hendrix model for the young women at the peace camp. I call my peace camp workshop: "Talking through Conflict." In the workshop, I took the young women through a series of conflict dissolving dialogues.



It was in one of these structured "speaker-listener" interactions that Tal and Amira talked to one another at the peace camp. To introduce and acquaint BBFP participants at camp with the conflict-dissolving process or what is termed "mirroring" dialogue, I invited two participants to sit with me in front of the assembly of Israelis, Palestinians, Americans, and camp staff. The participants and I demonstrated the particular process for that session's interaction through an actual dialogue that I facilitated. After such demonstrations, participants disperse into small groups with facilitators to guide them through each conflict-dissolving - mirroring - process. Thus, every participant took her turn in a structured dialogue with another participant.

Within this context, the following dialogue between Tal and Amira took place (*italics illustrate the structured dialogue - mirroring - phrases that guides the interaction*):

**Tal (Israeli):** "The conflict scares me. I am afraid to go to the markets or ride in a bus. I am afraid of a bomb blowing up and seeing people killed. I am scared of being killed by a bomb."

**Amira (Palestinian):** "I hear you saying that you are afraid of the conflict, going to the markets, riding in a bus. You are afraid of a bomb killing people or killing you. *Did I get it? Is there more you want to tell me?*"

**Tal:** "Yes, Amira, what comes up for me is the many stories and awful emotions I feel as I hear the stories at camp and at home in Israel about the Shoa [*Hebrew for Holocaust*] from my parents and grandparents. I am reminded of all that horror and I feel helpless".

**Amira:** Mirroring what Tal said, she asked, "*Is there more?*"

**Tal:** "Yes. In Dr. Tony's workshop Mayan talked about the bombs in the open market that kill many people: adults, children, old people, and even the cats that are in the street when the bombs explode. That is why I said I am afraid of being killed when I just am walking in the streets of Jerusalem."

**Amira:** Repeating back, she asked, "*Is there more?*"

**Tal:** "There is more. In the cabin last night, we Jewish girls talked about all the things we have been hearing from the Palestinian girls. We feel bad; Avital was crying and saying that before she came to this camp she thought she knew about everything but now she says she does not know her left from her right. I know what she means; we feel bad for your sad stories, but we know that our people suffer very much, too. Our grandparents chose to come to the land because we feel Israel is our homeland where our ancestors lived. We believe that the land is ours because the Torah says it is. Some of our people never left, some bought land. The Balfour Declaration [*the British plan for dividing the land*] and the United Nations gave us a right to live on the land.

At this point, some Palestinian participants began to shout, "No! You took our land, and you killed people. You took our land in 1948 and you oppress us with your military occupation." Someone else said, "You took Jerusalem in the 1967 war, but we will never give it up." The Israeli participants began shouting back, "Jerusalem is ours." Other Israelis shouted, "Let her talk." I stood up and asked everyone to be quiet and to honor and respect the process. The staff raised their arms above their head (our signal for silence) and moved about the group asking people to be quiet. Everyone eventually calmed down and Tal continued. Amira had kept quiet and just looked around. At this point, Tal did not seem to know what to say or do next. I reminded participants of the sentence stems I had taught them to use when they felt "stuck." I asked Tal to complete the statement, "*What scares me about this is ...*"

**Tal:** "What scares me about this is that we will not accomplish anything in this way of talking to one another. We came to listen to one another but the stories are just too painful."

I then asked Tal to complete the sentence stem, "*What hurts me about this is ...*"

**Tal:** "What hurts me about this is that we are hurting each other again and again with what we live each day at home. And it hurts me to see you and ourselves hurt."

I asked Tal to complete this sentence stem, "*And what this reminds me of is ...*"

**Tal:** "And what this reminds me of is a poem of an Israeli girl. When she was seven years old, one of her friends, a boy named Rami Haba—he was eight years old—Palestinian boys killed him. They killed him with stones. This Israeli girl wrote a poem

about his death. Shosi Bar-Yehuda is her name. She lives in a settlement in the West Bank. She read her poem in the video "Arab and Jew" (based on the Pulitzer Prize winning David Shipler book *Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land* 1986, produced on video by R. Gardner 1997) that Dr. Tony showed us. The name of her poem is "Death Has No Name." I have a copy of her poem; this is what it says:

*Death is mute; it continues forever.  
Around the throat it wraps its rope;  
one dies. Seconds pass away for a  
son who never returned, a mother  
grieves. Stones on a grave and little  
flowers too. A cry that is stamped  
[out] covering the eyes,  
smothering the light, and changed  
the world to black. A mother calls  
again and says, "Rami come  
back."*

**Amira:** Repeating what she heard Tal say, she asked, "Is there more?"

**Tal:** "Yes, in another poem she talks about Israelis being "wrapped around ourselves and fearing strangers." At the end of the video, the man [David Shipler] who was talking about Arabs and Jews says that we are, "Strangers to one another but that we are dependent upon each other." He said, "Whatever happens in war or diplomacy, whether the land is won or lost, whether agreements are finally made or not, our future 'Arabs and Jews' is with each other as close neighbors in the place we live." He said, "We will not escape from one another; we will not find peace in treaties or in victories; we will find it in looking into each others eyes." I know this, this last part especially, because I wrote it down. And it is what I wanted to say at this peace camp."

**Amira:** Saying all this back, she asked, "Is there more?"

**Tal:** "Yes. Well, I want to look in your eyes and tell you that we suffer because of the bombs in the streets, in the markets, and on the busses. I repeated the words from the video, said by a Jewish girl, and now by me. I want you to see in my eyes the desire, dream, and hope for peace."

I then asked Amira to *summarize* all the main points Tal stated to the best of her ability. I asked Amira to "stretch" in the next process, asking her to *validate* what she heard Tal say. I suggested she not think of it as agreeing but as a way of showing Tal that she is making an effort to see Tal's point of view.

**Amira:** Taking my direction, she said, "I've heard everything you said and you make sense to me, and what makes sense is that you want me to see in your eyes your suffering and fear of death from the bombs and most important you want me to know about your dream, wish, and hope for peace"

**Tal:** Adds, "Not just me, but for ALL the Jewish people."

**Amira:** "And the dreams, wishes, and hopes for peace for ALL the Jewish people. Is that what you said?"

**Tal:** "Yes."

In the validating phase of mirroring, I wanted Amira to tell Tal that she did see her point from her perspective. I asked her to "stretch" into making some degree of sense of it. I ask the person in Amira's role to think, if she were in Tal's position, "How would she view the situation?" to facilitate the validation.

The last part of the mirroring process is empathy where one identifies emotions of the other.



**Amira:** Said, "Given all that, I imagine you might emotionally feel ..."

Amira attempted to identify Tal's emotions, which she observed in the content of what she said and in the tone of her voice.

**Amira:** "I imagine you feel afraid and at times terrified of the whole situation especially because you or others might die. *Is that accurate?*"

I asked Tal to respond as to the accuracy of what Amira said and whether it was accurate or not. (If inaccurate, Tal would clarify what she actually felt, and Amira would mirror that back.) After Tal stated that it was accurate. I looked at Tal and said, "Tal, now you listen and mirror Amira."

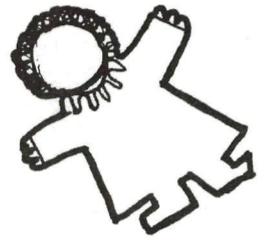
**Amira:** "Tal, I am going to tell you the story of my Patricia doll; this story is why I came to the peace camp: to tell Israeli girls what happened to Patricia. My mother went to visit friends in another town and left me with my grandfather. I went with him to the open market to sell his vegetables from his fields. An Israeli soldier on security patrol in the market ordered him to move his vegetables from one place to another; he could not move fast enough for this soldier who jammed the barrel of his M-16 rifle into my grandfather's stomach. My grandfather fell to the ground. I screamed; I was scared he hurt my grandfather; the soldier did not have to do that. My grandfather did not want to get up, he rolled over, and he did not move any more. He DIED in the street."

The mirroring process continued with Amira telling her story in stages and Tal, *mirroring*, saying back what she heard and asking after each phase, "Is there more?" As we listened to the next part of Amira's story, she related her most vivid of experiences in

the Israeli - Palestinian conflict for her, and for us.

**Amira:** "When I was seven years old, I was visiting my aunt. I found a doll by my aunt's bed. I fell in love with her. Her skin was a dark bronze color. She was the size of a newborn baby, brown hair, a small nose, red lips and cheeks, and ears that were a little too big, but cute. "Patricia" was so soft to touch. [Amira hugged her chest tightly as if she were embracing the doll.] I played very carefully with her, I did not want to hurt her; I wanted to take care of her. I wanted her to be my doll. When it was time to leave, I did not want to leave her. I cried and asked my mother if I could have her. My aunt was shocked that I wanted to keep her doll; Patricia was all she had left of her baby. That is when Aunt Rula told me the story of Patricia. Two years ago, she was at a checkpoint [a border crossing between an Israeli-controlled area and a Palestinian area]. My Aunt Rula was pregnant. She and an Israeli soldier got into an argument about her permit to cross into an Israeli area and he hit her with one those wood clubs [batons] they carry. He hit her and hurt her baby; he hit her in her belly and that caused her to lose her baby. My Aunt Rula then got a doll and named her Patricia. She made clothes for her and made her look pretty. I felt very bad for my aunt but I really loved Patricia, and I cried because I wanted to keep her so much. I thought that my aunt would not let me have Patricia but then she gave me Patricia. She asked me to promise to take very good care of her because she is so special - I promised I would take care of her all my life. I told her I would make Patricia's clothes for her now; I loved how soft Patricia was; she was my friend and I would take care of her like she was my baby."

As Amira told her story and Tal mirrored, Patricia seemed to come to life for me; the



mirroring interaction also took on a life of its own as I watched Amira and Tal using the process. Their interaction that day is what the mirroring process holds for people: the promise of what can happen when they take the time to leave their one-up, one-down struggle, and enter into a "same as" equal relational interaction. Tal was intent on mirroring Amira with great compassion. Tal repeated the story through the mirroring process, so we actually heard the story twice. This twice-told story had its effect on the audience: everyone focused intently on every word. This seemed to occur because Tal had suspended her subjectivity as an Israeli and to her credit entered into an objective view.

Amira continued relating her story to Tal.

**Amira:** "Two years later, my mother and I were at a checkpoint. There had been CLASHES [meaning rock throwing by Palestinians demonstrators at Israeli soldiers] around the area and security was very high. When that happens everybody is stopped, and the soldiers look at everybody's travel permits. Soldiers check all the adults, even the children. They checked their papers to cross into Israel. When my mother and me reached the "check-post," as the Israeli call them, the soldier asked my mother many, many questions about where she was going; they checked her travel permits and searched her. A soldier looked at me and my doll Patricia; I was squeezing her and holding her tight. I was terrified; I was afraid they would take my mother away, and I would be alone. Then the soldier came after me. He grabbed my Patricia from me and squeezed her. He said, "What is in here!" and ripped her open. I screamed and I said to the soldier: "You monster, you killed my Patricia. I hate you! You are wolves, you killed my Patricia girl!" I ran up and down the street crying and screaming at the soldiers: "You monsters, you killed her! You killed my Patricia!" I finally fell down and I started to pick up the pieces

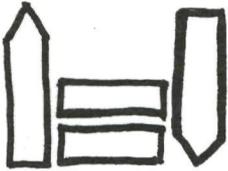
of Patricia. The soldier had torn her apart from one side to the other - her chest and clothes were ripped to pieces. I cried into the pieces. She was all torn: her neck was ripped open and her face was destroyed: She was dead. My mother picked me up and I cried into her shoulder until I did not have any more tears. My mother turned away from the Israeli soldiers and walked away from the checkpoint. I closed my eyes; I did not want to see Israelis anymore. I held pieces of Patricia in my hand."

**Tal:** "Is there more?"

**Amira:** "Yes, I came here to look an Israeli girl in the eye and tell her my story of Patricia. I want you to know what happened to my Patricia and me because this is what it is like for us Palestinians under your occupation of us."

Just as I had asked Amira to summarize the main points of Tal's story, I now asked Tal to summarize Amira's story and to "stretch" into validating what she heard Amira say. I reminded her that she did not have to agree, but she was to show Amira that she could see her points.

**Tal:** "Amira, I have heard everything you said and you make sense." Tal then repeated the highlights of what she heard Amira say. "And what makes sense is that you have come here to look me in the eye and tell me what happened to you and Patricia and how you, your family, and the Palestinian people suffer under Israeli, as you say, "occupation." What makes sense to me is that you suffer under the circumstances of our conflict and that you have suffered great emotional pain from the death of your grandfather, your aunt's baby, and that your doll, Patricia, died too. I imagine that you feel angry, sad, fearful, and hopeless. I also imagine that you hate Israelis and especially Israeli soldiers because of what



happened and how you were hurt. Is this right?"

**Amira:** "Yes, I feel hurt, angry, and I hate the Israeli occupation but not you. I hate your government, and, YES, especially the Israeli soldiers."

I saw in Amira the look of a trauma victim, the same look I have seen in others, a far away, detached look in their eyes. It was the same look I noticed in her eyes as she related her story. When Tal finished mirroring and asked if there was more, Amira said, "There's no more."

I asked Amira and Tal if they knew some way that they could show each other how they felt after their dialogue. In response, Amira and Tal embraced; both had tears in their eyes. Everyone's eyes were glazed over, Israelis, Palestinians, and Americans. We all felt Amira's and Tal's emotional pain and hopes for the future. Everyone reacted to Tal's and Amira's story in one way or another: they talked with each other about how they felt; they wrote in their journals; and they embraced. Everyone wanted to express how they felt about Amira's and Tal's stories.

Heidi Hursh (2001), a Denver high school teacher and doctoral candidate doing a study on the program, recorded what participants said they learned about building peace: "Everyone has a right to have a safe place and respect." "Each side has to learn to listen." "Peace is not as simple as I thought. The thoughts of both sides are extremely different." "When you approach an argument, don't go with ready-made answers." "Don't be afraid to change your mind." "Peace must start between the people in the two groups, not the governments." "To achieve peace, each side has to stretch." An entry I recall that touched me deeply reads, "It's much harder to make peace than I thought. I'm going home with friendship, love, and hope for people on the other side" (p. 212).

I later heard the Israeli participants

comment on how their soldiers may have acted inappropriately but they were acting in defense of their communities and they were protecting their people and the state of Israel. Palestinian participants discussed their own stories of suffering at the hands of soldiers. Americans expressed their concern for Palestinian and Israeli suffering and related their own stories of tragedies in their communities in gang fights or negative encounters with police officers. Eventually, as the discussions continued over dinner and into nightly debriefings of the day's events, they calmed down and they all began to talk about how little they could do about the situations in their home communities. They turned to each other and expressed their concern and their hope that the various conflicts would end. They wanted peace to prevail in their home communities and between their governments, and some reflected on their hopes for their family conflicts ending.

Tal's and Amira's interaction marked the conclusion of my dialogue work for that summer. The next day we ended with the process of "Goodbye" to the pain and "Hello" to their new understandings and insights into the other. Thus, I had reached my goal of creating a "safe place" and facilitating these young women to feel each other's pain by deeply listening to a dialogue, thus laying the foundation for mutual understanding and the possibility of co-creating peace with one another.

Reflecting on the dialogues of these young women, they were actually doing the work of their parents and grandparents by attempting to "repair" the disharmony between their communities. They were attempting to ensure a future free of the horrors of war for the children of the Middle East by telling each other not only about the tragedy of their conflict, but about the futility of violence as a means of dealing with their conflict.

Tal and Amira's stories have profound implications for Americans dealing with their

own conflict with the Middle East: Violence in reaction to violence is not the answer. Violence only begets more violence as fifty years of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict proves. If we are to learn from this continuing conflict, the lesson that arises is that we must strive to end violence as a means of dealing with it whether it be international, national or for that matter in our own interpersonal relations and "Seek to understand before we seek to be understood," as St. Francis of Assisi counseled. Since September 11th, we must seek to answer the question, "Why do they hate us?" through a face-to-face dialogue with people that attack us. Tal and Amira model for us the benefits in "talking through conflict" rather than counter-attacking with escalating violence. Some say we have entered a new era of war. I believe we have entered into a new era of peacemaking: The response to violence must be to answer with peacemaking not war. The ramification of a prolonged war in modernity is to risk annihilation of humankind. The Israeli - Palestinian conflict is a living example of how conflict that is not "talked through" can be continuous and perhaps without end. We must stop escalating violence and talk to one another as Tal and Amira did. What can bring us to a clear understanding of this point is found in the words of Thich Nhat Hanh (1991), a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist, who writes in *Peace is Every Step*:

*"When you begin to see that your enemy is suffering, that is the beginning of insight. When you see in yourself the wish that the other person stop suffering, that is a sign of real love" (p. 120).*

Tal and Amira saw in each other's suffering not only the tragedy, but also the futility of their conflict. Will we permit our children to live in the same state of futility, or will we value living in harmony more than

winning without regard for their future?

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