

REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF A SOCIAL WORKER IN THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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The role of the social work profession in regions of political conflict and in areas of acute armed conflict has recently become one of the most popular fields of interest in the social work literature. This narrative describes the author's experience as a social work professional in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The paper is pertinent given the number of political conflicts around the globe and suggests that social workers can be significant shapers within these contexts by addressing the root causes of conflict.

"Lo Alecha HaAvoda Legmor-It is not for you to complete the work."

—Hebrew Saying

This narrative focuses on my role as a social work professional in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For over a decade I have worked with the McGill Middle East Program in Civil Society and Peace Building (MMEP). MMEP is committed to the reduction of inequality and the promotion of civil society as cornerstones of sustainable peace both within and between societies in conflict. The program directs its efforts towards the establishment of rights-based community practice centers in some of the poorest and most disadvantaged communities in Israel, Palestine and Jordan.

Rights-based community practice centers, such as the MMEP, address individual and communal disempowerments and advance empowerment practice so that individuals and communities learn to advocate for and access economic and social rights. In the process, they become active citizens exercising civil and political rights and strengthening civil society and democracy — the foundations for more peaceful societies.

Jordan, Palestine and Israel have unique economic, political, cultural and social contexts. Hence, the rights-based community practice model is implemented somewhat differently in each of the three societies. Nonetheless, the centers share a common conceptual framework, principles and action strategies. These commonalities enable the centers to

function as part of a regional network of rights-based community practice and peace building centers in the Middle East (Moshe Grodofsky, 2007).

My role as regional coordinator of the program has evolved over time and has been influenced by program developments, the changing political landscape of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and my own reflections on my changing identity within the context of the conflict. This article will present aspects of my role and will highlight my reflections as to the relationship between the "personal, the professional and the political" as illustrated in the evolution of my work.

I begin with a brief description of the background of the McGill Middle East Program in Civil Society and Peace Building. I then focus on the different phases of my role as MMEP regional coordinator and share my thoughts and reflections in regard to the experiences within each of the phases.

The McGill Middle East Program in Civil Society and Peace Building

The rights-based community practice model was developed by Professor Jim Torczyner at the School of Social Work at McGill University in Montreal. I met Jim in the United States in 1992 when I was the assistant director of student field education in the Department of Social Work at the Ben Gurion University in Israel. Three months after our initial meeting, eight senior social work students from the Department of Social Work began their field placement in what eventually

led to the establishment of the rights-based community practice model in Israel, later to become known as Singur Kehillati-Community Advocacy.

In 1992, at the same time we were developing the rights-based practice model in Israel, larger developments were occurring in the Middle East. Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) were engaged in peace negotiations that culminated in the signing of The Declaration of Principles in September 1993. In 1994 Israel signed a Treaty of Peace with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. These events led Prof. Torczyner to Jordan and later to Palestine to identify academic institutional partners to facilitate the development of the rights-based practice models in their societies.

In the fall of 1997, following the securing of an agreement between the University of Jordan and McGill University, two Jordanians and two Israelis began their MSW studies at McGill University as the first fellows of the rights-based community practice cross-border initiative. The four fellows became well-versed in the theory and practice of the rights-based approach. Upon their return to their respective countries they were to begin to create the groundwork for the establishment of the model in Jordan and to work in the already established centers in Israel. Since 1997 four additional cohorts of Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian fellows have attended the MSW program and returned to their home countries to continue to establish and work with the rights-based practice model.

The history of the program in the Middle East is beyond the scope of this article¹. For the purpose of this article it is sufficient to briefly delineate four primary stages of the program. In its first stage, the focus of the program was establishment of rights-based community practice centers in Jordan and Palestine and reinforcement of the two existing centers in Israel. Fellows who returned from the MMEP Graduate Fellowship Program in Canada led these efforts.

The second phase of the MMEP focused on the development of the regional network of rights-based community practice centers and peace building. This stage entailed

expanding the relationships between the centers beyond those that had been established among the returning fellows, to include additional center staff and community constituencies.

In the third stage of the program additional rights-based community practice centers were established, increasing the total number of centers in the region. In the fourth and present stage, the program is focused on securing financial sustainability for the centers and the regional network and establishing Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian national bodies.

The Role of Regional Coordinator

I began my role as MMEP regional coordinator in 2005. By 2005 roughly forty Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian fellows had returned from their studies at McGill University. Two rights-based practice centers had been established in Palestine and one center in Jordan. In Israel fellows had returned to the three established centers. The program partners were well-positioned to begin to consider cross-country exchange.

My work as MMEP regional coordinator can be divided into three phases. I refer to the first stage as the "logistics stage." Here my primary task was to identify and address the logistical needs of the centers and to coordinate regional programs.

The second stage of my work was dedicated to facilitating exchange between the centers. In the third phase I became the program trainer of the rights-based practice model in centers in Palestine and Jordan. Currently I serve as the Israeli National Development Director. In the next section I will describe each of the roles and present some examples to illustrate the issues faced in the different phases of my role as MMEP regional coordinator.

The Logistics Stage

This first stage of my position was the most uneventful, yet the most critical. My primary activities revolved around securing the logistical needs of the program so that any activities defined as "regional" would function smoothly. This entailed securing travel visas

and permits for the partners, arranging the logistics of joint meetings between the partners and the visits by program funders to the region. It involved long phone conversations with the partners to adjust scheduling. This was a challenge, due to the political complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that oftentimes meant that programs that had been scheduled were cancelled at the last moment, given travel restrictions placed on the Palestinians by the Israeli Government. These tasks required that I establish working relationships, not only with the program partners, but also with the Israeli Embassy in Jordan, the Israeli army in the Occupied Territories, funding representatives in the region, travel companies and more.

Early on in my work one of my colleagues commented that this was a job that a good administrative assistant could do. I saw in the work an opportunity to begin to build relationships with my colleagues, particularly in Palestine and Jordan. I was an Israeli and despite the fact that Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians had chosen to partner in the program, we were still in the midst of a political conflict. As a social work professional I recognized that logistics are linked to needs. Social workers begin to build relationships based upon needs identification and addressing the needs of others. This basic principle of the profession was certainly applicable to this program.

One may question how, as a party to the conflict, I was able to transcend my loyalty to my own people. I saw an opportunity to create a process that might enable us to build relationships within a complex political reality. I felt professionally, personally and politically aligned with this endeavor. Perhaps this was enlightened self-interest. Good relationships with one's neighbors benefit all of the neighbors.

This first stage in my work culminated in the coordination of the MMEP regional conference held in Istanbul in 2006. The conference brought together one hundred Palestinians, Israelis and Jordanians including center staff, center steering committee members and community constituents. For many of those who attended the conference it was the first time that they met "the other,"

"the enemy" from the other side of the conflict. For many of the community members who attended the conference it was the first time they had left their countries and the first time they had boarded a plane. Given this reality, the planning and coordination of every aspect of the conference had to excel. It was extremely important that the accommodations meet the specific needs of the Muslim and Jewish participants.

We had originally planned to hold the conference in East Jerusalem at a location that would be accessible for the Palestinians so that we would not be dependent upon travel permits that might be refused at the last minute, hence threatening conference participation. I invited one of my Palestinian colleagues to join me when I visited the Notre Dame Cathedral in East Jerusalem to determine its suitability for the conference. We were shown the conference rooms and the dining hall and then asked to see the sleeping accommodations. Each of the bedrooms had crosses over the beds. My Palestinian colleague and I simultaneously recognized that for both the Muslim and the Jewish participants this might cause discomfort. Looking back, I think this was a critical moment where we understood the complexity of what we were trying to do; every aspect of the conference needed to be considered, based upon the needs and sensitivities of our communities. It would be impossible to expect the participants to relate to one another if they felt that we had not addressed their needs.

Sometime into the planning of the conference we decided to move the location to Jordan, thinking it would be a less complicated travel destination than East Jerusalem. I spoke to one of my Jordanian partners about the necessity of ensuring that we would have kosher food for the Israeli participants who kept kosher. He assured me that there was no place in Amman where we would find kosher food. I arranged for an Israeli caterer to cater the conference; however, this meant that we would have to bring three days of food across the Jordanian border. Moreover, given the rules of kosher cuisine, I explained to my colleague that we would need to have the hotel in Amman agree

to bring in the food, to heat it and to serve it on a separate set of dishes that the caterer would provide. Imagine! My Jordanian partner proceeded to the hotel and to the border police to explain the rules entailed in keeping kosher. In the Middle East this was unique and was indicative of the close relationships that we had developed.

We ultimately held the regional conference in Istanbul and it was by every measure a true success. At the end of the conference the one major criticism that we heard was that the conference had not been long enough. Worrying about "logistics" served as the basis for successful peace building in this stage of my work and enabled me to build upon this in the next phase of my role.

Facilitating Bilateral Relationships

The complexities and costs of organizing a regional conference helped us to recognize that, as program, we would need to consider bilateral exchanges between centers as an additional avenue to reinforce the regional network. An opportunity for such exchange presented itself when the Israeli Government introduced the Wisconsin Plan, a welfare-to-work pilot initiative. Neighborhoods in West Jerusalem, with a predominantly Israeli population, and neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, with a predominantly Palestinian population, were chosen for the pilot project.

Soon after the commencement of the Wisconsin Plan, MMEP's West Jerusalem center initiated what was called "Wisconsin Watch" a monitoring strategy to document disentanglements experienced by the program participants as the basis for advocacy work in regard to the program with the Israeli Government.

I organized a joint meeting between the staffs of the West Jerusalem and the East Jerusalem centers to discuss possibilities for joint cooperation regarding the impact of the Plan on the two communities. One of the principles behind the rights-based community practice model is universality-that we are all entitled to the same rights. We recognized that governments oftentimes divide identity groups and that the best way to put the principle of universality into practice is to bring together

people of diversity who suffer from the same disentanglement and yet are traditionally divided.

At that first meeting the Israeli and Palestinian center staffs sat around the table sharing the experiences of their constituencies and telling about what they had done to date to assist them. The stories they told about the experiences of their constituencies who participated in the Wisconsin Plan were almost a mirror image of the other. In this context it did not matter if you were Palestinian or Israeli. What mattered was that the constituencies, Jewish and Palestinian, were poor and dependent upon government programs that ultimately disempowered them.

It was a very exciting time for me for I was seeing how rights-based practice and peace building come together and how professionals can play a role in bridging the divides created by political conflict by identifying and organizing around common rights issues.

For a period of about a year the centers worked in cooperation and my role was to facilitate their efforts. Anyone who has ever done inter-organizational work knows how complicated this can be. Added to normative complexities were issues that paralleled those of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict-issues of power, decision-making, expertise, autonomy and more. Addressing these was critical to the ability of the staffs to continue to work together and required different strategies at different stages of the process. At times I would meet with each of the partners individually to allow for ventilation and regrouping. At times we would meet together to work out the sensitivities of the two communities.

The centers were able to hold joint activities, including a public meeting, community outreach, lobbying, and a demonstration in the heart of Jerusalem, where Israelis and Palestinians stood side by side advocating for their rights. The efforts eventually influenced the government to adopt significant changes to the original Wisconsin Plan. At the same time, these often heroic efforts to cooperate across the conflict were not without compromise. Excerpts from a letter that I received from our West Jerusalem center

director following a joint conference were telling:

The conference itself was important in terms of the message of working together and the information that those there received. Unfortunately, but as I predicted, the Jewish participation was very small—about ten people all together, and all but one from our core group of activists. It was clear that coming to both East Jerusalem and a church was an unrealistic challenge to people who are not closely involved with our center. While the conference clearly gave the message that the Wisconsin Plan brings people together across their differences, and it was amazing to have a conference in Hebrew and Arabic, including a Knesset member who translated for himself, it did not have an impact on our organizing of the Jewish participants. We will have to do a similar conference in West Jerusalem very soon to raise the energy level.

Because the time is so critical in terms of what must be moved forward—all of our claims have been publicly adopted by Eli Yeshai¹, with whom we have worked regularly, and he is expecting us to give vocal support—I feel that currently I need to focus and put most of our time into working with the Jewish community to get them out into the streets and to the Knesset regularly. We will obviously coordinate joint activities, but they will be focused on doing things publicly in our community, in the Knesset and in opposition to the Treasury Ministry. Obviously we will coordinate as much as possible with the group that L. is working with [in East Jerusalem]²

Clearly the center director was committed to the peace building aspect of the MMEP. At the same time, I recognized that the peace

building element that was central to my role was to a great extent secondary to the rights-based work within each center's constituencies. To put it simply, if the centers ceased to address the needs of their constituencies they would cease to exist. Hence this had to be their first priority.

Now well into my position as regional coordinator, I recognized that in order to strengthen the regional network we needed to strengthen each of the centers so as to enhance a more equal exchange between them. The first Israeli centers, which had been set up close to a decade before the Palestinian and the Jordanian centers, had obvious advantages as the veteran organizations within the rights-based community practice regional network. While there was an openness and willingness to share experience and knowledge, it was important that the partner centers develop their own expertise and reinforce their autonomy. One can view this micro process within the context of the conflict as parallel to a peace process, whereby it is critical that there be both autonomy and interdependence between the parties to a peace agreement. Agreements can be honored best when there is a balance of power among the parties to the agreement.

This understanding led me to approach the director of the East Jerusalem Palestinian center to begin to think about how to strengthen the capacity of her staff. Our discussions led to a two-year training program for the staff that I facilitated. This development, within my role as regional coordinator, was particularly significant for me in that I understood the depth of the trust that the East Jerusalem Palestinian center director and I had built. My role at this stage was like that of an external trainer or supervisor who is brought into an agency by the agency director. In any circumstance this would require a relationship based upon mutual trust. Within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where an Israeli was being asked to accept a role within a Palestinian organization, it was all the more challenging.

Training and Supervision

Of all of the work I have done with MMEP, the two years I spent working directly with the center staffs in East Jerusalem, and later

in Jordan, were the most exciting and fulfilling. I was drawn to the people I met. In many ways, just as I had wanted my partners to see me not only through the prism of the conflict, I too needed to find a way to see the center staffs, and the Palestinian and Jordanian communities they worked with, in all of their identities.

When I began to work with the entire center staff, both my Palestinian and Jordanian colleagues introduced me as the regional coordinator of MMEP from Canada. Because I am American-born, my North American roots were never questioned. My partners explained that, given the political reality, they could not introduce me as an Israeli. Although some may take issue with this, I trusted my colleagues' judgment. They had opened a door for me and now it was up to me to build relationships with the staff members that might allow us, over time, to become more open with one another.

Over the two years of my work with the staff in East Jerusalem, I visited the center on a bi-monthly basis. We spent one year discussing the conceptual framework of the rights-based practice model and figuring out its relevance to Palestinian society. We translated the central concepts of the model into Arabic and worked together to define them and to adapt them to the Palestinian reality. My goal in this first year was to ensure that the staff had a conceptual and theoretical framework, compatible with their professional practice and the language and practice used by the centers in the regional network.

Oftentimes the staff would be so engaged in their discussion of the ideas in Arabic that they would forget to stop to translate for me. I didn't mind and honestly it did not matter that I understood every detail. I was able to observe the process of the staff's excitement with the ideas and to see them as they debated the ideas among themselves. I trusted that if they were stuck, they would bring me into the conversation. I was fascinated by what I saw and the energy I felt. I had a sense of a group of professionals in a process of growth and of a society in development. The excitement in the room often reminded me of what I had felt some thirty years earlier when I had visited

Israel for the first time and felt the energy of the developing Israeli society.

My position as the MMEP Canadian Regional Coordinator afforded me the opportunity to bring examples of the work being done in each of the three societies, Israel, Palestine and Jordan, to the staff counterparts. For example, when the Palestinian staff spoke about disentanglements among the poor in Palestine, I was able to bring examples of the work being done in parallel realities in Jordan and Israel. This kind of sharing had two purposes. The first was to create the links between the centers in the different countries by impressing upon the staff that parallel work was being done with the other side to the conflict. In addition, by sharing the realities of the other societies, we were breaking down stereotypes. Many of the Palestinians were surprised to learn that there are poor communities in Israel that are disentitled. By bringing examples we began to look at how governments disentitle their own citizens. My professional knowledge and experience permitted me to hear and see the realities of life under occupation without having a sense that I needed to defend or uphold Israel or my government. This enabled me to be seen, I think, as fair. I visited Palestinian homes and met with the community. I saw the suffering of a people living under occupation.

What I saw oftentimes depressed me and it would have been understandable to give in to the feelings of disempowerment that the situation rendered. Instead, I demanded, in the most positive sense, that the staff members and I recognize our role as professionals with a knowledge base that could enable the staff to focus its efforts on using the rights-based community practice model to build community solidarity and to fight for common rights. This challenge helped to solidify a sense of solidarity among the staff members.

In the second year of our work together I suggested that in each of our meetings a different staff member would present her work and questions related to her work for discussion. This process involved more personal and professional exposure and my goal was to focus on how each staff member's work reflected the rights-based community

practice model that we had struggled with the year before.

In this second year I was invited into yet another layer of intimacy with the staff at the East Jerusalem Palestinian center. The majority of the staff was women and we developed a process that allowed us to bring ourselves as women to our meetings. One by one, the women pulled me aside to share something personal—difficulties with dieting, a failed attempt to become pregnant, nervousness before a marriage, difficulties with a mother-in-law, deliberations about professional choices, a family member who had left the family fold and disappeared somewhere in Israel after changing her identity. I was approached by one of the staff members who told me in Hebrew that she was studying Hebrew. It was not uncommon for the women to call me or write to me in between our meetings and I often wonder who did more for whom? I learned about the issues of the community—teenage marriage, violence against women, parenting difficulties and more. I was thrilled to be part of a joint effort to assist the staff and the community in organizing efforts to cope with these issues. Our meetings were incredibly dear to me.

We arranged a visit from the East Jerusalem center to the Israeli center in Beersheva and this led to visits by our Jordanian center staffs to the Israeli centers as well. There are very few things that raise the emotions in me in the same way as a meeting between the center staffs. During this period they were many. I was filled with a sense that we were at the core of developing rights-based community practice in the Middle East and peace building between the peoples of the region.

Operation Cast Lead

In the winter of 2008 Israel launched Operation Cast Lead, a twenty one day battle against Hamas, the militant ruling party in the Gaza Strip. Tensions between Israel and Hamas had grown. For over a seven year period, Hamas had launched Qassam rockets into civilian populations in Israel. Israel had placed a blockade on the Gaza Strip, restricting

the daily lives of the Palestinian population in Gaza.

I was opposed to the Israeli Operation and to the Hamas rocket attacks on the Israeli civilian population. Within days after the outbreak of the Operation I had organized peace vigils together with my students and Jewish and Arab citizens living in the south of Israel in areas defined as part of the war zone. Yet while I was involved in aspects of the conflict, I realized that by organizing and attending the vigils, I was about to make a clear political statement at a time when it seemed that the majority of Israeli society supported Operation Cast Lead. I called one of my MMEP Palestinian colleagues who leads an initiative for non-violence in Palestine to strengthen my courage. Afterwards I proceeded to the vigil.

Some months after the end of Operation Cast Lead, the MMEP regional management committee met in Jordan. The morning of the first day of our meetings was spent discussing our thoughts and feelings about Operation Cast Lead. In the context of that discussion I brought my Israeli identity to the table in a way that I had never done before. It was astonishing, not only for me, but also for my regional partners, because I had spent many years in my role as MMEP regional coordinator without emphasizing this aspect of my identity, and I had just been actively engaged in peace vigils that did not reflect the views of the majority of the Israeli public. Yet as I listened to my Palestinian and Jordanian colleagues speak about their feelings about the Operation, I realized that it was equally important to share the Israeli reality. I brought the voices of my Israeli students who live near the Gaza Strip and have been most deeply affected by the Qassam rockets. I brought my reality as a senior lecturer at the Sapir College, located just twenty kilometers from the border, and the experience of running to the bomb shelters during lectures.

In that meeting I was a party to the conflict—an Israeli, and I felt that real partners needed to hear about my reality no less than I had heard and seen my partners' reality. If we are ever to have a sustainable peace this

reality needs to be known and recognized no less so than that of the Palestinians.

We emerged from the meetings with a ten year plan to expand the rights-based practice model in the three societies through the establishment of twenty new centers in the region. To an outsider this must seem surrealistic. How is it possible that we entered into the meetings so divided by the Operation and emerged so united? There is no simple explanation. We have worked together for over a decade and have survived as a network throughout what have been the worst of times in the Middle East. Today it is more difficult to give up on these relationships and the progress that we have made together in our own communities and regions, than it is to allow the political situation to break us apart. We keep fighting back.

Aftermath

My activism during Operation Cast Lead was an eye opener for me. Today I recognize that the biggest challenge I face personally, professionally and politically is within my own society. Operation Cast Lead exposed me to aspects of Israeli society that I had not paid enough attention to previously. My society has moved to the right of the political continuum. Social, economic and psychological gaps between diverse identity groups within the country have grown. There is less tolerance for the "other" from within and the "other" from without. Addressing these is critical if we are ever to be prepared to live peacefully.

Our present goal is to ensure financial sustainability for the centers in each of the societies. I am currently developing a new center in the city of Sderot, located some twenty kilometers from the Gaza Strip. In addition, I serve as the Israeli National Development Director for the program.

The current political reality in the region is not encouraging. I imagine that as a program, and as individuals, our commitment to working together will continue to be challenged. Today I am more pessimistic about the possibilities for peace in the region than in the past, yet this does not deter me from my path. In my moments of despair I remind myself of the Hebrew saying, "Lo Alecha HaAvodah

Legmor" – "It is not for you to complete the work." We are however, responsible to fulfill our part to advance the work. I may never see peace in my lifetime but I remain committed to doing my part to advance peace in our region.

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(Endnotes)

¹ To learn more about MMEP see Moshe Grodofsky (2007) and Torczyner (2000).

² The Israeli Government Minister responsible for the Wisconsin Plan.

³ The excerpts have been included by permission of the center director.

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