

***When Soldiers Speak: From Acts of Violence to Open Communication*, by Anne Read**

Abstract

Inter-religious conversations are essential in transforming current relations in Israel and West Bank Palestine from combat to communication. This paper presents the case study of a Jerusalem-based dialogue group, Combatants for Peace (CFP), which utilizes contact theory to match West Bank Palestinians with Jewish Israeli participants to speak of their experience of war and violence. This paper records and analyzes the impact of such encounters on participants as they overcome psychological, social, and religious walls to address their former enemies in conversation. Through such conversations, interlocutors re-examine their historical narratives, address their personal roles in the conflict, and develop individual relationships with one another. Interlocutor narratives developed within this case study are particular, unique, and even problematic in terms of the dominant narrative of peace in the Middle East. Working within the framework of Martin Buber's theory on dialogue, I argue that conversation is an effective approach to reconciliation and reason that speech is a peace-building praxis. This paper offers an account of peace-building that allows for particularized, even idiosyncratic practices that operate on an intentionally small scale. This paper records the personal stories of conflicting communities as they engage with and address one another in conversation.

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Agony stems from the Greek word *agonia*, meaning combat. Combat is predominant in the historical narratives of Jewish Israelis and West-Bank Palestinians. Historical narratives rely on the collective memory of the living community. Memory is the point where the past meets the present and a relevant tool when developing an approach to the narrative identity of any given community. Yet, what is memory, more particularly, how is personal identity informed and created by collective memory?¹ Collective memory unifies a community and grants meaning to individuals. Strict adherence to upholding a given historical narrative can inhibit new forms of meaningful inter-cultural relations from being integrated into the collective memory. As memory, a historical narrative is neither static nor unified; rather it is a collection of some shared and some contended stories, which legitimize and unify a given population.

In using the term narrative here, I rely on the definition put forward by Paul Scham, Walid Salem, and Benjamin Porgrund in their book, *Shared Histories: A Palestinian-Israeli Dialogue*.² The premise of identity within their book begins with an inter-relation between an individual and her or his collective history.³ The collective

history of each community proves instrumental in dictating inter-religious and inter-cultural relations as well as individual identity. The contradictions between West Bank Palestinian and Jewish Israeli historical narratives often disable fruitful discussion. This type of stalemate interaction was described by Rosenstock-Huessy as a “speech impasse,” which results in a cultural crisis. Speech impasses draw all forms of relation to a halt. To respond, through conversation, to an enemy culture is to bridge such impasses with words, gestures, and shared acts. Speech shapes conversation; speech results in transformation. “I respond although I will be changed,” writes Rosenstock-Huessy.⁴ Speech enables amendment.

In light of these predicaments, the focus of this paper is on reconciling conflict through speech and conversation. This article presents person-to-person encounters between participants of inter-religious and cross-cultural dialogue initiatives in Israel and West Bank Palestine. The conversations presented here are part of a larger project, which analyzes the approaches to and effects of three dialogue groups presently active in Israel and West Bank Palestine. This article will include one of the groups studied: Combatants for Peace, an organization founded by Israelis who had previously served in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and West Bank Palestinians previously active in the armed resistance.

Drawing on the work of Martin Buber, this paper analyzes speech as a viable approach toward cultural reconciliation and assesses the role of conversation in reconstructing identity-based conflicts. What happens in conversation and what is the result? Based on their outcome or lack thereof, conversations can appear to be inconsequential, irritating, and inconclusive. Individuals’ conversations rest outside the peace narrative as constructed by the international community. Inter-religious and cross-cultural encounters are experimental yet practical: to record them is to bring people’s accounts of themselves and of the conflict into knowledge. The narratives developing within these encounters are particular, unique, obscure, and even problematic in terms of the overall account of peace in the Middle-East. These personal narratives can be corrosive to the predominant collective memory and historical narratives of the given communities.

The transformative nature of such encounters is best articulated by Martin Buber in his book, *I and Thou*. In it, Buber presents two forms of human interaction: *I-You (Ich-Du)* and *I-It (Ich-Es)*. *I-You* is a mutual exchange or dialogue between two people. In *I-You* relations, conversation is neither structured nor information laden. *I-It* is the interaction of two monologues speaking over each other, which disables an actual meeting between two individuals. In the *I-It* relation, the interaction occurs not between two whole individuals, but between two combating narratives, each struggling to assert their experiences over the other.⁵ While one draws on the past, the other is open and opens to the present.

Dialogue requires neither speech nor gesture; rather, it is based on presence, will, and openness to meeting. Dialogue, implies Buber, is sacred. Yet, for the sacred aspect to emerge, dialogue must use the word as a means of transformation. Buber writes of dialogue in terms of a covenant relation. Speech, he states, “has no alphabet, each of its sounds is a new creation and only to be grasped as such”.⁶ Response is a necessity of being turned to and addressed.⁷ Buber thus posits the responsibility to respond when turned to, and the accountability, one to another, which is required of us by mere inclusion in life with others.

Dialogue evokes the contrasting term monologue, which furthers the two-fold paradigm of Buber’s construction of human relations, differentiating between *I-It* and *I-You*. Acknowledgment of the basic movement of turning towards another is the required action of life in dialogue, whereas ‘reflection’ is the axis of movement within the life of monologue. Reflection draws one out of the presence of the conversation, the moment of encounter, into a separate state of contemplation. In turning toward another, one reassesses one’s worldview, not through the means of reflection, but through active engagement with the self in the presence of another.

If Martin Buber’s model of *I-You* relations is usable, it requires the availability of two subjects, both an *I* and a *You*. To develop true understanding of the self, one must be able to encounter others.⁸ What if those encounters are inhibited by checkpoints, walls, and military closures? As the following recorded conversations reveal, it is the absence of the acknowledgement of another that has disabled the *I-You* relation from occurring.

Methodology

The research methodology used in this paper is ethnographic fieldwork, which records and describes conversations between West Bank Palestinians, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and Jewish Israelis. This methodology approaches the encounters as they develop through conversation. “The encounters do not order themselves to become a world, but each is for you a sign of world order...it cannot be surveyed: if you try to make it surveyable, you will lose it”, writes Buber.⁹ Rather than being directed toward conclusions and conclusiveness, dialogue may suspend the need for a conclusion. Dialogue may allow interlocutors to rename or re-characterize experiences and memories, to organize them in terms and ways that *need not* be publicly acceptable or even legible.

The conversations with members of Combatants for Peace recorded herein took place over a two-year period, starting in June of 2007. Combatants for Peace matches Jewish Israelis with West Bank Palestinians, which enables the organic nature of conversation between two distinct people to develop. This form of practice allows each person the ability to see and interact with another as a separate, wholly other person,

complete with national, historical, and religious narratives that interact, conflate, and contradict. The premise of these encounters engenders a possible forum for an *I-You* interaction to occur.

Combatants for Peace

I first met Michael Lehrer at a demonstration in Susia, a small village on the cusp of the Hebron hills. The local population of Palestinians, who had been living there for some generations, had been threatened with removal by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) due to the expansion of a nearby Jewish Israeli settlement. Conflict ensued. In response, a group of Israeli citizens and West Bank Palestinians had rented a bus and driven out to the border of the desert to show support and encourage the local population. Combatants for Peace had arranged the trip and had invited me to join them, and it was on this trip that I met Michael.

Michael, who had lived in America for much of his youth, had returned to Israel in his late teens with a keen desire to serve in the IDF. After a year of service he joined a combat unit and later served in the IDF reserves. Over the course of two years of conversations, Michael shared with me the details of his transformation, an experience that began with encounter and eventually lead him into dialogue with his former enemy.

“It was 1987 when the first *intifada* broke out and the commander of our unit volunteered us to do the service in the territories. We were placed in the Hebron area, in the surrounding hills we were basically manning a roadblock for people entering to Israel from Bersheva and a few other areas. We were at the checkpoint, surrounded by empty hills, and we had to man it 24 hours; at the shift of night-morning, all the workers, going into Israel, to work in construction in Bersheva, would be leaving all these farms and villages at four in the morning. They would be arriving at our checkpoint, and there would be a huge traffic jam, a huge line of shared taxis, each one filled with a driver and six workers, each one half asleep, each one with their bag. They would hand over their IDs, and you’re there with your flashlight, and their IDs are all really worn by this time, held by the plastic, and you can hardly read them, and one is Mohammad Ahmed Heleg, and then there is Heleg Ahmed Mohamed, and they all look the same, and you’re trying to see inside, and it’s raining, and its five in the morning, and it’s so ridiculous.

“I remember thinking, the real ones who want to get in, they are not going to go here, so we are just holding up the proletariats. At the same time, I thought they were looking at me like this poor guy, standing out there in the rain and there was kind of a mutual empathy. It was the

beginning of the first *intifada*, it was kind of an innocent revolt, and there were no armed gangs. And then there were knifings, and every year we got more and more distant until today where you don't even see the soldiers. The big ones [checkpoints] now, they are called terminals, around Jerusalem, like in the airport, where there are turnstiles and cameras, and they are sitting behind thick, bullet-proof glass because of all the suicide bombers at the checkpoints - so there is no contact anymore, no contact one-on-one. And I kind of missed this one-on-one contact."

The checkpoint serves as an interesting metaphor. Michael was working at the perimeter between Israel and Palestine—an "irrelevant" and decidedly "small-scale" point of contact between the two communities. The very location of his memory reveals an intersection of Palestinian and Israeli collective memory. Through recounting his experience, what is expressed is the desire for a personal encounter with his national enemy.

Encounter is eventually what Michael found in Combatants for Peace. After ten years of serving regularly as a reserve soldier, Michael refused to cross the Green Line. As a result, he was imprisoned by the military court for refusal to serve based on conscientious objection. Eventually, he learned of Combatants for Peace and began attending regular dialogue sessions. This form of dialogue enables personal relationships to develop through encounters between two people. In the space of encounter, participants share their contrasting experiences of violence, fear, and loss as a common context of their individual hardships. In this scenario, the cultural narratives about the other dissolve as each combatant removes his uniform and stands as an individual before another. It is through such personal experiences that the collective memory is reformulated. The following recorded conversation reveals how an encounter may eventually lead to such identity reformulation:

"Each year the violence on the Palestinian side was rising", recalls Michael. "The second year, we were on the far side of the Mount of Olives, and there was beginning to be more violence, so you begin to be much more distant from the people, you are much more wary. We were supposed to get a wanted person; we were not the unit going into the house to get the person, we were providing support for that unit. So after they arrested him, I went to the police station, and I remember the guy was sitting there hand cuffed and blindfolded and he was waiting to be taken to interrogation in the *Shin Bet*¹⁰. So I was standing there guarding this guy, who was young, a teenager, I couldn't even tell. Was he eighteen? Was he sixteen? And I knew he was going to be taken into interrogation, and I sort

of realized what I am – because my instincts, from how I grew up, the stories that I was told, my mother went through the *Shoah*¹¹ - I related to the victim you know - so I was immediately identifying with him, but at the same time, he had done something.”

Here, Michael has recognized where his historical narrative began to contradict his personal knowledge based on the collective memory of the Shoah. Relating the story of the Palestinian detainee to events of the Shoah as experienced by his mother reveals the recognition of an individual person fallen victim to a military system. His recognition grants the Palestinian teenager individuality and renders him a wholly other person whose pain is both recognizable and familiar. The force of an encounter, even as brief as this, reveals the contrary nature of personal experience on historical narratives. His brief relation to the teenager brought his historical narrative, which maintains an enemy relation, into question. What resulted was a movement toward an *I-You* exclusive relation, where two humans encounter each other as wholly other. This encounter eventually led Michael to his decision to refuse serving across the Green Line and initiate his engagement with Combatants for Peace. Yet encounter is only the beginning point of dialogue. Michael shared with me the difficulties of ongoing dialogue in a land of conflict:

“When I started to have some encounters with Palestinians – the first time you go into a Palestinian village and you are surrounded by the young guys, a huge amount of youth, children and youth, no women. And they are all coming up to you, and you feel naked, you don't have your gun, and you're going there in good will, but still, you are looking up to the rooftops, and it takes a while to get over that - so today I go and I feel quite comfortable. But to be an Israeli in a Palestinian area without a gun, my security depends on their good will. I always feel that a little bit, but I believe in good will, I believe in looking a person in the eyes and speaking a little bit of Arabic, and they know that I'm Jewish but I'm okay, and I believe there is enough of them who want to who can make a difference. There is a distinction between those who know this and the ones who don't care. But I wouldn't just go; I have to go through friends. You know to Ramallah, I wouldn't go unless I knew someone was waiting to meet me there. Through these encounters, I've eventually made some friends as well.”

Riyad Kharraz is one of those friends. Originally from Hebron, Riyad became involved with Combatants for Peace in 2006, after having been shot in the leg and imprisoned by

the IDF. His brother was killed in the same shooting. Throughout his childhood and into university, he was actively involved in the Fatah youth movement. I meet with Riyadh and his brothers – one a pharmacist, the other a civil engineer – after their recent return from studying in Jordan. We spoke at length about the situation. “I don’t understand *intifada* exactly, but I think it is a good thing,” said Riyadh.

“That we are working for a dream, that we are working to have a country, to have an army. We are working for our dream. I told you that I when I was a child, there were people who were older than us, and they ‘managed’ us, just to bring water for them and bring food for them. When the army came to our village, they closed some roads. When the army would arrive, they [Palestinians] began to throw some stones. This is kind of refusing the occupation. We didn’t have a chance to have our education daily, because the army closed the schools and the hospitals and different things like this. And we began to understand what was going on. And we were thinking: What’s up? Why’d they close our schools? We just educate there. And then we began to understand what ‘occupation’ is. Occupation cuts everything. It closes everything. In an occupation, they treat you like an animal, you are not human, you are not a person in their eyes. You have just to take orders: don’t go out of your house; don’t walk on that street; don’t open the window; don’t look out of the window. Things that make you think: How can I work against this?”

Here Riyadh identifies how the *intifada* ruptured the previous Israeli-Palestinian *I-It* relation. Post first *intifada*, the everyday interactions between Israelis and West Bank Palestinians vanished. In its wake came the understanding of the alarming effect of the *I-It* Israeli-Palestinian relation, in which the given collective memory of each community concealed the wholeness of the other. The result of an ongoing *I-It* relation was a breach of connection.¹² This breach was the outcome of an ongoing speech impasse between two historical narratives that refused to recognize the other as a distinct and separate whole. What first appeared to be a standoff was actually a rupture.

The *intifada* dissolved the illusion of a single-state national amalgamation. While the historical narratives never fused, the national narrative of a post 1967 Israel amalgamated the Christian and Muslim Palestinians, along with Jewish Israelis and Palestinian citizens of Israel, under a single nation-state. The merge was not whole, complete, or effective. The eventual response was an eruption of active resistance. Encounter as rupture offers insight into the relations between Israelis and Palestinians. The first Palestinian *intifada* resulted in the division of an *It* from an *I*. Through civil disobedience and non-participation in the Israeli economy, Palestinians revealed the

eclipsing nature of *I-It* relations by transgressing Israel's inclusion of them under a single nation state. The *intifada* offered a clear distinction between Palestinian and Israeli citizens.

In Buber's terms of *I-You* relations, the hyphen is essential. It enables the two entities to remain particular yet ultimately linked in a form of relation. A point of interest is Buber's use of the terms "exclusive" to articulate the *I-You* relation, and "separate" to convey the *I-It* experience. The *I-You* relation is an encounter of the wholly other; yet, it is the exclusive nature of the *You* that enables an encounter. Meanwhile, the *I-It* is described as "experience is remoteness from you", which also requires a separation.¹³ *I-You* requires reciprocity, while *I-It* provides no such possible relation. *I-You* relies on the space "between" the two interlocutors. This between is dynamic, unlimited, unmediated by borders. The between is the presence of the present. This exclusiveness required by the *I-You* relation is exemplified by personal, individual, person-to-person encounters. Here, syntax is used as a pure reflection of the encounter Buber articulates. What exact role the hyphen plays is a contended matter. It is a role the international community has taken on as their own, at times to the detriment of the two parties involved.

Buber's text on dialogue provides readers with approaches: not prescriptive tools, but means to re-evaluate and move towards *I-You* encounters. His work is one of relational ethics. *I-It* has an object of inquiry; here *Is* seek *Its* to experience and exploit. Whereas the *I-You* is a dynamic based in the present, it is the realm of the between, and its relation is based on reciprocity¹⁴. These encounters dissolve the illusion of a merger or separateness. In many ways, what is sought from Buber is a vocabulary for dialogue that is not fettered with tactics already operative (e.g. diplomacy), but which suspends those language games in order to make available a new kind of relation. The result is a language of encounter, which challenges historical narratives by changing the collective memory of cross-cultural and inter-religious relations.

Unlike the territorially defined borders between states and communities, which rely on leaving and returning, conversation is not necessarily formed by political or geographical terms. While West Bank Palestinians and Jewish Israelis are currently entrenched in a network of circumstances which disable their communities from encountering one another daily, Combatants for Peace suggests one way which *may* overcome these barriers. By de-centering historical narratives, participants approach each other through their personal experiences of war and *intifada*. These conversations reveal that a majority of individuals living in that region express a commonality of loss, terror, disorientation, and displacement as a defining characteristic of their personal experience. Combatants for Peace's distinctive person-to-person forum of encounter enables an individual understanding of the past while shaping a new collective memory of shared experiences.

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Notes

¹ Jacques Le Goff describes the role of collective memory in the establishment of personal narrative in the following terms: “In societies the distinction between past and present (and future) also implies the ascent into memory and this liberation from the present, both of which in turn assume education, the constitution of a collective memory preceding and extending beyond the individual memory...as an organized construct, the individual past parallels the collective past.” Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 3.

² Historical narratives are an expression of cultural identity. By historical narrative, I refer to “how a society understands itself and others through history – how it came into being, how it fits into the world, how it relates to its enemies and friends. The historical narrative is truly the property of a nation as a whole; in fact, possession of an historical narrative is one definition of a nation” Walid, S., Scham, P., & Porgrund, B. *Shared Histories: A Palestinian-Israeli Dialogue*. (Jerusalem: Modern Arab Press, 2005), 3.

³ Head of the Yakar Center in Jerusalem, Rabbi Micheal Rosen says: “History is a means of self-understanding....Without history one can neither understand oneself, nor the world around.” Scham, Salem, & Pogrund, *Shared Histories: A Palestinian-Israeli Dialogue*, vii.

⁴ Rosenstock-Huessy, E. *Out of Revolution*. (Norwich, Vermont: Argo Books, 1969), 740.

⁵ “By the nature of things, in the 100-year-long conflict between the Jewish and Palestinian populations, it is particularly difficult to acknowledge the history of the other partner to the conflict, in addition to one’s own viewpoint and description of history, never mind accepting it as being of equal worth.” Scham, Salem, & Pogrund, *Shared Histories: A Palestinian-Israeli Dialogue*, iv.

⁶ Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. (New York: Free Press, 1971), 34.

⁷ With piercing directness Buber asks, “What do we expect when we are in despair and yet go to a man? Surely a presence by means of which we are told that nevertheless there is meaning.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 31.

⁸ “The concentration and fusion into a whole can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You.” Buber, *I and Thou*, 62.

⁹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 83.

¹⁰ Security Service

¹¹ *Shoah* (שואה), a biblical word meaning "calamity," is a Hebrew term for the Holocaust

¹² “To begin with, I believe the most important feeling the West Bankers and Gazans wanted to convey to the Israelis – after they got their raw anger out of the way – was: ‘I’m not part of you.’ They wanted to tell Israelis with their stones: ‘I may have worked in your fields and factories for twenty years; I may have spoken Hebrew, carried your identity cards, and sold your yarmulkes. But I am telling you here and now that I am not part of you, and I have no intention of becoming part of you.’” Friedman, T. *From Beirut to Jerusalem*. (NY: Anchor Books, 1989), 375.

¹³ Buber, *I and Thou*, 60.

¹⁴ Note: this is not an either/or orientation. No I is fully *Ich-Es*, nor is *Ich-Du* ever fully void of *Ich-Es*; each human being holds both forms of self-other manifestation.