

INVITED SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

Teaching Israel/Palestine to Build Community on Campus

Russell C.D. Arnold

Abstract

This article is a scholarly reflection on the experience of teaching a class on Israel/Palestine at Regis University four times over the last decade. Indebted to Parker J. Palmer’s “Habits of the Heart that Make Democracy Possible,” this author explores some of the skills and experiences that have served to impact the wider campus community toward a more just and humane world. The article begins by discussing welcoming all participants into a more open and honest engagement with such a highly charged and almost universally contentious conversation. We are challenged to speak knowing our understanding is partial, and listen for what the other’s perspective can add to our understanding rather than to find their faults. Next, the author recounts experiences of engaging the complexity of the Other within the classroom and in public events on campus. This is accomplished by seeking out a wider range of perspectives and wrestling with the tension between the correctness of our use of language and our effectiveness in deepening our understanding and transforming our conflicts. The article concludes with a call to make plans to make a difference; for each of us to take an active role in transforming ourselves and the communities in which we live, learn, and work toward the world we want.

Keywords

Israel, Palestine, Habits of the Heart, pedagogy, Gaza, October 7

This scholarly reflection draws on my experiences teaching an integrative undergraduate seminar for 20–25 students at Regis University on Israel/Palestine four times over the last decade (2015, 2017, 2022, and 2024). Throughout this period, I was also teaching courses in the skills and practice of dialogue and serving as the primary point person on campus for public conversations related to Israel/Palestine as well as responses to violence and rhetoric targeting Jews and Muslims.

I would like to dedicate this reflection to my Dad, Richard Arnold, *z”l* (may his memory be for a blessing), who died suddenly in January 2026, during the weeks I was writing this reflection. He was a remarkable person, a *mensch*, who modeled for me a commitment to curiosity, fairness, articulating his own positions clearly, and an openness to wrestling with the positions of others. During the year after the October 7 attacks on Israel, and throughout the first year of the war in Gaza that followed, my Dad and I met for breakfast just about every Tuesday morning. While I was teaching the Israel/Palestine class, he and I would talk about the latest news, share things we had read, and challenge each other to complicate our understandings. I knew that he did not agree with me about the possibilities for a future in which Jews and Palestinians might live together, nor the path to get there. However, I also always knew that he earnestly wanted to hear about what I was thinking and what I was doing with my students. His memory continues to be a blessing and an inspiration to me and to many others.

Let me give a bit of context about Regis and about the class. Regis University is a small, Jesuit Catholic liberal arts college in Denver, CO. We have a strong commitment to our mission as a community of scholars and learners engaged with the world around us, accompanying one another as we seek to “build a more just and humane world through transformative education at the frontiers of faith, reason, and culture.”¹ As a result, we have a faculty and student body consistently engaged in activism around race, gender, LGBTQ inclusion, immigrant rights, and disability rights. At the same time, it is rare for Israel/Palestine to be the issue at the top of anyone’s list. In my thirteen years at Regis, I have met only a handful of students who had deep, direct, or familial ties to either Israel or Palestine, even fewer of which became students in the class. The majority of people who either took the class, or participated in campus events, learning communities, or actions did so as more or less interested outsiders.

1 Regis University, “History and Mission.” <https://www.regis.edu/about/history-mission/>.

I originally designed my Israel/Palestine course in 2014 to broaden our understanding of the land, peoples, histories, diversities, and diasporas, rather than narrowly about “the conflict,” with the primary goal that we expand our skills and capacities to foster better conversations on campus. As described in an earlier article published in the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, the course’s structure follows the “5 Habits of the Heart that make democracy possible” from Parker J. Palmer’s 2014 book, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*.² These habits are: 1) An understanding that we’re all in this together, 2) An appreciation of the value of otherness, 3) An ability to hold tension in life giving ways, 4) A sense of personal voice and agency, and 5) A capacity to create community.³

Focusing on these habits of thought and practice have enabled the students, and me as well, to connect what we are learning about Israel/Palestine with our own ways of being, as well as our families, and our campus communities. My goal has been that the class is not an isolated intellectual exercise, but rather a holistic learning experience that integrates ideas, understandings, and commitments in order to contribute to the transformation of our communities and societies. In other words, I believe that this Israel/Palestine class ought to be responsive to the needs of the present moment, preparing us to support better conversations across campus and our communities: conversations that welcome everyone to deeper engagement, that explore the nuance and complexity of the “other,” and those that lead to making plans, making a difference.

Welcoming Everyone to Engagement

At Regis, one of the first issues we face is the widely different levels of knowledge and investment among the students. As a result, my first objective is to welcome everyone into engagement with the central question of the class: [W]hat does justice mean in the context of Israel/Palestine? I try to be clear with the students that I am not teaching this class because I know the answer to this question, but rather because I am wrestling with this question alongside them and I am very grateful to have them as conversation partners. I don’t pretend to be done, or even farther along toward an answer. I may

2 Russell C.D. Arnold, “Cultivating Parker Palmer’s Habits of the Heart in an Integrative Course on Israel/Palestine,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 20 (2017): 54–70. This article and the course were subsequently mentioned in Palmer’s Introduction to the 2024 edition of *Healing the Heart of Democracy* (see note 3).

3 Parker J. Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (Jossey-Bass, 2011).

have spent more time reading and thinking about the issues, and have travelled to the land on multiple occasions, but each one of us brings perspectives and commitments that we all need. To solidify this shared project, we read together two poems: “The Place Where We Are Right” by Yehuda Amichai and “Out Beyond Ideas of Wrongdoing” by Rumi. Amichai tells us that “doubts and loves/dig up the world/like a mole, a plow”⁴ making the trampled ground once again fertile for growth and healing. Rumi invites us to a field “out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing” where “ideas, language and even the phrase *each other*/doesn’t make any sense.”⁵

Even with this kind of framing, it is clear that there are many barriers to participating in real conversations about Israel/Palestine, both inside and outside of the classroom. We try to discuss this directly, to learn what keeps us from speaking up or getting involved in the conversation. The most common responses are something like “I don’t know enough” or “it’s too difficult.” Understandably, students want to feel confident that they know what they think about the situation before taking the risk to say something. They interpret their uncertainty as a total lack of relevant information. They think that if they knew more they would know what to say or do. At the same time, they are afraid of saying something “wrong” and/or offending someone. Together we begin to challenge one other to become comfortable with the inevitable fact that whatever we might say is incomplete. Someone will always be able to say, “but you didn’t also say this” or “but what about this.” If we want to foster a better, deeper, richer set of conversations with each other, we have to be willing to say something that is partial (not encompassing the whole situation from every perspective) and to be willing to listen to each other for what they are saying, not jumping on them for what they did not say, or what perspective they did not take. We need to be reminded of the teaching of Rabbi Tarfon, “He [Rabbi Tarfon] used to say: It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it” (*Mishnah Avot* 2:16, Kulp translation).⁶

4 Yehuda Amichai, “The Place Where We Are Right,” in *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, ed. and trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (University of California Press, 1996), 34.

5 Rumi, “Out Beyond Ideas of Wrongdoing,” in *The Essential Rumi*, expanded ed., trans. Coleman Banks (HarperOne, 1995), 36.

6 *Mishnah Pirkei Avot* 2:16, translated by Joshua Kulp, Sefaria Library, https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.2.1?lang=bi&with=Translations&lang2=en.

Engaging the Nuance and Complexity of the Other

The next step, a difficult one to be sure, is to take this courage and understanding outside of the classroom and into the wider conversations on campus, in the community, and even online.⁷ We have tried to work toward this in both indirect and direct ways. Indirectly, I am consistently drawing on what I have learned from these conversations with my students in organizing interfaith conversations, vigils, panels, events, and learning communities on campus. Since October 7th, 2023, I have hosted a series of public conversations, a faculty/staff learning community, as well as a few gatherings of the Jewish community on campus. In each case, I have prioritized invitation, relationships, and engagement. My hope, which is not always achieved, is to create a space where we can have real disagreement over the real issues while maintaining a sense that we are all in this together.

As a result of this work, I was contacted in Fall 2024 by Regis’ newly formed Muslim Student Association (MSA). They wanted one of their first public events to promote more informal, individual conversations on campus about Israel and Palestine and the war in Gaza. The plan was to set up separate tables to invite people to speak and learn about the “Past” “Present” and “Future” of Palestine. To support their presentation of the past, I assigned the students in my class to design and produce posters and brochure style handouts that could invite meaningful conversations related to narratives of the history of the region since 1917. My students drew upon our reading of *Side By Side*, a volume that presents two narratives of each decade of the 20th Century according to Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian schoolteachers on facing pages.⁸ The very experience reading this book evokes in us the discomfort and disorientation that makes an easy harmonized story utterly impossible. We might like the way one “side” tells each part of the story, but the voice of the “other” remains ever-present. We learn that “the history” is always held in tension, and that the words we use in telling “the” story matter a great deal. In trying to represent this experience of narrating history for the purpose of this public event, both my students and the MSA students resisted collapsing the tension into a single, simple story, and successfully modeled deepening conversations in public.

7 Online conversations are beyond the scope of this reflection, and extremely difficult. I mention it here only as aspiration.

8 Sāmī ‘Abd Al-Razzāq ‘Adwān, Dan Bar-On, Eyal J. Naveh, and the Peace Research Institute in the Middle East (PRIME), eds., *Side by Side: Parallel Histories of Israel/Palestine* (New Press, 2012).

The work in the class to interrogate the complexity of our language also impacted a series of private conversations as well. In recent years, we have used the book, *Social Justice and Israel/Palestine* to help us problematize foundational terminology such as settler-colonialism, self-determination, international law, and genocide.⁹ This volume includes two or three essays reflecting divergent perspectives on each concept. One of the questions that these essays raise for us is the difference between *correct* use of a term in an academic context and *strategic* use of a term within a conversation. For example, in Fall 2024, one of the students referred, in class, to Israel's war in Gaza as genocide. In response, I raised a question about whether we should use that word to describe the situation. The student was a little taken aback, but the class session moved on. The student stopped by my office the next day and asked me why I pushed back on calling it a genocide. I told the student that my question was not about whether it was "correct"—whether it fit the official definition of genocide according to international law. It was about whether it was "wise" or "helpful" or "necessary" to use that language. What is the effect on the discourse of using that language? Does invoking genocide end the conversation? Is there anything else to say if we have declared genocide? Is there anything else to understand about the situation or the parties or the people we are talking to? Does it automatically make one party a victim and the other party evil? Is there anything left to wonder about? Does it make it impossible to continue talking with anyone who does not see it as genocide? After our meeting, the student indicated that they were glad they came to talk to me because they initially thought my response in class indicated I could not be respected and that they shouldn't listen to me anymore. Thus, illustrating precisely my point.

Later that month, I was leading a learning community series with interested faculty and staff. Over five or six meetings we read and discussed some of the materials I used in class, including the essays from *Social Justice and Israel/Palestine* on genocide. We similarly engaged arguments about the difference between terminology being correct and being helpful. In that context we wrestled directly with the official definition in international law, and the difficulty of proving intent. One of my colleagues, a professor of Politics, challenged us to also consider the context in which the definition was created and adopted, he argued, to shield nations from scrutiny and limit its applicability to other situations. We are left, then, with the danger of specific terminology as a mark of respectability used to determine who should be listened to, on one hand, and interminable debate over semantics on the

9 Aaron J. Hahn Tapper and Mira Sucharov, eds., *Social Justice and Israel/Palestine: Foundational and Contemporary Debates* (University of Toronto Press, 2019).

other. The deeper, nuanced conversation we want to have requires from us the patience and generosity to refuse to use labels and analytical terminology to shortcut and short-circuit the conversations.

One of the most productive and challenging readings I have used in each iteration of the class has been “Returning to Haifa,” by Ghassan Kanafani.¹⁰ This novella tells the story of a Palestinian couple who return, in the days after the 1967 war, to the home they were forced to flee in 1948 and their conversation with the Israeli Jewish woman who, after fleeing Europe with her husband, settled in that home raising the son agonizingly left behind as her own son. Each time I read this story, I am taken on a complicated, personal, emotional, and intellectual journey. The first experience I have is my own visceral memories of the semester I studied at the University of Haifa in 1992. While reading about the Palestinian couple approaching Haifa in the car, in my mind I hear the droning hum of paddleballs on the beach, see the layered streets rising up the steep hills of the city, smell the flowers and trees of the Baha’i Gardens, and hear “Bohemian Rhapsody” played on repeat by my Yemeni roommate. These memories are for me (as for Said and Safiyya in the story) a powerful connection to the place as it is in my memory, not necessarily the place as it is today, or as it is for others.

My second experience takes place as I fully enter into the metaphor of the story: the son (Khaldun/Dov) as the land, lost to his parents who are made refugees (Said and Safiyya), raised by his adoptive parents who arrive as refugees (Iphrat and Miriam), and coming of age and coming to terms with his/its shared history and possible futures. At one point, Miriam makes an off handed comment about Dov being like his father, Iphrat, who died in the Sinai 11 years earlier. Said responded to this comment with shock, followed by the question “What is fatherhood?”¹¹ He invites me to ask, Is it blood? Is it relationship? What makes my father, my father? The parents believe that the son is old enough to choose for himself, however he responds by becoming angry and then slumping in paralysis. If I put myself in the place of the son, and consider the voice of the land itself, would I accept the choice? Should I reject this as either/or thinking? It must be possible to find a both/and way of proceeding, right?

In the end, the story leaves me with a powerful reminder of my own limitations, and the refusal to accept easy answers that seem great but tend to

10 Ghassan Kanafani, *Palestine’s Children: Returning to Haifa and Other Stories*, trans. Barbara Harlow and Karen E. Riley (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000).

11 Kanafani, *Palestine’s Children*, 171.

collapse the tensions. The conclusion that both Dov and Said reach, which I presume is also the author's conclusion, is "man is a cause."¹² I have read this story more than half a dozen times, and I have read the notes and other commentaries on this story, and I have to tell you, I have no idea what Kanafani means by this. At times, I have felt like I have approached some understanding of it, but it doesn't last and I am left wondering and struggling to understand the limitations in our ability to reconcile with one another. In a way, like Said, who hopes his other son, Khalid, will have left to join the *fidayeen*, my hope is that my students will find their own way into the fight, not on one side against the other, but for the world full of compassion and understanding, justice and life for all. The kind of world worthy of my own father.

Making Plans, Making a Difference

In spring 2025, a flyer was taped to our department bulletin board and in other places on campus, asking students if they opposed their tuition supporting genocide and accelerating climate change. The flyer had a QR code that led to a survey, but neither the flyer nor the survey included any contact information for the group involved. I eventually tracked them down and asked to talk with them. They had gathered some support for a divestment campaign, and had talked with the Provost specifically about divestment from Israel. They were scheduled to meet with the Board of Trustees in a few weeks. On a phone call with the organizers, I listened to their concerns and what they wanted to do. About a year earlier, during the height of encampments at other universities, I had a meeting with our University's President and asked him how he would respond if a group of students demanded divestment from Israel. He said he would welcome student involvement in the conversation. He would want them to come into the process, not just demand from outside; to wrestle with the scope and the complexities of the budget and the other financial and ethical considerations for our investment strategies. Reminded of this conversation, I raised questions to the students that I thought the board might have about the scope of their request: How to determine whom to divest from? Would it include those who supported the occupation of the West Bank, the military, or anything to do with Israel? What about companies in the US who support Israel? Would we refuse donations from anyone who supports Israel? I encouraged students to do more to engage the widest possible support for what they wanted to do. They were convinced that they had the support of

12 Kanafani, *Palestine's Children*, 181.

all the students, based on those they had talked to. It seemed to me they had not gathered the support of the faculty—or really tried to do so. After this one phone conversation I did not hear from them again. My sense was that they saw me as not sufficiently supportive of their efforts. Too many questions, not enough “passion” for the cause.

Experiences like these with students both inside and outside the course, challenged me to think carefully about my own roles and responsibilities. Balancing the need for facilitating a space of dialogue, of welcoming everyone, of elevating the conversation, with the need for action in the face of horrific violence and a worrying level of apathy or paralysis. While the students in the most recent class (2024) were working on a project about developing a sense of voice and agency, I decided to write an open letter to our campus community. I tried to articulate a way of proceeding and a message that I thought our community (including myself) needed to hear. I wanted to declare that advocacy and action did not necessarily mean choosing a side (Israeli or Palestinian) but taking a stand for/towards peace and against violence—toward understanding and against othering—toward a more just and humane world. I shared my draft of this statement with the class and asked for advice that allowed me to revise it. In the end, I did not publish it or send it to the newspaper. I was afraid how it might be received. I want to publish a revised version of this letter here.

Open Letter to the Regis Community, January 2025

Dear Friends,

We have to be brave. We cannot sit this out. We have to do something. Every one of us.

We have to be brave enough to allow ourselves to feel the weight of the tragedy.

And, we have to grieve.

We have to be brave enough to not look away from this devastating violence or become paralyzed because it is too complicated.

And, we have to be brave enough to know that our understanding is incomplete, that there is always more to understand.

We have to be brave enough to take seriously what we do know, and allow it to penetrate our hearts and provoke our care and concern.

And, we have to be brave enough to listen generously to the voices and stories of more people who are closer to it than we are, those we may agree with and those we may not.

We have to be brave enough to listen to our opponents.

And, we have to be brave enough to speak up for our friends.

We have to be brave enough to listen to our own hearts as they break open in compassion.

And, we have to be brave enough to speak out to demand justice for those harmed.

We have to be brave enough to speak out against our own who fail to live up to our ideals.

And, we have to be brave enough to reject the “two sides” narratives (Israelis vs. Palestinians or Jews vs. Muslims) in favor of polyvocal narratives that explore the complex diversities of perspectives and experiences as well as the complex causes and influences on people’s behavior.

We have to be brave enough to talk about the difficult and contentious questions.

And, we will have to be brave enough to “get stuck in”—to persist in the conversations with one another, to deepen our understanding so that we might strengthen our ability to act appropriately and effectively.

To our Regis Administration and Staff, I challenge you to be brave enough to encourage rather than fear the activation of our students in response to our commitment to accompanying the marginalized, and to be willing to align every aspect of our university, including our finances and investments, with our deepest commitments and mission.

To our Faculty, I challenge you to be brave enough to journey with our students, challenging them (and ourselves) to deeper understanding, to radically inclusive community building, and to careful discernment leading to just action.

To our Students, I challenge you to fight the algorithm that only feeds you the most sensational sliver of the story, to discover more than the single story, and to fight the despair that tells you there is nothing you can do to make a difference. You have ears, you can listen. You have a voice, you can speak. You have a heart and a soul, you can love—everyone.

To all of us, I challenge us to be brave enough to ask: Who have we not yet tried to love? Who have we not yet tried to hear? Who have we not yet tried to understand? Whose death have we refused to mourn?

As one of my teachers, Valarie Kaur, has taught me, “Listening does not grant the other side legitimacy, it grants them humanity and preserves our

own.”¹³ Kaur also says, “Only when we know each other can we understand *how* to stand up and fight for each other—and the world we want.”¹⁴

We have to be brave enough to act based on our incomplete understanding AND commit to continuing to broaden and deepen our understanding so that we can adapt our action as we grow in our knowledge of one another.

I know that all that I have said is incomplete. That I have left many things out. And that something I have said will seem wrong-headed to you. So, come talk with me, I want to hear you. I want to continue the conversations.

So, let’s go. Let’s get involved. Let’s love with abandon. Let’s be brave.

L’shalom/ salaam—In/for/towards peace,

Russ Arnold
 Professor and Chair of Dept of Religious Studies and Theology
 Regis University
 Loyola Hall 32B
 rarnold@regis.edu
 303 458 4920

Russell C. D. Arnold, Ph.D., Professor of Religious Studies and Theology, Regis University, has been living, teaching and learning in interfaith and interreligious spaces on college campuses for more than 35 years. He seeks a deep understanding of the human found in sacred texts (Genesis, Gospels), history (Qumran, Early Jewish/Christian communities), and contemporary society (gender, race, identity) to work towards peace and the transformation of internal, interpersonal, and intergroup conflict. His is a former President of the Association for Interreligious/Interfaith Studies (AIIS).



The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles, essays, and other contributions published in the Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS) are solely those of the respective contributors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views, opinions, or positions of the JIRS publishing partners, the JIRS editorial staff, editors, editorial board, or the employees, officers, board of directors, advisory board, affiliates, or financial sponsors of Interreligious Studies Media (ISM).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).

13 Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love* (One World, 2020), 157.

14 Kaur, *See No Stranger*, 63.