

Mark Freeman
619-594-5497
mfreeman@mail.sdsu.edu

Talking Peace
Revised 3-15-05

Narrator

Jerusalem is a holy city. Here Jews and Arabs have lived side by side for more than a thousand years.

But the 20th century brought bitter disputes and five wars. When the British left Palestine, a bloody conflict over this tiny territory began. It has continued for more than 50 years. Arab and Israeli armies clashed in 1948 and again in 1956. In 1967. In 1973. And in 1982.

Today the cycle of violence seems to have no end. Both sides are still exchanging claims and blame ---and bombs. Violence and fear haunt the region, sowing unbearable pain in Israel, in the occupied territories, and throughout the Middle East.

Even here in San Diego, California, thousands of miles from the conflict, there is hostility and misunderstanding between Palestinians and Jews.

But in this San Diego home, Jim Rauch, a Jew, and his wife Doris Bittar, an Arab, are creating an alternative to living with hatred. In their home, Jews and Palestinians share their stories and their pain.

As they listen to one another, they overcome their misgivings, and take small steps on a journey from fear to hope.

There's a businessman and a teacher; an artist and a karate instructor; a Jewish physicist and a Palestinian engineer. Their discussions are wide-ranging. This evening the talk is about Palestinians who are citizens of Israel. There is only one rule: To truly listen to one another.

George Khoury:

There is until today major discrimination against minorities in Israel. And the minority really in Israel are the Arabs. And I know many people that are Israeli Arabs who didn't have many choices. They were strangers in their own country. And they are Israeli citizens.

Miko Peled

You know, I think I must have been 16 or 17 before I met a Palestinian. I grew up in Jerusalem for God's sake. When you learn about the history you don't learn about the Palestinians. When you learn about geography you don't learn about Palestinians. When you learn about culture, all the different cultures, all the different peoples that lived in the land of Israel, you never hear anything about the Palestinians. There's no such thing as Palestinians. They don't even exist.

Janal Kanj

Actually that's the danger of racism. That's how we define racism. And I admire the way Miko looks at it, as an outsider, who's an Israeli citizen, and an outsider who can see the policies of the Israeli government, and what it is really creating there on the Palestinian side.

Jim Rauch

We started this dialogue group and another three years ago, almost exactly now, I think. And I guess my favorite meetings have always been the introduction meetings.

Doris Bittar

I always say I was raised by New York Jews after the age of thirteen, and then we came to San Diego, and then the Arab community raised me the rest of the way.

Rabbi Levin

We came together at their home, and we went around the room introducing ourselves, and it was an unbelievable experience

Doris Bittar

We thought ok, well, we get along, maybe they will too. And, you know, we'll just make them come together. They have to trust us. And that's how the first group got started. We just kind of forced their hand.

George Khoury

I lost 50 pounds and regained 8

Miko Peled

Now you look good.

George Khoury

...on vacation. No I need to lose 8.

Yair Bourlas

You don't have to record that Mark. I mean this is something that has nothing to do with the dialogue. (Laughter)

George Khoury

Well, no this is about friendship you know. That's part of the dialogue.

Doris Bittar

And I think the two communities have learned to really become friends, and in some cases close friends, and in some cases moving to something closer than close friends. These texts are collaborations. And I work on them for weeks really. And it starts with a spark, the person I'm interested in doing a portrait of tells me a story, and that's what gets the whole thing started. You know, I think that's the key. A Jewish story can stand right next to a Palestinian story. An Israeli story can stand right next to an Arab story. And maybe strengthen each other not negate each other. That's a silly fear.

Narrator

What do these San Diegans have in common? More than they realized at first. Most of them have personal histories shaped by loss and dislocation, by fear and intolerance.

Martin Stern

I joined the group about two years ago because I was interested in learning more about what goes on in the Near East. I was born in Germany and emigrated with my family because of Hitler.

Martin Stern

I had tracked the progress of the German armies with a large map that I had pinned to a wall. And I had some flags where I put down the German line and the French line.

So when my father looked at this map it was only one of two times he laid his hands on me. And he slapped me in the face and he said: "The Germans aren't that far along." Well they were.

Newsreel

The Jewish warmongers and plutocrats were running away. With their bags full of gold they were fleeing in their cars. But they didn't get far. They ran out of gas.

Jamal Kanj

Looking into Martin and his experience moving from one place to another for his own survival, as a human being, you know, independent of being Jew, or Muslim or Christian whatever, I mean I have to say there are a lot of similarities between my self and somebody like Martin. I was born in a refugee camp, and I'd remember incidents where I would be sitting home and reading, or doing my homeworks, and it is so noisy out there from the wind, the breeze...it really got to me thinking those days ---I mean I do remember incidents where I really sad, I put the book for a second, and I just looked up and just thinking, you know, why is, why is this kind of life being imposed on us?

Martin Stern

I don't really consider myself completely a Holocaust survivor. A Holocaust survivor is somebody who survived in a concentration camp, strictly speaking.

To me Israel is a place of refuge for Jews that are not wanted elsewhere.

Rabbi Levin

I grew up in Crown Heights, Brooklyn in a modern Orthodox setting, strong Zionist families. Many Holocaust survivors came and settled in the area of Brooklyn and I had a strong sense of my Jewish identity. Three time a day in my prayers, I like all the rest of us recited: "Oh God bring us back to Zion. Come back to Jerusalem. Let's rebuild the temple. Gather our exiles from the four corners of the earth." And now the people without a land were returning to the land without a people.

Nader Elbanna

I remember that my family, wealthy family, my father rich man. He owned a hundred, a thousand *dounam* equal 250 acres, planted with olive trees, and a thousand of livestock, sheep, cows, camel.

Rabbi Levin

In 1948, 1947 when the United Nations partitioned, partitioned the land because of the friction that developed between Arab and Jew, Israel was prepared to accept a mere sliver of the land and make a state out of that, but five Arab nations refused to accept that, declared war against Israel attacked.

Nader Elbanna

My father for some reason he scare; he panic when he was in Tel Aviv. And he thought according to the rumor at that times, he don't know what's going on in Nazareth. He need to save his family, his wife and his two children. So he asked my mom to leave.

My father told me that he has no clue in his mind that we stay in a refugee camp. Just until they have cease-fire, and then we move back. It's panic, terror, killing, rumor, name it. It's a war. Civil war. He lost everything. After he left they closed the border. They closed the border. No in. No out.

I spent five years living in refugee camp. There is over like 10,000 people living in that camp. And the only way to live in a small tent four people, my father, my mother, my brother and myself. I remember my mother, so she like to warm me. She took my little foot and put it on her chest, to warm my little frozen foot. This is the only way I can feel warm in that ugly tent.

Rabbi Levin

The other part of the narrative was that the reason the refugee camps still exist is that unlike Israel which took in Jews, hundreds of thousands of Jews and absorbed them into the society, these Arab countries insisted upon keeping these refugees along the borders to use them as a propaganda tool for ultimately wanting to take back the

land. And that was the, that was the impression that I, and I would say, the vast vast majority of American Jews, and I would say, the vast vast majority of Israelis had about why the situation was the way it was.

Nader Elbanna

Last summer I visit my back home. I visit my grandfather house when I flew to Nazareth. And my aunts take me direct to the room wheres I born. And they give me my grandfather's historical house key. That inspire and touch me to the bone. Every time I touch this key it remind me of my roots, my family roots there.

Rabbi Levin

Dialogue shattered the image I had that Arabs are my enemy; Palestinians are my people's enemy, and opened up the door as wide as it could be for me to see all of these people as people like me, who had a narrative that was different from mine. And a narrative I had already begun to learn through Jewish sources, Israeli journalists had begun exposing truths about the way in which Israel was founded and created and about its wars and so on that didn't jive with the party line that I have been brought up with, and to these people that was their main story.

Jamal Kanj

We were kids you know. Playing, I wanted to go meet a girl that was from outside the town, which, outside the camp really, which made her more attractive in a way. And I was right, actually as we were going to the place where we were going to meet. I saw the biggest explosion in my life.

In that air strike I lost a friend of mine. He died there. And also I know another child who was about six years old at the time, who never made it.

Miko Peled

And so this is Jamal telling us a story about him as child experience exactly what people are saying wasn't happening. And I remember arguing with people. People say, "The Israeli air force would never You think Israelis would do a thing like this? You really think the Israeli army would do things like this? Who do you think, you know?" It turns out they did. When you hear the narrative of the other side it's very painful. It's not easy. It doesn't make anyone feel good. In the end, in the big picture it makes you feel good, because you get a sense that you're accomplishing something. But it doesn't feel good while you're at it.

Nader Elbanna

When I was serving in Jordanian army I remember the first time I face Israeli army. My best friend Ibrahim Shaksheer, he is dying. He look to my eyes and I looked to him directly and he's in my hand, he told me say to my mom, "I love you," and say to my fiancée Laylla, her name Layllah, "I love you" and he dying in my hand. So from that time I feel how much war is really painful, terrible because you face death face-to-face.

Miko Peled

On September the 4th 1997, two young Palestinians blew themselves up in Jerusalem, and they took their own lives, and the lives of five Israelis. And one of those my five Israelis was my niece Smadar Elhanan,

Reporter

There were three bomb explosions. The bombs went off within a few seconds of each other, on the outdoor walkway, a pedestrian mall in downtown Jerusalem. There was a lot of destruction. Ambulances took more than a hundred wounded to various local hospitals. There were at least three people killed, possible two of them were suicide bombers.

Miko Peled

I'm watching this and my mother calls. So she called and she says, "We don't know where Smadar is. She's missing and we don't know where she is, and we're looking for her."

Rami Elhanan

My wife was crying and told me that there was a bombing and someone saw Smadar walking down the street. And I said to her, "It's nothing. It can be anything."

Miko Peled

So being the optimist that I am, I said, "Well, she's probably at a friend's house. She didn't think to call home. She, you know, there's all this chaos, traffic jams and all this, because of the bombing and all that."

Rami Elhanan

She vanished. And you keep hoping that this finger will not turn towards you this time. And you're running, and you... And after a very long time you find yourself in the morgue. And this finger stuck right between your eyes. And you are looking at sight that you will never, ever be able to forget.

Miko Peled

The headline on the front page is, "The granddaughter of General Peled, a victim of Palestinian terrorism."

Rami Elhanan

After the seven days of the Jewish mourning, on the eighth day you have to look yourself in the mirror and decide what are you going to do the rest of your life. And there are only two possibilities. The first one, and the obvious one and the natural one is to hate. Because one someone kills your fourteen years old little girl, you are very, very angry, and you want to get even. And then you start to think, because we are people. We are not animals. And you think what good would it be if I killed someone? Would it bring back my baby? If I cause pain to someone, would it heal my pain? So you find yourself choosing the other option. And the other option is the way of understanding and the way of reconciling.

Afaf Elbanna

Rami he is tell me about his story about his daughter. She's killed. And I told you before my education. I hate Israel, and I cannot feel anything bad about what happened for Israeli people. But when Rami came here and tell me about his story about his daughter, I feel different feeling. He touched my heart about his daughter. I feel what happen for his daughter maybe happen for my daughter also. I cry with him.

Rami Elhanan

And my mission in life, the reason for me to get up in the morning and get out of bed, is to go out and tell people that we are not doomed, that it's not our destiny to die in the Holy Land. We can change this endless cycle of violence. And this is what I do.

Doris Bittar

You know when you meet someone, an Israeli who lost his niece in a suicide bombing, and they're reaching out to you to make peace, what can you say? I mean you're gonna...? It's a humbling experience. So whenever there's a suicide bombing now, I remember our friends who lost their niece, you know Miko. And then I met his sister. The mother of the daughter who was killed at the age of fourteen. And she wants peace. So how can I not change from that kind of experience?

Jamal Kanj

To me dialogue is really being able to be yourself; being able to present your case, and being able to disagree. But having, being able also or being required really to listen.

Rabbi Levin

The requirements for dialogue are honesty and openness, being truthful about one's position, not pussy-footing, not walking on eggshells, or not coming up with arguments for the sake of argument. It's being real.

Narrator

Another evening the women take the lead. There's talk about the role of women---in society, in religion and in dialogue.

Neta Bourlas

This conversation has been mostly men talking. I want to hear what the women...

Jean Seager

...and I just wonder how much power the women have to make those choices. The men seem to be the ones who are the more powerful in that society.

Haifa Houry

I told my father, that you taught me that people are how they treat you. Not people are what they are in their religion and where they come from. You told me we are all the same. And my religion told me that we are equal. So I am going by the principle. I don't care if my culture says no. I'm saying yes.

Narrator

But the most important work of dialogue is overcoming fear and suspicion.... Coming to know one another, first as human beings and then, with luck, as friends.

Miko Peled

And I remember the meeting everyone was supposed to ...they went around the room and talked about how they viewed the solution, how they viewed what they viewed as the goal of peace. You know, what peace would look like. And this was my first meeting, and later on ---everybody---I heard ---they told me this much later on---that they all looked at me and thought this guy must be a spy. Must be a Mossad agent. What is he doing here? What does he want?

Nader Elbanna

When I looked to Miko, I said, "Oh my God that man, he is a spy. I have to be concerned about him. He's looking like he's working with Mossad. He will watch everything I will say. I will be careful, because I still under this kind of stereotype of fear. And then I realize, suddenly that he put in his jacket flags Palestinian and Israeli flags together. Oh, "Why you put Palestinian flags in your jacket?" He said, "I am with peace movement. My father General Peled was in peace movement, and I follow my father steps." And then we talk, suddenly, I discover that his brother he has command a tank fighting against me. We fight each other with his brother.

Miko Peled

In dialogue there's nothing to disagree on. This is his story. This is what happened to this man. This is my story. This is what happened to me. What's he gonna argue about?

Bassem Darwish

Dialogue has influenced me so much. There's just so much. I was thinking about it on the way over her too. That one I have gained a lot of friends. It's put a human face to the Israeli, and to the Jews. I've known Jews as acquaintances, but never as friends. And so, it humanizes people that are on the other side, and then it puts those people on the same side that I'm on.

Jean Seager

First of all I share what Bassemah says about friendships. Before I joined dialogue I had never spoken with a Palestinian or an Arab, and now I have. I must also say that there were several times when I thought that I didn't want to come back, because I felt a lot of times that there was, a lot of people in the group who were attacking Israel, and it made me a little bit uncomfortable as a Jew.

Meir Nawy

I can understand what you were saying about your resistance about not wanting to come. And I have that kind of resistance from time-to-time.

Nader Elbanna

I have fear for myself. So when I discover their fear, with my fear, and looking to each other as a human being, oh, this is a huge, a huge breakthrough for myself.

Rabbi Levin

There's an old joke about two parties to a dispute come to talk to the Rabbi. And the Rabbi listens to one of them, and he listens to that story and he says, "You're right." And then the other one starts giving his side of the story and the Rabbi says, "You're right." And the Rabbi's wife listens to this, overhears this, comes to the Rabbi says, "How can you say that he's right and he's right? They disagree so much. And you say they're both right." And the Rabbi says, "You're right too." As funny as that story might be, there's tremendous amount of truth in it. That is Talmudic education. It's to see that in a dispute there is right on both sides; probably more than there was wrong on both sides.

Martin Stern

You know memories of the persecution and the Holocaust are permanently with the people who have suffered it. It takes several generations to overcome it. I think having gone through something brushing against this kind of intolerance, all I can say is we are all capable of intolerance. We have to fight it. And we have to fight it mostly in ourselves really.

Rabbi Levin

Where do we go from here? Because clearly we care about each other. Clearly we want an end to the pain and suffering that we're causing each other. And we want to live our own lives in a beautiful and productive way. So where do we go from here?

Doris Bittar

I'm not as dogmatic about what I think the solution is. You know, I think it'll, it'll vary. It'll change. I change my mind periodically about what I think the solution should be for the two peoples. But of course I've changed. And I think all the Palestinians involved in dialogue have changed.

Jamal Kanj

You know dialogue to me is being able to really move it from the small living room to the larger living room, which is building the nation, where people can be looked at as humans, not as Jews, Muslims, or Christians.

Miko Peled

Peace can be achieved now. Every moment that goes by, every second that goes by without signing a peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians is wasted. Every drop of blood that is dropped is dropped in vain.

Rabbi Levin

As much as I would like not to be a cancer patient, I realize that there are certain gifts that come with it. And one of them is the appreciation of living in the present, and appreciating every single moment. I don't think that there is anyone who really wants to end their last days, and taking their last breathe, and saying I am satisfied that I spent most of my life fighting.

Rabbi Levin

I think all of us want to end our lives looking back and saying, "I lived it to the fullest. And living it to the fullest is not living it in anger, resentment, and violence and warfare. Living it to the fullest is living it with peace and with love, and with compassion and with understanding and with kindness and with joy. That's what dialogue is about. Getting to that point.

Nader Elbanna

This is our possibility here of being at peace. So I give it to him this name, Salaam, mean Shalom, mean Peace. He's my grandchildren, child.