

Abstract: Dialogue in Impossible Situations

Ruth Duek, M.A. Group Analyst

“Besod Siach”: Organization for the Promotion of Dialogue Between Conflict Groups
in Israeli Society

ruthduek@012.net.il

Besod Siach, an Organization for the Promotion of Dialogue Between Conflict Groups in Israeli Society, was established by Israeli Group Psychologists, religious and secular, from the political right and the political left, in 1991.

Theoretical background for our methods has some of its sources in Martin Buber's work on dialogue (1947), Carl Roger's Conversation with Buber on Dialogue (1969), David Bohm's methods for work with **dialogue groups** (Bohm, Factor and Garret, 1991), Jewish traditional writings and systems theory as related by Sullivan (1953), Roberts (1983), Pines (1984,1990), Zinkin (1983).

In this paper I present some of the theoretical background for our work and also some of the methodological tools that have been developed in the process of yearly conferences, long-term dialogue groups and national forums for conciliation. These include the concept of “we” and “them” as a universal dynamic (Berman, Berger and Gutman, 2000), the use of intra-personal conflicts in relating to inter-personal and inter-group conflicts (Berman, 1993) and the model of up-the-ladder-of-dialogue (Farago-Gofer, 1996.)

Dialogue in Impossible Situations*

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In 2001 I was requested to present an address on “Dialogue in impossible situations”

The very name of this address is a tautology. If the situation is impossible for dialogue – then the dialogue will not take place. I would rather try to explain to you – how we push the boundaries of situations in order to make dialogue possible.

Dialogue implies a meeting of people who hold different opinions and different worldviews (that would apply to any two people on earth.) A comedian in Israel once said, “A monologue is one person talking to himself. A dialogue is two people talking to themselves.”

But actually a dialogue implies listening and learning about differences. This very process can be threatening to the self-image of an individual. If he (or she) takes in new information – that contradicts his or her worldview – then the self-image of the individual has to be re-evaluated. Since self-identity is based on what is me and what is *not* me – a placing of boundaries between myself and the rest of the world - taking in contradictory information is bound to shake this up. Can I possibly listen to opinions that I disagree with – and maybe even understand them and be empathic to them – without changing who I am? The danger lies in the fine difference between understanding and empathizing as opposed to agreeing. (Sullivan, 1953.)

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When saying "...how we push the boundaries of situations in which dialogue is possible..." – "we" pertains to the organization I represent "Amutat Besod Siach" the **Besod Siach Organization for Promotion of Dialogue between Conflict Groups in Israeli Society**. This organization was established, in 1991, by group psychologists from the political right and the political left, religious and secular, including settlers.

Just to ensure that you and I are agreed on the use of the words – let me include you in some of the idiosyncrasies of Israeli terminology. "Right" and "left" are used to designate positions *vis a vis* the peace process. "Leftists" are those who support the peace process, in tandem with their support of democratic principles, universal human rights and a firm belief that the Palestinians will be satisfied to achieve an independent state in the occupied territories, and put an end to violent international conflict in the region. "Rightists" are much more cautious about possible agreements with the Palestinians – citing religious, historical and security concerns. A "settler" is the term used for a Jewish-Israeli citizen who resides in the occupied territories. I must state here, that I define myself as a "leftist" and despite having engaged in much dialogue, I cannot assure you that any political remarks I make are not biased.

The term "religious" - in Israel - is not necessarily connected with belief in God – but has rather been confused with the terms "traditional" or "fundamentalist." Religious Jews adhere – in varying degrees of strictness - to the 613 Holy Commandments as elaborated in the Talmud and the Commentaries to the Torah. Central to these Commandments are those governing kosher dietary Laws, the keeping of the Sabbath, and relationships between men and women, sexual and other. "Secular" is

the term applied to those who do not maintain religious tradition within an established framework, synagogue or community. (I also define myself as secular.)

At the time of the beginnings of Besod Siach, the PLO had declared their willingness to recognize the State of Israel within the 1967 borders. The mostly religious right and the mostly secular left in Israel seemed on the verge of civil war, with threats being made to establish Jewish militias in the occupied territories that would take up arms against the evacuation that will be inevitable – if ever we achieve peace.

The psychologists who established the organization realized they were carefully skirting political issues in their personal conversations, in fear of fighting with each other. A process of dialogue between themselves led to their first conference, run on a Group Relations model, with the help of IFSI.

[Slide 1]

The name of our organization – Besod Siach – means “the Secret of the Dialogue” and is actually the Hebrew name of Martin Buber’s book on dialogue (1947). The name of the book is taken from a quotation of a Jewish prayer which says “The secret of the dialogue is with the holy angels” and as Buber says – a certain “angelic” position is necessary for dialogue (not easy for mere mortals like us) – relating to the “other” as **thou**, a holy entity to be respected and cherished. Buber’s ideas were the starting point for developing our methods.

David Bohm’s views on dialogue became another important guideline for our work. He espouses an open space wherein all ideas can be observed – and absolute conclusions can be suspended. If each idea can be investigated on its own merits – there is space for a wide spectrum of opinions, and possibly room for a new “common truth.”

Even in Jewish tradition – there are sources which stress the importance of differing opinions. One well-known example is the tragic story of Rabbi Yohanan and his study partner – Resh Lakish. (Bialik & Ravnitzky, 1948). The learned Rabbi Yohanan chose Resh Lakish as his study partner (which in the Aramaic is called his “disagreement partner”) because Resh Lakish could always come up with intelligent criticisms to Rabbi Yohanan’s ideas. Resh Lakish never agreed with Rabbi Yohanan – and by having a partner who never agreed with him, Rabbi Yohanan was forced to refine his own thinking. During one unusually hot argument, Rabbi Yohanan insulted Resh Lakish, (by referring to his past as a professional thief) and Resh Lakish was so hurt by this insult that he died. Aside from feeling really guilty over causing the death of his beloved study partner – Rabbi Yohanan also found he couldn’t learn anymore. He chose other partners to work with him – but they were so over-awed by his reputation as a learned man – that they tended to agree with everything he said. So poor Rabbi Yohanan pined for some real opposition, and finally died himself. Of course there are many morals to be taken from this story (one being that personal insults are *not* part of a process of dialogue – but rather a method of “killing the messenger in order not to hear the message” – a well-known gambit of **Dissonance Theory**, Brown, 1962.) The main point is that without meeting opposing opinions, you cannot truly learn.

Applied to **theories of self** – without an *other* it is impossible to define precisely – what is *me*. (Ostroff, 2000.) David Bohm might say that open dialogue is a process of learning about the whole world – and finally deciding – what I will internalize – and what I will allow to remain outside of my own boundaries. Carl Rogers – in a famous dialogue with Martin Buber (1969) – on dialogue itself – said we must be prepared to be surprised – in order to truly learn about our fellowmen. I would add that without the element of surprise – we will probably miss a lot of learning about ourselves.

In **systems theory** a more involved attitude is set forth. A personal system will achieve balance – self-identity – by choosing a position and denying other possibilities – quite often by projecting them onto another person. A social system – in balance with itself – will allow space for the holders of opposing positions – each with his or her own personal identity. (Hadari, 2000.) Without those opposing us – our own opinions often become stagnated. (Roberts, 1983.) Back to Dissonance Theory – if we make a choice about what is *me* and what is *not me*, we truly don't want to be confronted – again – with the parts we've decided to reject. During a process of dialogue – there is the distinct possibility of meeting rejected parts of ourselves – in others. This might not be a comfortable meeting – but once it is recognized – it can be cherished. If there was a choice – it's quite possible that we recognized – at some point – the advantages of espousing elements that we later chose to reject. Meeting them in others – and if we can be brought to realize that they are also part of ourselves – we can cherish them. Then rejected parts of ourselves have not been lost – they are being held by others.

As an example – let me tell you a bit about my own first experiences with dialogue. I came to the first Besod Siach conference, directly from participation in violent street demonstrations of Women in Black, an organization which has held weekly vigils opposing the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza since the beginning of the first **Intifada** in 1987. These demonstrations were extraordinarily violent and seemed to arouse amazing amounts of animosity among Jews who saw us standing there with our signs. I was hurt and appalled that these compatriots of mine could find my positions – which I truly believed to be in the best interest of the State of Israel – so threatening that they would make serious efforts to “kill the messenger.” Why was it so essential that they drive me from the street? I was sure they weren't really paying attention to my message – but were simply making sure *they* wouldn't

have to hear it. I was anxious to meet those people in an atmosphere where I could understand why they hated so much – the ideas I represented.

The framework of a **Group Relations** Tavistock-style conference allowed for boundaries, which limited and protected us from getting into the old “you think...” poses. The consultant to our group kept demanding that I recognize “the little rightist” within myself, while asking of the rightists in the group where was their “little leftist.”

By the end of that first conference – I was amazed to hear one of these rightists, a religious settler – who represented – for me – everything I opposed – saying to me “Ruthie – you be the repository of my conscience.” She firmly believes that Jews have the right to live in any place within the historic **Land of Israel**. She sees herself fulfilling a religious and national duty by living in the controversial areas under Israeli occupation. She said she had to force herself to ignore the misery and oppression of her Palestinian neighbors – in order to fulfill the dictates of her beliefs. She had come to realize that I represented something essential to her own Judaism – the belief that all men are created in God's image. Hearing her say this – I could allow myself to realize that I'm not completely sure of my own solutions to our local conflict. I'm not sure I can completely trust the Palestinians not to turn their independent state into yet another base for hostile attacks against the State of Israel. I had been denying my doubts about the sincerity of my Palestinian partners in dialogue – and came to realize that this lady was holding these doubts – for me – adamant in maintaining a measure of suspicion that would preserve the security of the State of Israel. Knowing this – I could allow myself to espouse my positions single-mindedly – and let her “camp” hold the paranoia. Knowing what she now knew about me – she could allow herself to continue living where she lives – while I continued to promote the rights of the Palestinians. I realized – by the end of this first conference – that the permanent agreement would probably be somewhere between her suspiciousness and

ethnocentricity and my naiveté and support for universal human rights. As David Bohm might say – we're all right. The truth lies somewhere in the mixing of all these positions. A systems theorist would say that without my rightist counterpart – I would be less leftist, and vice versa. We need each other to hold the complete spectrum of opinions – and not be paralyzed by inner contradictions.

Besod Siach has held these yearly conferences since 1991 – in periods of great national turmoil – after **Rabin's assassination** and during the outbreak of the later rounds of violence. Never has the conference descended into chaos – although often we feel we're taking foolhardy risks. We attempt to include, among our participants, a microcosm of Israeli society, with people from differing political, religious and cultural backgrounds. This will include Israeli Arabs, new immigrants and Jews of Western and Oriental extraction. Our staff will also include a similar spectrum of backgrounds and positions, and dialogue among members of the staff is the flywheel that – in my opinion – moves whatever dialogue we consult to.

When not in a conference setting, we have held long-term dialogue groups, which meet monthly over a period of years. They generally focus on one specific conflict, for example: religious vs. secular, left vs. right, Oriental vs. Western Jews or new immigrants vs. old-timers. Consultation is done by pairs who represent the opposing positions and carry on the dialogue between themselves. Despite maintaining clear time, task and territory boundaries – in good Tavistock tradition – these long-term groups are generally much more easy-going, and participation is not as steady – as during a conference.

One part of any Besod Siach conference involves an **Inter-Group Event** that generally will last for 2-3 sessions. (Our conferences are never longer than 3 days – in order to allow for participants to leave their routines and take full part – and also to

keep costs reasonable. So this event doesn't take up more than a third of the activity.) Participants are split into two or more groups and asked to investigate the relationships between the groups. Participants – so far – have *always* congregated in specified parts of the room – which have been labeled with the names of their groups. Then they begin a serious conversation – trying to develop a sense of group identity. Sooner or later – one of the groups will send a representative to the other group or groups, to suggest some inter-group dialogue. These representatives are invariably rebuffed. They are told “It's too soon – we're still busy with our own issues” or even worse, they may be labeled as “spies” or “provocateurs.” The representatives will then return to their own groups where the other members of their group will be incensed at the “insult”. They will develop all sorts of paranoid ideas about the “meanies” in the other groups. When, finally, a representative appears, from the other group, the one that first sent a representative will rebuff him in kind. So an enmity will develop, spontaneously – it would seem. Avi Berman – one of the founders of Besod Siach – together with Miriam Berger and David Gutman defined the split “we” and “them” as a universal social structure. Identity with the “in” group and projections on the “other” begin to crop up as soon as any interaction takes place between two groups. It is not a comforting realization about the human race – that we tend to gravitate towards closed “in” groups and identify an enemy – receptacle for our projections - as a natural process. Ideology merely serves as a vehicle for these projections.

As in the example I gave before – of myself and my rightist-religious counterpart – both of us had used the other for a receptacle of our projections – avoiding **intra-personal conflict** by translating it into an **inter-personal** or **inter-group conflict**. The dialogue gels when we can identify – not only projections of *negative* elements of ourselves – in the other – but also projections of parts we cherish – but must nevertheless relinquish in order to maintain internal coherence. Pines (1984, 1990)

and Zinkin (1983) talk about **mirroring** as a specific group phenomenon. We will always find rejected or cut-off aspects of ourselves in others in a group. If we can understand, or empathize with the other participants, maybe we can achieve better *intra-personal* integration.

[Slide 2]

Avi Berman identified a partial list of *intra-personal* conflicts that may be mirrored in the *inter-personal* conflicts which arise. I would like to go over some of these possible conflicts and give examples that can be identified from the present political difficulties in Israel.

id vs. super-ego: wherein primary impulses compete with ideals.

The religious right often see leftists as hedonistic - in thrall of their ids – without the ideological stamina to realize the Zionist dream. They place their own personal sacrifices in the position of the super-ego and then place their own wishes for self-gratification on the left.

The left often see the right as putting their greed for “as much territory as possible” above concerns for the human rights of our neighbors. Both sides are involved in an id-superego conflict.

fantasy vs. reality testing: This can be seen in the Messianic dream of a Greater Israel or a Greater Palestine or a wish for peace among nations as opposed to the necessity for compromise, mutual concessions and the realization that the hatred we have built up during 100 years of war may only allow for an uneasy truce or a “**cold peace**” (as many Israelis define the relationship with Egypt.)

individuation vs. symbiosis or merging: This is something we find in slogans such as “National Unity” on the right and “collective ideology” on the left – which arouse in the opposition an immediate threat of being sucked into a collective “we” and losing autonomy.

This need to belong – as opposed to a need for autonomy – can be seen also in the conflicts which arise between fundamentalist Jews and their secular counterparts. Fundamentalist Jews are seen to relinquish autonomy in order to follow the specifications of the complete 613 Commandments. When in doubt, they consult their rabbi, rather than resorting to their own common sense. For secular Jews this is an intolerable loss of individuation.

In the conflict between narcissism vs. object love lies the danger of empathizing too much with your adversary and possibly forgetting to guard your own interests (such as in the example I gave of my interaction with the rightist lady at the Besod Siach conference – where a wish for peace with the Palestinians may lead to a naive trust that disregards the reality of hatred.)

Within this conflict lies the danger of dialogue. If I understand and empathize with my adversary, I may come to love him and this could lead to my rejecting my own identity. As David Bohm said – the point of dialogue is “not concerned with deliberately trying to alter or change behavior” (Bohm, Factor and Garrett, 1991) but this threat may be implicit for people who come to the dialogue setting. Each side thinks they will convince the other side to agree with them. Each side fears they may be convinced to relinquish their own positions and their own identity.

being vs. doing: where a tendency to act-out encounters a tendency to endlessly ruminate – neither of which is beneficial on its own – but both of which are necessary. Planning and carefully considering various options are a necessary counterpart to finally getting things done.

Quite often the right maintains that we should first be certain that our partners in negotiations are serious, before making agreements with them. While the left is pushing for a Permanent Agreement, the right is waiting for certainty. This could mean a two-week, two-month or a two-year cease-fire, before returning to the negotiating table. They also often contend that we must achieve “National Unity” before making concessions to our adversaries. Both these contentions seem like unnecessary procrastination to the left.

For the right – territorial concessions seem a disaster of “doing” without true consideration of the consequences. For the left, the continuation of development of settlements in the occupied territories, seem the same sort of reckless “doing.”

In one closed workshop a discussion arose over the necessity for serving in the Israeli army. Arabs and more extreme Jewish leftists asserted that military service is evil and “any right-thinking human being” should refuse to serve in an army of occupation. Others asserted – just as hotly – that our army is the only factor that ensures the continued existence of our state in this hostile arena. They added that military service also afforded maturing experiences, such as steeling your bodies to long forced-marches and experiencing the camaraderie of participating in a unit. One of the Arab women said “then why don’t you join the Scouts?” The consultant referred to the silent members of the group saying “There are soldiers here, who are fighting a heated battle, but there are also Scouts who are simply observing the territory and trying to decide what it means for them.” This turned the group to a new

split – more internal to themselves, of the differences between the “doers” and the “be-ers”

real self vs. false self shows up in cases where the right accuses the left of being “bleeding hearts” or where religious injunctions – for instance a requirement to “love all of Israel” - forbid the expression of anger and resentment. Both these positions enable coexistence – but neither of them enables dealing with the full depth of a relationship. Both of them smell of hypocrisy and patronization.

This conflict is also evident in criticisms of the secular population against strict adherence to archaic traditions. I have heard religious Jews maintaining that by following tradition – they are establishing their Jewish identity. I would rather search for my Jewish identity in other – less concrete - aspects of my personality and culture.

Actually – if we consider these *intra*-personal conflicts – we can find representation of both sides in any political position. But none of the conflicts has a “correct” solution. Each person will always find himself balancing between the two extremes. Quite often – identifying the current unconscious conflict being expressed in the group will lead to more constructive dialogue and an element of surprise – Roger’s requirement for true dialogue.

[Slide 3]

Ami Farago-Gofer – another founder of Besod Siach – developed a model which he calls “Up the Ladder of Dialogue.” He found that any dialogue group will go up these rungs --although during a three-day conference maybe the group will only achieve

the first rungs, while long-term groups may sometimes continue up to the higher ones.

- 1) Initial readiness for a meeting: It would seem that dialogue is impossible in times of conflict. In these periods, both sides are intent on solving the conflict without regard to the needs of the opposing side. This would seem to be a time for struggle rather than a time for dialogue. Leaders of “vision” might see dialogue as a means for *solving* the conflict – more a matter of negotiations or “bridging.” Besod Siach developed the concept and methods for dialogue-in-time-of-conflict which is *not* meant to solve the conflict at all. This dialogue can serve to change the sphere of conflict from the battlefield, the street or the media to that of interpersonal exchange. In order for this to succeed – it *must* include elements of internal self-dialogue, as I described before.

When we begin a dialogue framework - conference or group - we must first find the people who are willing to take the risk of meeting their adversaries face-to-face. We often find that those parts of society that are feeling excluded are more anxious to engage in dialogue than those who feel they are in control. When the left is in power, the rightists are more anxious to meet their adversaries than the leftists and vice versa. Groups for new immigrants and old-timers in the country tend to have more steady attendance of new immigrants than of the old-timers. So finding people to take part in this dialogue often entails making personal contact with various community leaders, and bringing them and their close circle into the dialogue, first.

These groups will generally meet and begin by patting themselves on the back and declaring that “we’re all rational people here – *we’re* willing to talk to each

other. *True* fanatics wouldn't come to a group like this." Or they may project the conflict onto other external factors, such as the media.

- 2) Disillusionment and frustration in discovering "not-me": So members meet, and after they've decided they're all really nice people, "not fanatics at all," they begin to express their opinions and are appalled to discover that "the enemy" is sitting right here. Each side is intent upon convincing their adversaries that *they* have it right. Each side is adamant in insisting that they are not to be moved from their own positions. If I can't convince them, either I'm not explaining myself clearly enough or the others aren't willing to listen to what I have to say. And if they aren't listening, maybe they really *are* fanatics. Frustration builds up. It may be difficult to express hatred for people, in this face-to-face situation, but hatred for what they represent becomes clear.

- 3) Critical intersection: If the group breaks up at this rung – participants may go away convinced that there really isn't any point in trying to talk to "those fanatics." They will go back to their own "camps" as loud detractors of dialogue contending that "there really isn't anybody to talk to." Their disappointment will become contagious.

But the strong emotions being expressed may become a source of energy for continuing the process. This can generally not be accomplished without the intervention of consultants. Continuing to discuss the content of the conflict is counterproductive and the consultants must refocus the group. It may be possible to show them that they are actually playing out mirror images of the same conflict (maybe by referring to some of the *intra*-personal conflicts I listed before.)

Another possibility is to focus participants on their emotions. Feelings such as alienation, exclusion or de-legitimization, disappointment that dreams cannot

come true, anxieties for our continued existence as a nation, all these feelings may be present for either side of the conflict.

In the continuation of the discussion about military service a consultant asked the Arab participants if there is something alien to them in recognizing – and celebrating the military strength of their own side. One of the Arab ladies said “Actually, I *did* feel jubilation when the Iraqi missiles were falling on Jewish cities. Yes – I do like to see my side get their licks in.”

At one of our conferences – the Arab participants spent much time explaining their basic cultural tenet of drawing their identity from their property – especially the land on which they live. When one of the rightist members of the group contended that the Jewish people must retain control of the Temple Mount – and the leftists in the group called this primitive tribalism – the consultant asked them why they could accept the Arabs’ explanation of their attachment to the land – but rejected this – when a Jew spoke of the same thing.

At points like this, usually the arguments dissipate, as participants recognize – within themselves – structures that are not so terribly different from those of the “other side.” The differences aren’t really so deep – after all. We can all recognize – within ourselves – a certain feeling of vindication – when “our” side gets their “licks” in. We can recognize – in anybody – the attachment and identity that come from maintaining possession of our Land and the history it holds for us.

Then we move on to the next rung.

- 4) Readiness for dialogue - empathic understanding: At this rung participants begin to realize the dynamics of the “other” – which are not so different from their

own. This doesn't necessarily mean foregoing one's own positions – but only making room for other possibilities. It becomes an exciting experience to view the world through the eyes of the “other,” especially if I can identify parts of this “other” within myself. This can allow for empathy and understanding.

But in order not to relinquish my own identity I may have to engage in a process of *internal* dialogue, where-in I will be reaffirmed in my own positions (and identity) while recognizing that there are two sides to the conflict -- even within myself. This was the process where-by Rabbi Yohanan honed his intellect in his continuous arguments with Resh Lakish.

If we get this far in conferences – we feel we have accomplished a great deal.

In the final Large Group session of one of our conferences – in October 2000 – at the height of the renewed violence of the **Second Intifada** – when a leftist expressed violent hatred for the settlers, an Arab lady intervened and said “I'd always thought that Jews were whining unnecessarily about their difficulties. But I suddenly realized – talking to this settler – that Jews are *really* afraid for their existence. Up until now I'd thought the Jews weren't afraid – only the Arabs felt they were being oppressed unto extinction. Now I see we're not so different in our fears.”

- 5) Recognition and flexibility in the spaces of conflict: This may look like a big jump – but actually it is similar in its importance and general length in the process to the other rungs. Two central principles become the focus for this rung. One is recognition of the priorities of the other side as legitimate as my own. If I can identify within myself the resistance to relinquishing my own identity, I can be empathic to the “other” experiencing the same resistance.

The second principle lies in realizing that the positions the “other” holds are to be cherished, since they represent split-off parts of myself. We recognize the richness in sharing a society, and the fact that we are parts of a whole, which would be impoverished without our diversity. A sense of mutual responsibility is established. I would not like to see Israeli society as completely secular. The religious people maintain a connection with tradition that I want to be able to refer back to. The meaning of my Jewish identity would be blurred without the presence of Moslems and Christians, with whom I can compare myself. The cultural richness of Oriental portions of our society (Arabs included) are essential to our national character. When contemplating the removal of any of these diverse elements, I experience a feeling of irretrievable loss.

But both these principles must be recognized in all the spaces where the conflict may exist. These spaces may be explored and dealt with in the various frameworks of a conference. They entail a recapitulation of the previous rungs – but this time include elements of awareness and learning.

One: the street In the street I fight for my political beliefs. There is no place for dialogue. Slogans have a tendency to negate an opposing position, and demonstrators from opposing camps have a tendency to project all of their fears onto the opposition. I have found – since engaging in dialogue – that I can be empathic to rightist demonstrators and convince them that *because* both our positions are legitimate – maybe we would do the public a better service by standing separately and allowing them to be exposed to both positions – “and may the best ‘man’ win” – rather than engaging in physically attacking each other. By now I am known to rightists in Haifa as the person – who – if organizing a demonstration - will find a way to avoid violent confrontation. Rightists are always

happy to see me coming – so we can separate hotheads and put up our signs in separated territories – for example on opposite sides of the street.

The media is quite often the place where the “street” is expressed. Television and newspaper articles have a tendency to espouse a certain world-view, and to present the “other side” as wrong-thinking or -doing. Quite often we hear complaints from one political camp or the other – that the media are distorting their positions and arousing unnecessary hatred against them. It is rare – and we in Besod Siach cherish these events – for an editorial to be balanced and to give equal space to both sides of the conflict. It is clear that even by reporting – or not reporting an event – the media will definitely have influence over citizens’ grasp of the situation and maybe even over the event itself.

This aspect of the conflict can be experienced in the Large Groups in conferences. In Large Groups – as in experiences with the media – certain processes will be given room – while others will be suppressed. In these situations, participants may feel they are “under-represented.” Each participant must find – in himself – the strength to voice his opinion in the face of this anonymous crowd. As the conference progresses – Large Groups have a tendency to take on the characteristics of the other spaces of the conflict – as in the example I gave before of the Arab lady coming to the defense of the settler.

Two: the neighborhood In contacts with my neighbors we have local concerns which take precedence over political differences. In 2000, with the threat of West Nile Virus in the area, settlers and Palestinians in the territories demonstrated together for extermination of mosquito breeding-grounds. During a polio epidemic in 1990, the Intifada was called off for several days to allow for

inoculations to be administered to Palestinian children by Israeli doctors. Under these circumstances we differentiate between the person and his political positions. We can learn to empathize and understand without necessarily agreeing.

(Maybe – as a result of my own process of dialogue – I have turned the Haifa streets into my own neighborhood.)

In conferences the Small Groups may become the “neighborhood.” Here – we have seen – that people can listen to each other and find that their differences are not necessarily so great and that these differences can be a source of enrichment.

Three: the home is where each of us learns the family’s specific methods for dealing with conflicts and then applies them in the other spheres.

The Review and Application Groups in conferences afford a space where the individual can investigate his or her own particular modes of dealing with conflict. This may entail internal dialogue, identifying and maintaining both sides of the conflict within oneself in order to reaffirm one’s own identity while establishing empathy for the “other”.

RAGs can also give support for making changes outside the group. It is heartening to see how RAGs can modify the behavior of participants – even in the course of a conference, while also giving motivation for making changes in their communities – when they leave.

Sometimes long-term groups will end at this stage – feeling the dialogue has served its purpose – since we can now quietly compare opinions without hating each other. Others turn their energies to the following activities in their communities, and even on the national level.

- 6) A social treaty: which will include rules for behavior and social interaction in time-of-conflict, or what I would call “how to disagree”. Taking all spaces-of-conflict into consideration, a social treaty can be obtained – for means of managing the conflict. This is being done in several frameworks in Israel.

Besod Siach has been instrumental in setting up the Forum for National Agreement, which is trying to formulate such a treaty between the secular and religious parts of society. Often we consult to their discussions, and former participants in our groups and conferences take part. It is heartening when participants in this Forum realize that an iron-clad agreement may be impossible to achieve, but that as long as a process of dialogue is continuing, violent conflict can be avoided.

Rabbi Malchior, in his position as Minister of Social Issues established (with the assistance of Besod Siach) what he called Togetherness Councils, forums for meetings of the various factions in different communities, to discuss conflicts as they arise. The Councils are not necessarily meant to find solutions, but rather to allow legitimacy for all sides. Often compromises will result from these discussions.

For instance a conflict arose over the activities of a MacDonald’s Restaurant in a residential area in Petach Tikvah. The religious people objected to the restaurant operating on Sabbath. In discussions in the community, it turned out that the

secular neighbors of the restaurant were also not too happy with the disturbance of an open restaurant next-door. So the restaurant was ordered closed by the municipality.

In another instance, the religious member of a municipality objected to dancers taking part in a Memorial Day ceremony. The girls, who had found this dance as their way of expressing their inclusion in this solemn event, were very hurt. But discussions with religious members of the community led to the recognition that dancing is a legitimate religious expression of mourning, and dancers were included in the ceremony.

The next rung involves bringing this Treaty back to my own “camp”. It is called

- 7) Leadership for dialogue in-time-of-conflict: This can be tricky. A leader may be considered a “traitor” if he tries to push his own camp too fast into peaceful dialogue or coexistence – with the opposing camp. (See what happened to Yitzhak Rabin and Anwar Sadat.) But if your own camp is convinced of the sincerity of your common beliefs, they will be willing to follow leadership, in applying a social treaty. Quite often the truism is expressed that only the rightist Begin could have made peace with Sadat, (only the Red-bating Nixon could have established diplomatic relations with Red China) and only a rightist government will be able to make a permanent agreement with the Palestinians. Even Yitzhak Rabin, as a recognized military hero, was given initial credit when he began the peace process with the PLO. His major failure was the disdain he expressed for the anxieties of the rightists and the suffering of victims of the terrorist attacks that continued during the process.

At times it seems impossible to contain the frustration, anxiety and pain of those who must make sacrifices for a conciliation with the adversary, while continuing apace with that very process. For the victims, expressions of understanding or condolences may seem hypocritical, at best. Again we find the old reflexes arising. If he understands and is empathic – how can it be that he doesn't agree with me?

So far – it seems we still haven't found the magic formula for conciliation in the population at large. But if there are leaders on both sides – and indeed people at all levels of the hierarchy – who consider themselves “neighbors” and recognize the mutual responsibility involved in sharing a common space – there may be hope for conciliation – further up the ladder. To my great sorrow – the primal tendency to fear recognition of a position that negates one's own identity – continues to arise, again and again. Nevertheless, creating islands of sanity in the regional *insanity* is a gratifying experience and may hold the seeds of hope for the future.

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Shelley@trendline.co.il

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Underlying Principles
of the Work Of Besod Siach

Martin Buber: I and Thou

David Bohm: Suspension of Conclusions

Jewish Tradition

Carl Rogers: Surprise

Systems Theory

**Intra-personal conflicts that are
transformed into Inter-Personal or Inter-
Group Conflicts**

Id vs. Super-Ego

Fantasy vs. Reality Testing

Individuation vs. Symbiosis or Merging

Narcissism vs. Object Love

Being vs. Doing

Real Self vs. False Self



