

Azriel Cohen shares his experience of working to build bridges between people from different religions and Israelis and Palestinians – in the Dalai Lama's village in India, in a Buddhist community in France, and in Jerusalem. His article challenges us to think about how our inner realities and our relationship to our bodies impacts our work for peace.

Towards a Holistic Model of Conflict Resolution

From Israelis & Palestinians to our Relationship with Animals

Azriel Cohen

Many people from backgrounds different than the world I grew up in. This is everyone's story: believing the unfamiliar 'other' is not good, and one of the dynamics underlying war. This realization spurred me onto a 15-year journey of transformative encounters with 'others', which led to deep meetings with peoples and cultures I had negative ideas about. Most recently it includes exploring my relationship with animals and plants. My own transformation led to specializing in designing non-threatening environments that facilitate transformative encounters between peoples from differing backgrounds. I will share some of what I learned along the way that may be useful for people interested in conflict resolution and work with diversity.

Peacemaker, Heal Thyself

I grew up in a kind, gentle and pious close-knit Orthodox Jewish community in Toronto. There was so much meaning and depth within our world that I never gave much thought to how I viewed people outside my community. The turning point was one summer during a lunch break at the Ontario College of Art. I always sat alone after lunch to recite my after-meal prayers because I wanted no one to know what I was doing. One day a student who I really did not like because of his strange appearance – long hair and unfamiliar clothes – did not leave when the meal was done. Hesitantly I told him I was going to pray silently for a few minutes. He asked me about my spiritual practice in a way that took me by surprise. He was curious, sincere and respectful and knew so much about my tradition. I was shaken. What a wonderful person. How many other people do I perceive with wrong ideas? My journey began.

Since then I have studied various models of conflict resolution and community building and engaged in encounters and deep friendships with individuals and communities from

groups I believed I was not allowed to get close to. This includes non-Orthodox Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Germans and Arabs.

To work for peace you do not need to fly to a country where there is war. It begins with your self. Here is an exercise everyone can do to contribute to peace and healing of conflict: make an inventory of who in your life you judge negatively and consider 'other'. Think about all the people who you encounter, including family, friends, neighbours and co-workers.

Most people don't experience a positive change towards the 'other' by having a gun put to their head. Often a moment of 'aha' – that the 'other' is experienced differently than ever before – occurs when there is safety and the opportunity to interact with the 'other' around something that has nothing to do with the topic of conflict. So be creative and gentle as you work towards healing your relationship with others. Put on some inspiring music, light a candle, allow yourself to daydream about how you might engage with these 'others', record your thoughts with a pen and let your intuition guide you.

Bridging between Religions in the Dalai Lama's Village

In 1997, minutes from the Dalai Lama's village in India I created the Ohr Olam Project, an experiment in creating community between people normally seen as not getting along. Dharamshala, at the foothills of the Himalayas, attracts thousands of spiritual seekers from all over the world. Though far away from any existing Jewish community, there is always a critical mass of hundreds of Jews from greatly varied backgrounds from around the world, especially post-military Israelis. The local community is Tibetan Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim. Distanced from the politics of the Jewish world we dreamt of a community that nurtured transformative encounters between different kinds of Jews and between Jews and people from other faiths.

The Dalai Lama's deep respect for all the world's religions, something that tends to elude the big three monotheistic religions, was one of the main reasons for choosing Dharamshala. We met the Dalai Lama privately and he wholeheartedly endorsed creating the project, "However", he said, "I am older than you and I know that such work of healing conflict will not be finished in your lifetime. It will take generations. Yet, if your work affects one person it will have been worth it. If it impacts ten people that will be wonderful, and if it impacts one hundred even more so." We spoke to the Dalai Lama about building bridges between groups in conflict and he shared with us a multi-level program he and Bishop Tutu had outlined. The outline included:

- intellectual forums
- meetings between laypeople
- service projects where the two parties in conflict serve a third party in need.

The Ohr Olam Model

The program created an environment that attracted people from all walks of life, spanning the range of Jewish beliefs and practices as well as people from many other religions. The Ohr Olam model included:

- appropriate staff – friends walking a path of personal transformation who get along with people from very diverse backgrounds
- multi-layered program – that meets the needs of as many different kinds of people as possible. The program included ritual – a huge Passover Seder, prayer services, classes and workshops on Jewish mysticism, social and musical programs, and interfaith dialogues
- Dropping expectations of changing anyone, and a clear intention to make everyone feel welcome – no matter what their background.

The program ran for almost five years and over 2,500 people participated. It was highly successful, deeply impacted many people's lives and attracted significant interest in the media.

Encountering Counterforces to Peace

I was not adequately prepared for the inevitable – steps forward in peacemaking provoke counterattacks by forces committed to perpetuating war and conflict. A messianic fundamentalist Jewish group, split off from the Hasidic Lubavitch movement, who found the idea of Jews sincerely respecting people of other faiths to be evil, came to save the Jews. They aggressively spread misinformation about our project and tore down our posters. Lubavitch headquarters wrote to me, asking me to turn to the local Indian police. I decided to take a step back from the project, thought about the historical pattern of peacemakers getting assassinated and wondered if I was really ready for this work.

Bringing Israelis & Palestinians to Plum Village

In the spring of 2001, I co-initiated a project called Peace Begins With Myself, a program that brought delegations of Israelis and Palestinians to Thich Naht Hanh's Plum Village in France. In the spirit of the Buddhist tradition, Thich Naht Hanh teaches that making peace always comes back to transformation of the individual, and it relates to all aspects of life. Making peace between groups in conflict is part of a greater holistic process that relates to every element of our lives, including even how we breathe, eat and walk. In a humble way it happens one person, and one step at a time. Such a transformation will take much longer than we may be comfortable with. My first lessons in Plum Village were about patience. There was conflict within the group and some participants were not following Thich Naht Hanh's guidance. I asked for a private conversation with Sister Gina, the facilitator of our group. I shared with her my distress. She told me that at the beginning of her time in Plum Village, Thay ('teacher', as he is commonly known to his

followers) would share a vision and she would feel responsible to make it happen, but it did not manifest as quickly as she expected and she would get frustrated. “Thay shares visions with us, and we rush to realize them, yet he seems to have all the patience in the world,” she said. “He speaks to us about processes. What I did not understand then, which I do now, is that he sometimes sees processes that can take three hundred years.”

Buddhist Wisdom: Mindfulness

In Plum Village I learned about the power of reducing how much we do while increasing our ‘mindfulness’. Doing less, but doing it with more presence actually improves our effectiveness, contrary to the perception of most Westerners. For example, as a painter, I am learning that it is better to reduce the number of hours I spend creating, and when I do paint, to do so with a sense of inner centeredness. There is a quality of self-restraint in this path because it means that sometimes holding back from the impulse to create. To be mindful is to approach life with a broadened sense of being, attending with care to how we sleep, eat and speak, how we use our time and even how we walk. The practice of mindfulness shifts us towards quality rather than quantity. Its essence is to simplify and slow down. Mindful eating refers to only eating when we eat, focusing of our awareness on ‘I am eating’ and being mindful, both in thought and physical sensation of the process of eating. Being mindful in all aspects of living affects how I paint, and in Plum Village I learned how it affects how we make peace.

A most potent practice in making peace is mindful listening. My first glimpse of the power of this practice was after mindfully listening to a member of the Israeli delegation in Plum Village for twenty minutes. I not only remembered every word that was spoken – I also had an uncanny experience of the images and sensations behind the words. Mindful listening is an experience of moment-to-moment listening. It is quite simple and you can try it with a friend. Ask you friend to share something with you. While they speak sit as relaxed and alert as you can, perhaps in a meditation pose. Sit with an awareness of your body and focus your attention on how your breath moves in and out. Let your only thoughts be ‘I am sitting here present for you.’ Do not respond to the other person. Simply stay with your breath and this thought ‘I am sitting here present for you.’ Let the person’s words move through you without attempting to process or remember what they are saying. Notice how different this feels from how you normally listen. Then switch roles and notice how it feels to be listened to this way.

Through mindful listening both Israelis and Palestinians discovered that for the first time they not only heard but also felt one another. Some Israeli veteran peacemakers, with close to fifteen years experience said they did not hear anything new but somehow they were able to feel the Palestinian experience with an unfamiliar depth.

Stability

Another central theme of the program at Plum Village was stability. During the first few days we did not discuss the conflict but rather were engaged in a process of learning how to sit, walk, eat, speak and listen mindfully, attuning to nature and being immersed in the

international community. The aim was to be stable enough to engage with the energy of conflict. We engaged in a practice which Thich Naht Hanh calls Watering the Flowers which is based on an ancient Buddhist monastic practice, as a way to maintain community and work through conflict. We sat together and were asked to 'water each other's flowers' – to share what we saw that is beautiful in one another. This practice creates a stable foundation of goodness in the relationship between people, a foundation that is necessary to contain that which is painful and difficult. Thich Naht Hanh said often groups fail because they get into painful issues before establishing stability. The listening sessions at Plum Village were contained both by time – generally not more than two hours a day – and by people. We saw how knowledge of group dynamics and conflict resolution theory needs is not enough. The facilitators of our group were the top monks and nuns in Plum Village, people who had many years of practise transforming their own suffering and conflict.

Energetic fields of healing spaces and war zones

It was during the second delegation in November 2001 that I began to think about the cultural relevance of a Buddhist environment to the Middle East conflict. Plum Village was filled with rules about such things as silence, interaction between the sexes and alcohol. The Palestinians from Nablus had been trapped in their city for over a year, unable to leave because of military closure. When they arrived in France they were frustrated by the structure and especially with rules about when to speak and where to smoke. More than anything they wanted to walk around, smoke, talk, experience the open fields of southern France and visit Paris. This was more important to the program, and the Buddhist rituals and Vietnamese culture were unfamiliar. There was a curious moment when a Jewish participant a religious Jewish settler who had served as a military officer in Gaza and the Palestinians stood aside laughing at the strange bell the Buddhists were using to get everyone to be quiet. They violated the quiet and enjoyed it together. I laughed to myself and thought 'Israeli and Palestinians have joined as friends now that they shared a common enemy – the oppressive Vietnamese monks'.

The second delegation returned from Plum Village and the Intifada intensified. There were actual or foiled terrorist bombings almost every day, and though many people around the world were touched by what we were doing, it was unclear how our efforts could counteract the forces of war. At best I felt we were gaining tools to simply help us from drowning. The group lived with a split personality. In Plum Village, everyone was embraced as integral to the group and the energy was generally contained, held by the Plum Village environment. Back in Israel, clashes between members of the group were not dealt with using the techniques from Plum Village and some people were pushed out of the sangha (community) because of personal agendas. Everyone was trying so hard, but something was not working. It seemed that there was some kind of invisible field that we were fighting against.

Learning from Animals

I began to sense something was happening to me just by living in this field of violence and fear. I had a physical sensation like some kind of poison was leaking into my system.

I decided to take time away from Israel and went into retreat at the ecovillage Findhorn in Scotland, sensing there was something to learn about peace by retreating from not just a war zone but from cities. I wanted to tune into the wisdom of the body and the healing frequency of nature and Findhorn was an ideal starting point. Healers guided me to learn about the physical sensations of being safe and how those sensations can be nourished regardless of our surroundings. During long walks in nature I explored aligning my movement, relaxing my breath and listening to silence until I was in an unfamiliar but incredibly peaceful frequency. A week after Findhorn, I was walking in the countryside tuning into this frequency and saw a young deer about 150 metres away from me. Very conscious of my movements, breath, thoughts and even how I used my eyes I witnessed the deer get closer to me until it came right up to me to smell me then licked my clothes. I began to walk and the deer followed by my side for about thirty minutes. Animals seemed to hold a key to healing and I began to wonder if wild animals run away from people because humans generally exude a frequency of violence.

Trauma, Violence and the Nervous System

A few months later in the US, I was introduced to Somatic Experiencing (S.E.), and suddenly a lot of puzzling things made sense. S.E. is a system of trauma healing rooted in the observation that wild animals, though constantly in danger, almost never exhibit symptoms of trauma. I learned how trauma is stored in the body, that contemporary neurological research has found that the brain is affected by unresolved trauma, and that resolution of trauma in the nervous system can break cycles of violence. S.E. refers to 'trauma vortexes' and 'healing vortexes'. Each vortex has a magnetic pull on people and affects or infects them. A place like Findhorn is a healing vortex and a terrorism filled area is a trauma vortex. Simply being in these spaces can heal or traumatize the nervous system.

The collective dynamics of both Israeli and Palestinian societies can be mapped onto models used to understand the impact of trauma in the individual. Societies that have been traumatized can get stuck in flight, fight or freeze responses. If there is a physiology to the cycles of war and violence then dialogues and encounter groups are not enough – healing of the body must also be addressed.

Reprogramming with Creativity

Creativity is a wonderful vehicle for both personal transformation of conflict and sharing that transformation to inspire others. Living again in Jerusalem, my response to the second Intifada was to create 'The Travelling Jerusalem Café', a multi-media art installation about café culture in East and West Jerusalem. Terrorists targeted Cafés in Israeli West-Jerusalem and most Jews considered Palestinian East Jerusalem very

dangerous. The exhibit depicts what is beautiful and even mundane in places associated with fear with the intention of reclaiming the ability to experience safety where there is a sense of danger. When the exhibit travels overseas, it includes storytelling about my experiences in the coffee shops. In Israel, the exhibition includes sample tastes from various cafes and invites Jews and Arabs to interact in the same space around a shared pleasure-café culture. One participant referred to the exhibit as 'living peace' because when there is no conflict, people just do regular things together.

Shalom and Salaam

Healing conflict between humans is a holistic matter, relating to the collective, individual, the mind, body, soul and our relationship to the other-than-human world around us. Various theories of conflict resolution and healing can be seen as expressing different facets on a large crystal. As we are able to go beyond our tendency to compare which approach is better and surrender to the possibility that multiple realities coexist, we may be able to perceive a whole shape that we never knew before. 'Shalom' in Hebrew means peace and is related to the word that means whole. 'Salaam' meaning peace in Arabic is related to the word for surrender. Peace is a process of surrender and revealing harmony between all parts.