Refusing to be Effective: Zeitouna and Michigan Peaceworks on Palestine


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What should one make of an Arab-Jewish women’s “dialogue group,” presumably concerned with the catastrophe in Palestine, one of whose Jewish members led the suppression of activism on Palestine in a general peace and justice group she also helped found? What if the group is being touted as a model of cooperation and learning, and has become the subject of a film made by the Jewish member in question? What if the film omitted the views of one Palestinian woman who dropped out because the group wasn’t politically active? An experienced observer might be surprised, because the “dialogue group” and its assumptions have long since come under criticism.

The late Edward Said described his experience in dialogue groups in these terms.

[T]hrough the period from 1969 to 1991, I and many other Palestinians had had private, even secret, meetings and peace discussions with Israelis, American Jews, and others who were concerned about the issue...By the period of the intifadah I had lost interest in the encounter groups principally because they were often manipulated by professional “conflict resolution” technicians, and also because they were now being used by the PLO not to argue the Palestinian case but, in my opinion, to try to prove to Israelis how many concessions the PLO was prepared to make.

I also found that most members of the Israeli Left (including Peace Now) were focused on asking for more Palestinian concessions (recognize us, give up on the National Charter, etc.) without offering anything in return. In other words, these private attempts at reconciliation—with some notable exceptions—reflected the exact balance of power between us, a very weak partner and a very strong one, some of whose advocates shamelessly kept asking the victims of military occupation and dispossession for various moral acknowledgements from their victims.¹

In fairness to the dialogue technicians, one of them agrees with Said: “When there is a dialogue between oppressor and oppressed, it might be just an attempt to create an illusion of caring about the needs of the powerless by those in power, without practical attempt to reverse the injustice.”²

At the same time that Said dropped out, in 1991, Jewish religious writer Marc Ellis criticized the progressive Jewish dialoguers.

What if the essence of the Israeli state is expansion rather than democracy, and that the Jewish character of the state makes expendable, in a terrifying sense makes logical the end of indigenous Palestinian culture and community in historic Palestine? What if one believes that what we are witnessing today is the culmination of a sixty-year process in which Palestinian culture and peoplehood are destroyed in historic Palestine?…
...[T]hen we can draw the following conclusions: That the survival of the Palestinian people, while dependent on many factors, is also partially dependent on progressive Jews moving beyond the acceptable levels of Jewish dissent; that...the Jewish progressive consensus position is a form of oppression vis-a-vis the Palestinian people.3

Ellis called for a “movement beyond victimization and oppression” to “solidarity with those whom we as Jews have oppressed as a people.”4 He also criticized the Christian-Jewish ecumenical dialogue for becoming “the ecumenical deal: eternal repentance for Christian anti-Jewishness unencumbered by any substantive criticism of Israel.”5 The “ecumenical deal continues as a way to manage Christian dissent on the issue of Israel and Palestine by brandishing the potent club of anti-Jewishness.”6

With the inevitable failure of the Oslo agreements and the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa intifada, some Jewish activists echoed Said and Ellis, such as Esther Kaplan. Writing in 2003, Kaplan described her background in “the old school of Jewish activism on Palestine,” groups such as Breira, New Jewish Agenda, International Jewish Peace Union, and Women in Black, which sought to “create audiences for the Israeli left, to educate and mobilize the American Jewish community against the occupation,” and to “bring Israelis and Palestinians into dialogue.”7 “Much of this movement navigated under the star of identity politics, the idea that American Palestinians and Jews had a special stake in the conflict and were uniquely situated to intervene.”8 Kaplan found that in “the past few years, these assumptions and strategies, even this emotional tone, have begun to seem anachronistic.”9 She cited the International Solidarity Movement, the divestment movement, and the US Campaign to End the Occupation, which were all founded after the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa intifada in 2000. They reflect heightened concern at Israel’s fierce oppression of the Palestinians, and have a general membership. Some Jews have not been affected by these new currents, but have “retreated into traditional formations, such as...the Zionist anti-occupation group Brit Tzedek v’Shalom, which seeks to balance ‘car[ing] deeply about Israel’ with ‘the achievement of a negotiated settlement.’”10 Their program does not even mention US funding and support of Israel.11 Kaplan thus bade farewell to those
difficult, agonizing conversations within Jewish spaces...those carefully planned Palestinian-Jewish dialogues...This work may still serve a purpose...but it no longer truly serve[s] the Palestinian cause. It has become a project, rather, of saving the Jewish soul.

Israel has proven its intransigence. And no effort tough enough to overpower that government’s belligerence will ever emerge from the American Jewish community...But new activists can and will throw down the gauntlet...We Jews can join in—many of us will—but we don’t own this movement any more.12
At least that was Kaplan’s view from New York. News of the de-acquisition has been slow to reach the provinces, such as Ann Arbor, Michigan, where one of the Jewish founders of the Arab-Jewish women’s dialogue group Zeitouna (Arabic for olive) helped prevent a general peace group she also helped found from addressing Palestine. She then made a documentary film, Zeitouna: Refusing to Be Enemies.

The filmmaker was one of three women who founded a group called Ann Arbor Area Committe for Peace, in the wake of 9/11, to defend civil liberties and protest the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq. AAACP was effective in mobilizing the post-9/11 concern, defending a local Muslim leader who was imprisoned by the INS and eventually deported, turning out crowds for demonstrations and getting resolutions defending civil liberties and opposing the Iraq war through city council. The Palestine question naturally arose, and a committee was formed to write a statement, three drafts of which were rejected before the steering committee reluctantly submitted it to the membership. At a meeting attended by about 50 people, the filmmaker, who was on the SC, opposed the statement because it hadn’t been “approved by the Jewish community,” a view expressed by several. The statement was approved by 64-14 (many voted by email), and rejected by the SC by about the same margin, 6-3 against. Alan Haber, who helped start Students for a Democratic Society in his college days in Ann Arbor, presented a plan for implementing the resolution, which was dismissed. Two of the three SC members supportive of Palestine resigned, and the general members most interested withdrew.

AAACP (now “Michigan Peaceworks”) is a 501C-3 non-profit corporation with staff and a six-figure budget. It no longer has membership meetings, and has the entire town working for it basically. It is a bastion of liberal Democratic equivocation (MoveOn.org, Kerry for President). The old Palestine statement lingered for a while on the Peaceworks web site, not linked to any page, but disappeared in late 2005. The group has said virtually nothing on Palestine and the US-Israel relationship in its entire existence. The city’s Human Rights Commission crafted a mild but constructive resolution about ending arms sales to Israel, which Peaceworks did not support. Peaceworks opposed divestment from Israel-related investments when it came up on campus, but did endorse the program of Brit Tzedek, Kaplan’s old politics, and presented a program on the Geneva Accords, an unofficial peace proposal by compromised Israeli and Palestinian figures, as if the problem is “over there,” rather than in US economic and political support for Israel.

The Zeitouna dialogue group started in summer, 2002. While Ariel Sharon’s army reconquered the West Bank in “Operation Field of Thorns,” while Rachel Corrie was murdered by an Israeli bulldozer.
driver, while Israel built the monstrous Wall around the Palestine ghetto, the Zeitounas dialogued. They appeared occasionally at public events, clustered beneath their banner. The Jewish Zeitounas struggled over merely signing their names on a letter to the local newspaper. When the HRC resolution opposing arms sales to Israel arose, the Jewish Zeitounas argued that it didn’t address Israel’s concerns, and proposed a new draft. After two years of this, one experienced Palestinian organizer dropped out, referring in her farewell email to

the worsening situation in Palestine and the occupied territories. Perhaps it was too optimistic a wish on my part, but my hope was always focused on transforming our group into an action group that can truly educate and increase awareness in the community at large. We have learned how to dialogue, but now we must find ways to break the silence. It is here where I will choose to put most of my energies in the future.

This woman was not featured in the film made about the group, which her husband dismissed as “dancing, sisterhood and story telling. As usual, the Zionists did their best to keep it sterile.” These are subjective judgments, and one cannot fault the Arab women who did not share them. One of them once told this writer how devastated she was by the collapse of the PLO in the Oslo agreements, and how it took years to reengage. After the total defeat of politics, programs and ideologies, there is a certain logic in withdrawing to personal relationships, which one can understand and control. Those of us who disagree must respect the other work of her and her colleagues in the Arab community. However, Zeitouna is being hailed like the greatest Arab-Jewish synthesis since medieval Andalusia, and thus invites judgment.

The film’s world premiere took place recently at the historic Michigan Theater in Ann Arbor, the town’s leading arts venue off the University of Michigan campus.17 There was a lavish reception, with live music from the band that composed and performed the original soundtrack from the film. The evening was introduced by the theater’s executive director, who last summer was in Hollywood to receive the Outstanding Historic Theater of the Year award from the League of Historic American Theaters. He announced that the 1700-seat house was sold out, and that there would be five additional showings in the spring. The emcee for the evening was the president of the 128-year old University Musical Society, one of the leading arts presenters in North America, which brings stellar programming to a city of 125,000, including a rich Arab music program in recent years.18 People came from New Jersey and California. There was a handsome program book, with biographies and photographs of the dozen beaming Zeitounas, six each Arab and Jewish (the dropout was replaced), and sponsorship from all of liberal polite society. Brit Tzedeck brochures were available, but no Palestinian literature. Few Arabs attended.
The film began by establishing moral equivalence. Each individual had her personal history; each side had its ceremonies and rituals and society. And each side had its tragic history of persecution. One of the senior Jewish women was born in Berlin, and she and her family, save for her father, survived interment in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Her account, and its acknowledgement by a Palestinian opened the victimhood discussion. The Palestinian gave an account of the Nabka in Haifa, which she had survived; there were montages of the Holocaust and the Nakba. When they discussed their experiences in the US, one Arab woman recounted feeling stigmatized as a “terrorist”, especially after 9/11, and the Arab-American experience of INS raids and police harassment. A Jewish woman responded that she felt Jews weren’t really accepted in America, since she had heard “remarks” as one of a few Jews in grade school, and in college. The filmmaker explained that Jews felt they had to stick up for each other, since no one else would.

Marc Ellis stated in 1990 that the alleged “symmetry of suffering and rights between Jews and Palestinians over the last forty years, is a false symmetry.” The Holocaust was perpetrated by Europeans, not by Arabs, and cannot excuse what Zionism has done to the Palestinian Arabs. It took place 62 and more years ago, and has been recognized and compensated by practically every means imaginable, including by the establishment of Israel, if one thinks that way. Obviously nothing can restore the Jewish life which was destroyed, or replace what it would have become, but to the extent amends can be made they have been. The Nakba occurred 59 years ago, has not been addressed but compounded. It is the center of an antagonism between Israel and the US on one hand and the Arab/Muslim world on the other, which may end in many Holocausts if Israel uses its arsenal of nuclear weapons as freely as it has used lesser ones. This disparity was never addressed, or not included in the film. The Holocaust narrative in the US derives its power not only from intrinsic merit, but from its assiduous development by the Jewish community, which has made this European event somehow as central to US history as the Civil War. There is no comparison between being stigmatized as a “terrorist” and subjected to INS roundups and police persecution, and being the subject of “remarks.” American Jews are not victims.

This inversion reached its height in film’s account of the visit of six of the group to Israel/Palestine in the summer of 2006. Israel’s oppression was not presented as a mortal threat to the Palestinian Arabs; rather, the oppression was a threat to the group. Occupation scenes such as checkpoints were described as “activities not in our spirit of togetherness,” words to that effect. The ghastly Wall of concrete slabs was shown defiling the landscape, but not even named; it might have been some new Christo project, “Running
Ghetto Fence.” Israel’s assault on Lebanon that summer was yet another obstacle to group feeling, which they thankfully survived.

Two of the Palestinian women had doubts about the value of dialogue. Yet overall, there was a marked lack of tension, no emphatic statements or arguments or even mild disagreements. Even the failings alleged above were artless and without tension. The group is by definition a joint effort, but it’s not clear that the film is. Editing clearly made the film, and one wonders if the group decided what picture the film would present, or whether the filmmaker made that decision herself. One also wonders who holds the rights to the film, who will decide on its distribution, and what will become of any revenue. Queries to the filmmaker on these and other points were not answered.

After the film the Zeitounas took a curtain call. One of the Palestinian women who had had doubts made a general statement about the horrible situation in occupied Palestine and the need to do something; she said privately later that she wanted to give a speech. Then the Zeitounas filed out to the lobby to receive their admirers. In nearly five years of dialogue, the attitudes of some Jewish members toward the Palestine question may have advanced, to their credit. Yet, to judge from the film, five years of dialogue have never discussed power—the colossal flow of US funds and materiel and political support to Israel, the resulting apocalypse which Israel wreaks on the Arabs, and the relative pinpricks it suffers; or the force which is primarily responsible, the Israel lobby, which academics John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt dragged into mainstream debate a year ago. Some may see the group as somehow unconnected with such questions, or even as a way of avoiding them. Yet they are unavoidable, if Zeitouna is not to be a complete failure, even by the most charitable standard.

One current member of Ann Arbor city council, Joan Lowenstein, was during her first term president of the local Jewish Federation, and is still a prominent Jewish spokeswoman. When Mustafa Barghouti spoke here after his Palestinian presidential candidacy, Lowenstein was called by the Ann Arbor News reporter for “the Jewish view.” She had not attended the talk, but was full of opinions, such as “once the entire wall is completed separating Israel from Palestine, there will be no more need for checkpoints and Palestinians will be able to move freely.” She was allowed to write an op-ed piece in the News attacking Jimmy Carter’s book about Israel an apartheid state, in which she stated she had not read the book. During her tenure on council, the attendance of the mayor and some council members at the annual Jewish Federation banquet has become standard, thus normalizing support for Israel and its deeds as ordinary politics.
Surely such a person should be challenged as unfit for public office, just as an Afrikaner and fervent partisan of apartheid twenty years ago. A strong effort to explain this to voters in Lowenstein’s ward and run a candidate against her, successful or not, would raise the level of public discussion, shock the local Democratic Party and set a national example. Michigan Peaceworks could spin off a political project with a snap of its collective fingers. The Zeitounas would be very powerful, going door-to-door in Arab-Jewish pairs, explaining the issues. Such a campaign would replace dialogue with solidarity with the oppressed, as Said, Ellis and Kaplan have long urged, as the plight of Palestine makes more urgent daily.
Notes


4ibid.

5ibid.

6ibid.


8ibid.

9ibid.

10ibid., p. 87

11see http://btvshalom.org/

12ibid., p. 88

13See http://www-personal.umich.edu/~hfc/mideast/aaacpstmt.htm

14See http://www-personal.umich.edu/~hfc/mideast/habernote.htm

15Peaceworks is at http://www.justpeaceinfo.org


17see http://www.michtheater.org

18see http://www.umich.org


21Joan Lowenstein, “Carter hurts his own cause,” *Ann Arbor News*, December 31, 2006. Lowenstein wrote that she was responding to a commentary by Carter on the op-ed page, but she attacked the entire book, citing that paragon of probity Alan Dershowitz, *inter alia*.