

Negotiating A Peace Of Mind

Within the context of a complicated peace process, essential truths have often been ignored, especially when it comes to the Palestinian narrative. **Doha Abdelkhaleq** argues that what the peace process may be lacking today is the availability of more righteous men.

Near the Jordan River, by the shores of the Dead Sea, it is widely believed that the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah was revealed to the Prophet Abraham by three of God's messengers. There, Abraham pleaded with God to spare the two cities, asking whether the Almighty would show mercy if ten righteous men were found. Abraham's efforts were rewarded and God agreed; round one of the negotiations went to Abraham.

Fast forward thousands of years, close to the very same location where those fateful negotiations are said to have taken place, I was fortunate enough to have attended an event in which the art of modern-day negotiations was at the heart of matters. The five-day Executive Education program, offered by Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, was entitled "Leading for the Future: The Arab Region in a Changing World". Launched in 2010 by the King Abdullah II Fund for Development, this year it drew around 60 senior executives and civil society leaders from across the Middle East and North Africa region to discuss common issues facing the Arab world. Dr. Andy Zelleke, lecturer in public policy at the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard's Kennedy School, introduced us to several groundbreaking concepts, techniques and case studies on the art of negotiations. He also asked us to link our newly-acquired knowledge to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

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During the program, Dr. Zelleke stressed that even though power may be concentrated in the hands of a single dominant side in any given negotiation (in this case Israel) – any party can influence the negotiation process in search of the "best alternative towards the negotiation acceptance (BAT-

NA)". According to Dr. Zelleke, a "zone of possible acceptance (ZOPA)" does exist between the Palestinians and the Israelis, and he explained that both sides can adopt a pragmatic approach by keeping the focus on the two-state solution, noting that Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's plan for establishing the fundamental infrastructure needed for a viable Palestinian state is a good example of working within one's circle of influence towards a common good.

Presenting a pertinent counterargument, a participant vocally pointed out that in reality, Israel has never acknowledged that the Palestinians had rights to begin with. At that point, I realized that a so-called ZOPA did not exist in the minds of some Israelis, whose ideology supports the dispossession of Palestinians because they consider themselves "God's chosen people" which, in turn, leaves hardly any ground for negotiations. Israel never even officially recognized that a unique Palestinian story ever existed, and apart from a few articles by Amira Hass and Gideon Levy – prominent Israeli journalists who write for Israel's left-leaning Haaretz newspaper – nowhere else do we see an Israeli official issuing an apology or showing remorse, let alone discussing the psychological impact of the 1948 ethnic cleansing on the new generations of Palestinians.

Having been raised as a proud and committed Jordanian of Palestinian origin, I myself have tried over the years to figure out what

went right or wrong with the formation of the State of Israel. I have even, in the most surrealist terms, attempted to distill history to find a third story that hints at a war-free future for my own children. Nothing has affected my generation's psyche, and that of the millions of Palestinians in exile since

the 1948 exodus, as severely as the stories of the Palestinians who were forced to leave their lands after the Deir Yassin massacre and the establishment of illegal Israeli settlements there. These events haunt me, and every Palestinian, exactly as the holocaust horror stories haunt every surviving Jew and their descendents.

Overwhelmed by the absence of a basic ground for a ZOPA, I communicated my frustration to Steve Kelman, another participating Harvard professor at the event. A sympathetic Kelman, who is a born Jew, looked me straight in the eye and very sincerely said, "Doha, I am sorry for your suffering and for the suffering of all the Palestinian people!"

If one were to find some lesson in the negotiations between Abraham and God, it may very well lie in the process. For a day after being granted an opportunity to save the two cities by finding ten of their residents' righteous men, Abraham proceeded to the elevation overlooking the River Jordan, the exact spot where he spoke to God one day before, and saw a "dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace"; not even ten righteous men could be found in either city. The final round of the negotiations had obviously ended in God's favor, and the two cities were destroyed.

Two righteous men did exist in that one room at the Harvard Executive Education program in Jordan last January. I now realize how important it is for both parties in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to adhere to the basic concept of righteousness in their negotiations, and I yearn for a day in the near future when an apology is given to the Palestinian people. However, while hundreds of thousands of Palestinians are waiting to hear a sincere apology for the lifetime of suffering that has been and continues to be inflicted upon them since the declaration of independence of the State of Israel, I speak for myself when I say that I have accepted Steven Kelman's apology, thus having negotiated a peace of my own mind. ■