

How to talk to just about anyone about Israel-Palestine

First steps toward meaningful dialogue



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Introduction

This booklet is a starting point for **inter-faith** and **intra-faith** conversations about Israel-Palestine. It's a step-by-step guide to navigating the tough conversations that accompany complicated topics.

In these pages you'll find new ways to think about Palestine and Israel as well as simple but effective tips for constructive engagement. Although many resources are suggested, this guide is in no way a complete compendium on the subject of Palestine and Israel. You are encouraged to add your own sources of information to the list.

To get the most benefit from this booklet, read it first from cover to cover, and then go back and work your way through one page at a time, carefully focusing on the ideas. At various places you'll find **ACTION** steps that set the stage for dialogue. Do them.

You'll increase your chances for meaningful engagement if you

- **Keep your ears open to new ways of listening.**
- **Keep your mind open to new ways of thinking.**
- **Keep your heart open to new ways of feeling.**

And just like Israeli-Palestinian dialogue and the conflict itself, this guide is a work-in-progress. We welcome your feedback about how the suggestions offered here work for you.

Email info@MyBrotherFromAnotherMother.org

“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and
rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.”

~ Rumi

Laying the foundation



If your intention is to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through dialogue, you'll never succeed.

Your goal cannot be to resolve the conflict.

Those of us living outside Israel and Palestine do not have the power to untangle the countless issues facing the region. Not through social media. Not in your neighbor's living room. And not on college campuses. If that is your endgame—if you think your conversations will create peace in the Middle East—give it up now because it won't happen.

Only the people on the ground in the Holy Land can create lasting peace.

Instead, your goal is to create a space for constructive dialogue. To expand your comfort zone to include ideas that are different from your own. And, if you so choose, to get behind grassroots peace efforts that are doing good work between Palestinians and Israelis. At the back of this guide you'll find a list of such organizations. Look for groups that resonate, and support them with your time and resources.

The realization that our objectives in dialogue do not include finding an answer to the conflict is both a relief and a burden.

It's liberating not to have to wrestle this complex issue to a practical conclusion. Hearing new ideas, sharing perspectives and developing empathy are, in and of themselves, worthwhile endeavors.

On the other hand, the work can be hard.

Dialogue requires an open mind and an open heart. Sometimes long-held beliefs get tested and even abandoned in deference to more inclusive worldviews. This shift in understanding can be scary.

And that is the way of Israel-Palestine dialogue. It is an ongoing paradox of attitudes and feelings. An archetypal Mobius strip. Seemingly discordant points of view interweave and complement each other.

Get used to it.

“It is precisely the multiplicity of opinions that derive from variegated souls and backgrounds which enriches wisdom and brings about its enlargement. In the end all matters will be properly understood and it will be recognized that it was impossible for the structure of peace to be built without those trends that appeared to be in conflict.”

- Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook

What is dialogue?

The word *debate* comes from the Old French *debatre*, meaning to fight or contend.

In contrast, the word *dialogue* is from the Greek *dialogos*—*dia* meaning through and *logos* meaning word or reason. Dialogue seeks understanding through words.

As the saying goes, a dialogue won't produce as much heat as a debate, but it generates a lot more light.

More light is what we need.

Debate is designed to convince one side of the other side's position. One side wins. The other side loses. Debate is contentious and competitive. It counters talking points and thwarts empathy. It reinforces a point of view and chips away at possibilities. A debate is a dead end that will not transform conflict.

Dialogue, on the other hand, benefits all parties. It is collaborative and seeks common ground. Dialogue listens for insight. It expands perspective. And while dialogue, by itself, will not transform conflict, it transforms people. Dialogue fosters understanding, builds partnerships and forges outcomes that advance common interests in positive and productive ways.

How to establish dialogue rather than debate

Look for places of agreement with your partners. (Debate highlights differences.)

Be open to changing your mind. (Debate strives to be right.)

Look for strength in your partner's position. (Debate seeks weakness.)

Examine your assumptions. (Debate doesn't question one's own beliefs.)

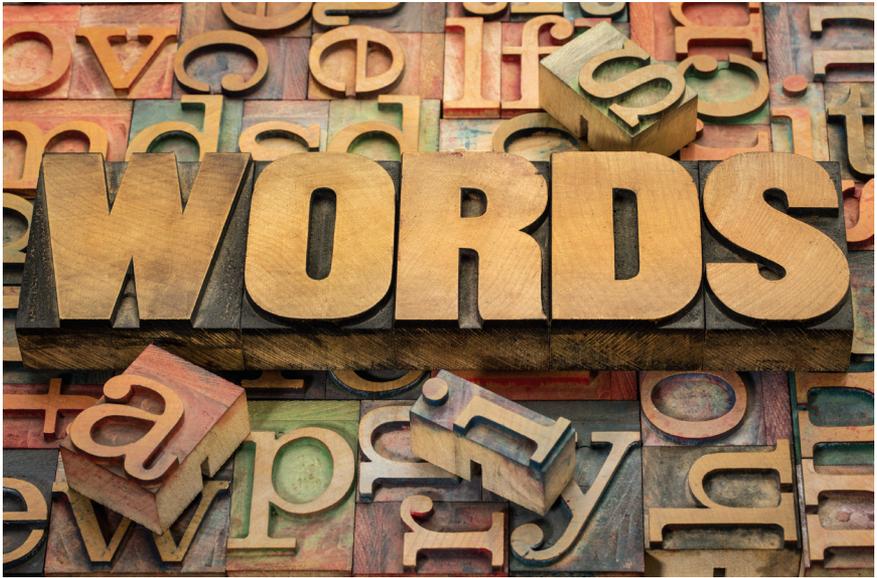
In dialogue people work together toward a solution. (Debate operates solo.)

When you're talking about Palestine and Israel, pay attention to whether you're in dialogue or debate.

Hearing someone else's perspective is not the same as agreeing with it.

ACTION: Practice the skills listed above every day—in conversations with family, friends, strangers and colleagues. Do you find yourself needing to be right? Can you acknowledge the validity or reasonableness of another viewpoint even if you don't agree with it?

Language matters



Who's the master of your words?

Does your listener understand a word the same way you intend it? Or does she have a completely different understanding of the word?

Words matter. The way we talk about Israel-Palestine and the words we use have a direct impact on the success or breakdown of our communication.

What words do you use when you talk about Israel-Palestine? *Occupied? Liberated? Disputed?* When you use the term *pro-Israel* do you also mean *pro-Palestine* or do you mean in *opposition to Palestine*? Does your use of *pro-Palestine* mean *against Israel*?

In the same way that your vocabulary reflects your worldview, other worldviews are expressed using different language.

Word choice isn't right or wrong; it simply reflects a certain perspective. Be careful, though, and don't use words to deliberately provoke your dialogue partner. And don't let someone else's word choice distract you from trying to understand her point.

ACTION: Clarify terms. Because the words we use to talk about Palestine and Israel have different meanings to different people, it's important that we define what we mean when we use certain words. Included in the list

of words that can cause confusion and trigger unexpected reactions are *Zionism, apartheid, occupation and colonialism*.

We're not suggesting avoiding these words. But when you hear them, ask the speaker what she means. You may be surprised to learn that a word with an obvious meaning to you means something completely different to someone else.

Assume nothing in someone else's use of language.

“When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said
in a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose
it to mean—neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make
words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty,
‘which is to be master—that’s all.’”

- Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

Sorting out statements

Some statements are **facts**.

Some statements are **opinions**.

Some statements are **personal narratives**.

The distinctions among these categories can mean the difference between a fruitful conversation and a heated argument.

A factual statement can be backed up with evidence.

"The sun rises every morning."

An opinion is a view or belief based on experience. An opinion may be factual, but an opinion can't be proven. Opinions often have strong emotional dimensions.

"Sunrise is the best time of the day."

A narrative is a retelling of experiences or connected events. It's a personal story that can be factual or not.

"Watching the sunrise every day for a month changed my life."

How do we interpret what we hear? How do we understand what we say?

When discussing hot-button issues, take care to distinguish facts, opinions and narratives.

Some people have trouble separating fact from opinion. When we care deeply about a subject and are committed to a specific point of view, we are more apt to mistake opinions for facts.

An opinion is no less valid than a fact; it's simply different.

ACTION: Avoid ambiguity. If you're confused about a statement, ask the speaker to explain what he means. This requires you to be listening carefully rather than preparing your next response. In clarification, often an opinion that is stated as hard fact softens.

What is truth?

Facts, opinions and narratives are distinct from truth.

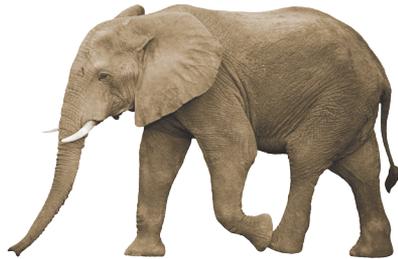
Truth is often subjective:

“My mother is the best mother in the world.”

That’s a true statement for the child speaking. But it is not true for another child.

When we get into discussions about what is true [versus what is fact], we can find ourselves in a standoff. Likeminded people can agree on one truth. Other people will not have that same certainty.

In the ancient fable, *Six Blind Men and an Elephant*, a group of blind men use personal experience to determine what an elephant is. They approach the animal from different directions, each coming into contact with a different part of its body: a tusk, a leg, the tail, the side, an ear and the trunk. Each has direct irrefutable experience of the elephant. Yet each comes away with an entirely different understanding of the animal.



Which one is true?

As with the case of the six blind men, our individual truths are largely determined by our singular point of view. When we have direct experience of a situation, we cling tightly to our convictions, believing beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are right.

And we are.

And we’re not.

When we’re only exposed to one aspect of an experience—whether it’s an elephant or a point of view about Palestine or Israel—our assessment of the situation is subjective. It’s only partially correct. Our experience is 100% true for us, but others can have an opposing yet equally legitimate truth—for them.

No one has a monopoly on the truth about Israel-Palestine.

No one.

Your work

Now it's time to focus on YOU. To pave the way for a meaningful encounter, do the exercise below before entering into dialogue.

ACTION: Acknowledge your assumptions.

Most of us have preconceived ideas about Palestine and Israel. It's useful to identify those ideas before starting dialogue. You don't need to share this information with anyone. But recognizing your own perspective is key to being able to talk with others.

Complete the following:

1. How do I think and feel about Israel? Israelis? The Israeli government?
2. How do I think and feel about Palestine? Palestinians? The Palestinian Authority? Hamas?
3. How do I think and feel about the creation of the state of Israel?
4. How do I think and feel about the creation of a state of Palestine?

Now fill in the blank below with either ISRAEL or PALESTINE.

5. _____ is primarily responsible for the ongoing conflict.

If you've been candid in your responses, you should have a pretty good picture of where your loyalties lie. Now ask yourself:

Are my answers facts or opinions?

No matter how sure you are that your answers and thoughts are grounded in incontrovertible evidence, the nature of dialogue requires you to see that your perspective is subjective. It may be legitimate, even justifiable. But it is not fact.

Your perspective is a point of view—based on your position in relation to the elephant.

Now that you've recognized your own biases, ask yourself if you're willing to shift your perspective. Even a little. If you're not, is your resistance an intellectual aversion to change or an emotional one? Is it in your head? Your heart? Or your gut?

If you find yourself unable to consider the possibility of another point of view, you may not be ready for dialogue. (See page 6 about the differences between dialogue and debate.)

Walking in another's shoes



A deep conversation about Palestine and Israel can be life-altering. Beyond geo-political discussions, your talks can be personally transformative.

To fully engage with someone, you must be able to put yourself in her place. That's called *empathy*. It's not easy, but it's the crux of successful dialogue—understanding another person without agreeing, disagreeing or judging.

ACTION: See if you can read the two views of history from Paul Scham's *Shared Histories* (see Resources) without hearing a “Yes, but...” in your head.

JEWISH NARRATIVE

Zionism was an authentic response to the persecution of Jews over millennia around the world. Jews did not come as colonizers, but rather as pioneers and redeemers of the land, and did not intend to disrupt the lives of the current inhabitants of the Land of Israel. All land for Jewish settlement was legally bought and paid for, often at inflated prices.

PALESTINIAN NARRATIVE

Zionism was a European colonialist enterprise like many in the late 19th century and was a European ideology superimposed on the Middle East. Moreover, it is an ideology of expansion directed towards robbing Arabs of their ancestral land. Arabs were systematically expelled by Zionist settlers from the beginning.

Can you hear both perspectives? Can you empathize with both narratives?

To understand without arguing against, or agreeing with what you're hearing, explore the ideas in the following books.

Rabbi Bradley Hirschfield's book *You Don't Have to be Wrong for Me to Be Right* is a top-notch resource. Rabbi Hirschfield illustrates how to hold conflicting points of view without judging one as right and the other as wrong. His book covers various themes including: *Making Judgments without Becoming Judgmental* and *Learning That You Don't Have to Disconnect Because You Disagree*.

Another excellent resource is Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish's book *I Shall Not Hate*, about his life as a Palestinian doctor, the 2009 killing of his children in Gaza—a horror that was captured on Israeli TV—and the doctor's promise that his daughters would be “the last sacrifice on the road to peace between Palestinians and Israelis.” It's a remarkable testament to forgiveness and hope for a better world.

It's not easy to empathize. But it's possible. And it's necessary.

“As a physician, I do not lose hope as long as the patient is alive. But when the patient's condition is deteriorating, I need to be willing and creative enough to search for a new course of treatment. We all need to search for the causes of our failure in the human journey to peace and discover why we are not happy, satisfied, and secure. The cause is inside us, not outside us—in our own hearts and minds. Hate is a chronic disease, and we need to heal ourselves of it and work toward a world in which we eradicate poverty and suffering.”

- Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish

Building group trust

Your dialogue group may be made up of strangers. Or it may be a gathering of old friends. Participants could be well-acquainted with each other. Or not.

As well-meaning as everyone in the conversation might be, this type of activity not surprisingly can cause hurt feelings. It's helpful to acknowledge that sensitivities probably exist in the group even though you may not know where they are until you start talking.

ACTION: Don't look for reasons to be offended.

Sometimes dialogue is like dancing in the dark: you and your partner are trying to move together smoothly, but occasionally toes get stepped on. If these incidents are seen as accidents rather than deliberate affronts, injury can be transformed into a tool for understanding. Ask yourselves, "Why did we step on each other's toes, and how can we avoid those missteps in the future?"

ACTION: Don't compare apples to oranges.

When discussing specific events or details about Palestine and Israel, follow the directive of the late Swedish theologian, Krister Stendahl, and don't measure "your side's" best against the "other side's" worst. When you're talking, compare best example to best example and worst example to worst example.

ACTION: Avoid "Yes, but..." (See page 12)

When you say "Yes, but..." a statement that starts out sounding like agreement ends up negating your partner's statement. "Yes, but..." is a roundabout way of saying "No." Try "Yes, and..." instead. "Yes, and..." may seem like trifling with semantics, but the subtle shift can change the dynamics of your conversation.

ACTION: Be kind.

Add charity to your repertoire of listening skills. Give your dialogue partner the benefit of the doubt. People often make statements out of ignorance, not prejudice. Don't be too quick to jump to conclusions. Ask for clarification if a statement is unclear. Turn offenses into teachable moments.

ACTION: Set ground rules for dialogue. (See next page)

Use guidelines to build a shared sense of respect and safety in your group. You can create your own guidelines or use samples. Have members of your group take turns reading the rules out loud so everyone hears and agrees to abide by them or amends them.

Sample dialogue guidelines

Agreements for Engaging in Dialogue

From *Building Abrahamic Partnerships*, Hartford Seminary, Hartford, CT

1. We agree to listen in a way that promotes understanding, rather than listen with the goal of countering what we hear.
2. We agree to listen for strengths so as to affirm and learn, rather than listening for weaknesses so as to discount and devalue.
3. We agree to speak for ourselves from our own understanding and experiences, rather than speak based on our assumptions about others' positions and motives.
4. We agree to ask questions to increase understanding, rather than asking questions to trip up or to confuse.
5. We agree to allow others to complete their communications, rather than interrupting or changing the topic.
6. We agree to keep our remarks as brief as possible and invite the quieter, less vocal participants in the conversation to speak.
7. We agree to concentrate on others' words and feelings, rather than focusing on the next point we want to make.
8. We agree to accept others' experiences as real and valid for them, rather than critiquing their experiences as distorted or invalid.
9. We agree to allow the expression of real feelings (in ourselves and in others) for understanding and catharsis, rather than expressing our feelings to manipulate others and deny that their feelings are legitimate.
10. We agree to honor silence rather than using silence to gain advantage.

Starting to talk

You've done your individual and group preparation. Now it's time to talk. State the obvious. Acknowledge that your group's *raison d'être* isn't to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict. Keep that point in front of the group at all times.

Where and how do you begin? One way is to ask the group, "What would you like to achieve?" This simple prompt opens participants' minds and hearts to the possibilities of dialogue, clarifies expectations, provides a space to test guidelines and assesses the group's listening skills. As you explore the prompt, invite participants to hold group members accountable to the agreed upon guidelines.

Another way to start is to begin with a book. Use one of the books mentioned in this guide, or, if the group has built enough trust to delve into the multifaceted dynamics of Palestinian-Israeli relations, try *The Lemon Tree: An Arab, A Jew, and the Heart of the Middle East* by Sandy Tolan. Told largely from a Palestinian perspective, *The Lemon Tree* explores the relationship between a Palestinian Muslim, forced from his home in 1948, and the Bulgarian Jewish refugee who moved into that home with her family later that year.

Or begin with an examination of one topic, for example Jerusalem. What does Jerusalem mean to Israelis? To Palestinians? To you? The Union for Reform Judaism and the Islamic Society of North America co-authored an interfaith curriculum, *Children of Abraham: Jews and Muslims in Conversation*, that has a useful chapter on this city considered holy by both peoples.

Or you can invite a speaker to the group. Or attend a public event. Or watch a movie like *The Gatekeepers* (2013) or *Encounter Point* (2006.) And then discuss.

Finally while not expressly about Israel-Palestine, *Sharing the Well: A Resource Guide for Jewish-Muslim Engagement* issued by The Islamic Society of North America, The Jewish Theological Seminary and Hartford Seminary, is an interfaith resource that contains provocative questions for starting conversations and that may serve as a model for your group conversations.

A journey of a thousand miles
starts under one's feet.

- Lao-Tzu

Holding the center



The Palestinian-Israeli dispute is a complicated and tragic entanglement of histories, personalities, passions, beliefs, actions and reactions. It is a conflict about land and power. It is not directly a religious conflict, yet religion and its symbols play an important role, which is why the subject of Israel-Palestine is often a difficult topic for interfaith groups.

You don't need an academic degree in Middle East Studies to enter into dialogue. Conversations that start with, "I'm confused about..." and "I don't understand..." are as valid as those that try to make sense of historical events and diplomatic roadmaps.

To expand your knowledge of Palestine and Israel, listen and talk to people with whom you agree and also with whom you disagree. Learn about Palestine from Arabs, including Palestinians, and about Israel from Jews, including Israelis.

Hold the center.

If the first directive of dialogue is you're not here to resolve the conflict, then the second directive is you don't have to choose sides.

Participants in Israel-Palestine dialogue are often torn between conflicting narratives. Compelling, heartbreaking stories pull us in one direction and then another.

But you don't have to choose sides. In fact, choosing sides is counter-productive and one of the least effective things you can do.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is complex. Besides Israelis and Palestinians, Arab states in the region, Iran, non-state actors, outside powers and many other factors influence the situation. Avoid the temptation to oversimplify.

Can you accept a position that is both pro-Israel and pro-Palestine? Can you imagine ways of alleviating the suffering on all sides? How can we support Israelis and Palestinians working to create a framework for inclusive justice and genuine peace?

“To reconcile conflicting parties, we must have the ability to understand the suffering of both sides. If we take sides, it is impossible to do the work of reconciliation. And humans want to take sides.

That is why the situation gets worse and worse.

Are there people who are still available to both sides? They need not do much. They need do only one thing: go to one side and tell all about the suffering endured by the other side, and go to the other side and tell all about the suffering endured by this side. That is our chance for peace. That can change the situation. But how many of us are able to do that?”

- Thích Nhất Hạnh

Resources

Here are some written materials and NGOs to guide your learning and dialogue.

Shared Histories

The Israeli historical narrative speaks of Zionism as a Jewish national liberation movement, of building a refuge from persecution and of national regeneration. The Palestinian narrative speaks of invasion, conquest, expulsion and oppression.

Edited by: Paul Scham, Walid Salem, Benjamin Pogrund

The Palestine-Israel Conflict

A British rabbi and a Palestinian lecturer co-authored this introduction to the conflict. The result is insight into the events and emotions behind all sides.

No issue is avoided, however conflict-ridden.

Authors: Dan Cohn-Sherbok, Dawoud el-Alami

Healing the Holy Land: Interreligious Peacebuilding in Israel/Palestine

The United States Institute of Peace published this research report to give greater visibility to the work of dedicated religious peacemakers and to inspire religious peacemakers in other regions of conflict.

Author: Yehezkel Landau

- **The Arava Institute for Environmental Studies**, a leading environmental and academic institution in the Middle East, prepares future leaders from Israel, Palestine, Jordan and around the world to collaboratively solve the regional and global challenges of our time. <http://arava.org/>
- **Hand in Hand** creates an inclusive, shared society in Israel via a network of Jewish-Arab integrated bilingual schools and organized communities—Jews and Arabs, learning and living together and inspiring broad support for social inclusion and civic equality in Israel. www.handinhandk12.org
- **Jerusalem Peacemakers** is a group of interreligious peacemakers in Israel working together to bring peace to the City of Jerusalem and the world—seeking to unite the heavenly and earthly Jerusalem. https://www.facebook.com/jerusalempeacemakers/info/?tab=page_info
- **Kids4Peace** is a movement of Jewish, Christian and Muslim youth dedicated to ending conflict and inspiring hope in divided societies around the world. Kids4Peace runs international summer camps and year-round programs for Palestinian, Israeli and North American youth. <http://www.k4p.org/>

- **OneVoice** is an international grassroots movement that amplifies the voice of mainstream Israelis and Palestinians, empowering them to prod their elected representatives toward a two-state solution. <https://www.onevoicemovement.org/>
- **Open House** is a peace education center in Ramle, Israel, forging relationships between Jewish and Arab children, teens and adults. Its peacemaking approach is grounded in the Three A's: Acknowledging harm done to others, Apologizing for that harm and making Amends. <http://www.friendsofopenhouse.co.il/> (see *The Lemon Tree*, page 16)
- **The Parents Circle - Families Forum** is a joint Palestinian-Israeli organization of over 600 families, all of which have lost a close family member as a result of the conflict. PCFF believes that reconciliation between individuals and nations is possible and that reconciliation is a prerequisite to achieving a sustainable peace. <http://www.theparentscircle.com/Home.aspx>
- **Roots**, led by an Orthodox rabbi living in the West Bank and a Palestinian activist, is based on the idea that the lack of knowing each other is the root cause of the conflict. Despite living next to each other, Israelis and Palestinians are separated by fear—fear of each other and of the price of peace. Without forging relationships that build trust, suspicions will suffocate any political peace agreements. www.friendsofroots.net
- **Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom** is an organization of Jewish and Muslim women fighting hate, negative stereotyping and prejudice. Through local chapters across the United States, women come together to get to know each other and build bridges of understanding. <http://sosspeace.org/>
- **Seeds of Peace** inspires and cultivates new generations of global leaders in communities divided by conflict by equipping youth with skills and relationships needed to accelerate the social, economic and political change essential for peace. <http://www.seedsofpeace.org/about>
- **The Third Narrative** engages with people on the left who suspect that it is wrong to lay all blame for the Arab-Israeli conflict at the feet of Israeli Jews but feel that too many Israel supporters reflexively support—or passively accept—the Israeli occupation. www.thirdnarrative.org



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