Parallel Narratives
Slifka Scholars
Brandeis University
April 2006

Photographs
Naomi Safran-Hon
This small publication came to be as part of a class in which I participated in the spring semester, 2006. In this class, Coexistence 250: The Arts of Building Peace, taught by Prof. Cynthia Cohen, we focused mainly on how art, culture work, coexistence and peace building come together. For the final project I decided to capture with my camera the stories of the Slifka scholars. These are six students, of which I am one, who have come to Brandeis University after being involved in coexistence work, between Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians in Israel. In each year there is one Jewish Israeli student and one Palestinian (Arab) Israeli student. This photo essay tries to bring our stories together, different narratives from the same conflict.

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Naomi Safran-Hon, ‘08
April 2006
Manar Fawakhry  
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As a Palestinian Israeli Muslim woman who grew up in Israel, my life has been driven by my experience of the great chasm between Jewish Israelis and Arab/Palestinian Israelis. The two societies seem to live together, but the harsh reality is that such diversity means much division: Each side dwells in its own world, realizing the existence of “the other” while remaining a stranger. Due to the different lifestyles and mentalities, as well as the physical separation of the two communities and cultures, the social interaction between them is limited to the functional and the economic.

As a child of this conflict, I choose to be active, not passive; I choose to make a positive difference and to try to influence others.

I am a fusion of both division and connection. I was born in an Arab village, went to Arab schools; I never made a Jewish friend during those years. My grandmother's narrative of the disaster that befell her in 1948 because of the Jews made me hostile and fearful of them. The segregated school system prevented me from encountering Jewish youth "just like me", and, of course, that reinforced my bias and prejudice even more. During high school in 1997 I became involved with the Center for Humanistic Education (CHE) at the Ghetto Fighters’ Holocaust Museum in Israel. I later worked there for year and continued working during my college summers. I began to see "the other" differently because the center gave me tools for listening and reaching out. I listened attentively to the memories and histories of the Holocaust and Jewish students listened attentively to memories of the Nakbah (Palestinian Catastrophe). Having my narrative heard helped to find a common space for dialogue about difference and similarity. I believe sharing narratives increases all of us our awareness and understanding of those so different from ourselves. These years of using the language of "You" and "I" instead of "we" and "they" challenged me to avoid generalizations about an entire group based on one story. There are many faces on each side and different narratives for each face. We must respect the narratives, acknowledge the facts, and still seek dialogue to defeat the ignorance that blinds us from seeing "the other's" humanity beyond the layers of stereotypes.

Cross-cultural conversations like these make me believe firmly that there is always hope for different groups to find ways to narrow the gaps in understanding between Arabs and Jews, increasing their tolerance and respect for one another. In dialogue, we create mutual frameworks to share empathy and sympathy for one another.
My name is Moran Eisenbaum, I am 22 years old and am an Israeli citizen. I left Israel four years ago to matriculate at Brandeis University. My parents don’t speak English and I have no family in the United States. I moved far from everything familiar because I had to. I was 19, and had no job and few opportunities.

After becoming a Conscientious Objector by rejecting mandatory enlistment in the army, my parents asked me to find another home. They could not support my choice because it went against what they had educated me to do and deeply believed in. I moved into an urban commune that accepted me as a volunteer teacher. I could only stay there for a year before I would find myself broke and alone again. I couldn’t get a job because Conscientious Objectors are not permitted to work officially for the government and unofficially for many others.

I went to Jerusalem to the Seeds of Peace center for a meeting and a show. This time I was one of the ten puppeteers for the greatest school-aged show, “Silver and Gold”, performed in Hebrew and Arabic to promote coexistence. In the Seeds center I always-felt hope, sometimes only there. Bashar, an Arabic speaking cast member, was helping me to build the stage for our upcoming performance when he dropped a piece of it on my foot. It was time for a cigarette break. I marveled at how long this war had persisted. Sidi the college adviser working for Seeds of Peace, followed me up. “What are you doing come September”? She asked. I shrugged. “What about college? You speak English well,” before I knew it, the middle-aged Brandeis alumnus was recruiting me.

America is easier, people are calmer and nothing blows up, almost ever. But I can’t stay, I gave my word. In 2001 my friend was shot by the Israeli army for being an Arab. I promised Aaseal to help make peace in Israel or at least spend every day of my life working toward it. I promised to never suspend my hope for peace. I cried silent tears in his seventeen-year-old bedroom and vowed to work twice as hard because we were now one person fewer.

I knew I was young, I still am, yet these promises stay with me because they have now become my mission. Brandeis tempts me daily to choose the simpler path, to live in a place where I don’t need to think about the war. At times I talk to Aaseal and ask him to help me remember why I am at Brandeis. I know I am here to learn and come home with better tools to change the situation, and that I mustn’t forget not to stay long here-- his memory fuels me.
Iman Hedar
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My name is Iman. I am an Israeli Palestinian. I was raised in a very warm family; I have three sisters and one brother. I am in the middle. My daddy died when I was three so I was raised by my mommy. She is a wonderful lady and I miss her. My two sisters, the twins: one goes to Tel Aviv University for medical school and the other one also goes to medical school in Ber-Sheva, Ben Gurion University. My biggest sister is a chemical engineer. She studied in the Technion. And my brother is a teacher.

It is a long story how I came to Brandeis. Me and my sisters, the twins, we wanted to attend school and my concern was, since my mommy is a single mother, how I am going to afford such a thing. I already registered at Tel Aviv University in medical school and I was accepted. But then once I was searching in the newspaper for a possible scholarship and then I found this ad about Keren Avraham. I did not know what it is about but since it was a scholarship I called and asked and they said they would send me the application. I filled out the application and there were lots of questions in this application and I needed to write all of it in English and also submit essay questions about different things and about peace. As I person I was not much of an activist. I mean, you know, I lived all of my life with Israelis Jews because my village, Majd El Kurum, is surrounded by Jewish settlements or cities. I never had any problem with Jewish people around me. I know that I am different; I know that there is this political situation here that I should avoid for the sake of living a decent life. And this is what I did, and mostly if you deal with people on a human level, talk about, like, you know, very simple things, like food, songs, fashion and love you can reach them quickly. I avoided political arguments with people because first of all, I did not know what was my political stand at that time and I was not sure if I should discuss such a thing with Israeli Jews. I worked in a garage in Carmeal. It was a very lovely experience and it was the first time I had to deal with Jews from Israel, with the other person. It was quite an experience, and the most amazing thing out of it was love, I loved them so much without questioning their political views.

The Arab Israeli conflict: I am connected to such a thing although some time I try to deny it but I can’t. It some time makes you very sad and I get very angry about the Israeli government. I am angry because of its discrimination against me and against us and against the people who are fighting to integrate into the society, the Israel Jewish society. When I introduce myself I always say that I am from the “Survival Galilee”. And I say it with a very strong feeling because this is my place.

From a conversation with Iman Hedar 4.7.06
Walaa Sbait  
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My name is Walaa Sbait. I am a Palestinian citizen of Israel. I am a son of the native population, the minority of 20%. I was born and raised in Haifa but originally I am a son of refugees. My grandfathers were banished from their own village in 1948, called the village of Iqrit, it is in northern Israel today. I carry the story of refugee life on my back, since I identify myself as a refugee, an internal refugee, inside Israel. I cannot go back home, where my grandfathers are originally from.

**Handala.** Handala is the name of a character that Naji Al-Ali drew. He is a Palestinian, he was banished from his village too. His village was called The Tree, Al-Shajara in Arabic. He is a cartoonist and he fled with his family, they were forced to leave. They fled to southern Lebanon to a refugee camp of Ein-Elhelwi. He was a very talented artist, very political, very critical against the Arab leadership and against dictatorships. He was very critical against Israel, against the US and colonialism. That is why he was shot in London in 1986. He was killed; he was assassinated by some people who did not like his work. That is why I identify with this guy since he died for his own principles and his own beliefs and this is a guy that should be respected.

Handala is a small character, a drawing… you need to see it… It is a drawing, a symbol of the Palestinian refugee kid. It symbolizes Naji Al-Ali when he was ten years old, when he left the village, banished from his village too. It symbolizes any Palestinian refugee kid, any kid who is oppressed in this world. Handala has a spiky head; it symbolizes the porcupine when it is attacked. The porcupine digs in the floor and shows his spikes, the same as a Palestinian kid. When he is attacked, he is close to the land, exactly like the porcupine is. He fights back whenever he is attacked. That is a symbol of the Palestinian kids who would fight for their lives. He is barefoot. It is a symbol of that when people were attacked, Palestinians were attacked in their villages - they were peasants, they were poor people and farmers. When you are being attacked you do not think -- when you are barefoot or have no clothes you do not think about, “oh I need to put on my shoes and then run” you just run, run away because you are scared, you are running for your life. This is what represents our situation as Palestinians in 1948; we ran away for our lives because this is what was happening. People were after us and we were trying to…harsh word…survive.

I am here to present a different Palestinian that people do not know about… I do not want to struggle with violence, I want to struggle with art. This is what I do, I do theater, I also study sociology so I can empower my community and I am studying peace and conflict resolution too.

From a conversation with Walaa Sbait 3.28.06
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I remember the first demonstration I went to – it was against the war in Iraq. It was in 1991; I was six. I stood in the street and shouted, “Demonstration, it does not matter why, as long as it is against war” (in Hebrew it rhymes…). Since then I went to many more demonstrations and took part in many more actions against violence and wars. Living in Israel those actions were always connected to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

At the age of 17 I decided not to join the Israeli army. This was not an easy choice. To take an active stand and to become a conscientious objector was not an easy decision, but I knew that I did not want to be part of this conflict; this was not a war I was willing to fight.

I dream about making a change, changing the reality that we live in, creating a new place where people can live in peace and coexistence. But to create a change for peace is not an easy goal. My mothers have been going to demonstrations against the occupation of Palestine for almost 20 years, nearly as long as my entire life. And the end of the occupation is nowhere near. But they still go and demonstrate. This is their way of creating change, feeling that they do make a difference in the struggle for peace. I struggle together with them but I would also like to use a different tool, the tool of the creative arts, the visual arts.

This project is my demonstration – this is my way of showing that we, Palestinians and Israeli Jews, are all human beings who have families, friends, dreams, and smiles. We come from the same place and we share the same dream for a peaceful future.