Seeing the Soul of the “Other”  
Bringing Israeli and Palestinian Women Together  
For a Peaceful Future  
By Natalie Rogers  
In collaboration with Irit Halperin, and Miriam Labes  
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Photos by Miriam Labes  

“When we build a wall for someone else, we also build our own wall.”

Nine Jewish women and seven Palestinian women move gently to the music of composer/singer, Enya, in a large meeting room at Neve Shalom (Peace Village), Israel. This is our first morning together at a two-day workshop titled, “Bringing Israeli and Palestinian Women Together for a Peaceful Future: Using Listening Skills and the Expressive Arts to Bridge the Divide.” As facilitators we have introduced ourselves and reviewed the goals and guidelines for the two days. Now we invite the women: “Move through the room, focusing on where you hold your tension. Where in your body do you feel tight? As you gently move to this music, see if you can release that tension. Find a way to let the stress express itself through movement.” Arms stretch high, feet stamp, and bodies bend to touch the floor. One young woman moves with determination and speed, weaving in and out among the others.

The stated goal for the morning’s first expressive arts activities is to become comfortable in this new setting, release physical tension and build trust through non-verbal exercises. Strangers in any group feel shy, anxious, fearful, curious, and excited. In this particular group there are historical and present day political barriers between the two groups – Israeli Jews and Israeli Palestinians. These women have chosen to come presumably to learn how to reduce those barriers by sharing their personal stories in a safe atmosphere of deep listening. However, gaining enough trust in the group to be able to tell those stories takes
some time and attention to one’s own feelings and a sense that the facilitators
will not judge, criticize or take sides.

We three women facilitators join the group, moving through the room as our
instructions are being translated from English to Hebrew. We want to see and be
seen by the participants.

Now participants are asked to make eye contact while moving past someone. No
words. The lyrical music still plays. Palestinian and Jewish women look into each
other’s eyes -- gazing into the soul of the “other.”

One woman sits hunched over in her chair, her head in her hands. Later she talks
about her pain in joining this group. Another sits rigid, glaring. She will also talk
about her unwillingness to participate. The guideline has already been stated:
“The facilitators will offer exercises; however, you have the option not to do
them. Take care of yourself. Do what is right for you. This will be honored.”

Next we suggest: “Touch a person gently as you move, without words.”
Gracefully flowing to the music, a hesitant hand reaches to touch another. A tall
woman touches the shoulder of a short one. A hand softly touches a back.
Another hand taps an elbow. Irit, our Israeli facilitator, has tears in her eyes. The
willingness to touch and be touched is profound and deeply moving. The
ambience in the room has shifted from tension and reluctance to tentative
curiosity, caring, and a willingness to give this opportunity a try.

This movement and silent exploration has been going on for half an hour or
more. As it comes to a close we ask the women to share their experiences. How
did it feel? Was it difficult? Easy? What did you appreciate? What made you
uncomfortable? These beginning responses to each other open the window to
further dialogue. The practice of being open and honest about what one is
experiencing at the moment is established.
We suggest that people partner with someone from the “other” culture to mirror each other’s movement while having eye contact. This becomes playful for some, tense for others. One disabled Palestinian woman sits in her chair and allows her arms to dance in the air. A Jewish woman joins her, creating a speechless dialogue.

This very simple, non-verbal beginning is a profound opening of the heart for most of us. Listening to and accepting the various reactions lets the group members know that any feelings are okay. We are building trust – the key element in facilitating groups. One person admits, “I didn’t like being the leader as we were mirroring each other. I realize I prefer to follow.” Her partner in that exercise says, “But I got tired of being the leader, I hoped you would initiate some of the movement.” As a group we are now starting to listen to disagreements, but in a simple, non-threatening way. The message is, “It is okay to have differences of style and opinion.”

The concept for this workshop was birthed at a conference of the International Expressive Arts Therapy Association (IEATA) where Natalie Rogers had given the keynote address, “Expressive Arts for Peace.” Irit Halperin was inspired and asked Natalie to come to Israel to offer her expressive arts work in a situation full of conflict. Irit is an Israeli mother and peace activist documenting the abuses occurring at military checkpoints located at the border of Palestine and Israel by interviewing the women who are monitoring this situation. This meeting between Irit and Natalie blossomed into a collaborative project to create a private workshop in Israel that would use the expressive arts to open the doors of communication between the two conflicted groups. Irit was willing to help get grant money and find the potential participants in her homeland. Natalie agreed to help write the flyer and raise funds for participants who needed scholarships. To create a three-generational facilitation team, we invited Miriam Labes to join us. She is an energetic therapist who, in collaboration with colleagues, has recently opened an expressive arts studio. The workshop announcement was our first collaborative effort:
In a time when the Israeli society faces crucial decisions about its future, the Israeli and Palestinian factions stir feelings of fear, frustration and alienation. Women activists will play a crucial role in upcoming resolutions of these conflicts.

We propose a person-centered expressive arts workshop for Israeli and Palestinian women activists. The philosophy of the person-centered approach honors the fact that every person has the ability to make her own decisions if given an environment of empathy, congruence and caring. A safe environment will be created in which dialogue, personal narrative and conflict resolution can occur. Palestinian women from both Palestine* and Israel are invited to attend.

As our friendship grew through phone and email, the three of us agreed that the role of women in promoting peace and reconciliation is important. Feminist perspectives on peace and conflict resolution challenge the traditional peace process where the domination of one party over another is the goal. Feminists emphasize hearing the needs of both parties with a goal of collaboration and negotiation where both sides come out as winners.

Israeli and Palestinian women have been reaching out to dialogue with each other for some time. (Sharoni, 1995) Women leaders and policy makers who offer caring and practical solutions are an essential element in the future of the Middle East. We hoped this workshop could provide opportunities for Israeli and Palestinian women to deepen their understanding of each other’s personal and political situation and give them a block of time to strategize constructive action.

Our goal was to create a small group of leaders that could learn to offer similar workshops to others, helping them start to create peaceful solutions to conflict. As person-centered expressive art therapists and group facilitators, we know that using movement, visual art, music, journal writing
and psychodrama are non-verbal methods that foster self-insight and transformation. We have found that getting acquainted through dance, drawing, and sharing deep feelings through the arts helps to breakdown the psychological walls of defensiveness. Using the arts offers the opportunity to talk about long held hostilities and creatively envision new solutions.

The safe environment that is so essential for this kind of work is based on the person-centered work of Natalie’s father, humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers. His work emphasizes the facilitator’s role as being empathic, congruent, open and honest, listening in depth to the world of the participant. The person-centered philosophy incorporates the belief that each individual has worth, dignity, and the capacity for self-direction. (C. Rogers, 1951).

The first difficult situation occurs after the morning session described above. Although most of the women are beginning to feel safe and are finding ways to enjoy each other, the two women sitting on opposite sides of the room need attention. One had seemed emotionally fragile when she first arrived. As an observer during the get-acquainted exercise, tears had been flowing silently down her cheeks. Her distress had been obvious to all of us, yet to focus on her midst the movement and sharing seemed inappropriate. In her own way, she was taking care of herself. Now when the group sits in a circle to talk, she is asked if she could share some of what she is feeling. She keeps her eyes closed as she speaks of her grief and loneliness in life. She doesn’t think she is up to engaging in this kind of group process at this time. “I am not quite sure why I came.” The facilitators listen respectfully and honor her notion that there are times when joining a group might open one to more suffering and thus could be counter-productive. At lunch break she tells us she is leaving. It seems like a wise decision.

The other woman who sat on the sidelines talks about her constant struggle as a peace activist: “Nothing ever seems to really happen!” Her frustration, anger and exhaustion are evident in her tone of voice. The facilitators
acknowledge her frustration and tears and suggest she might have a
different kind of experience this time if she stays. “Everyone has a choice to
commit to the two days or to leave. Your choice will be honored.” Although
the objectives of the workshop were clearly written in the flyer, she says she
did not understand them. Her turmoil is apparent as she tries to make a
decision. During lunch break she tells us she is leaving. The two women,
although strangers to each other, leave together.

Now we are fourteen participants and three facilitators. Our first dramatic
issue is in front of us. Women who have been chatting at lunch come back to
discover two of the participants have left. Do we feel abandoned? Relieved?
Guilty? Angry? The whole group had listened to the conversation about
whether to stay or leave. When we announce they have left together, one
woman says, “I am glad they had each other for support.” We open this
topic for discussion, but few comments are made. Natalie summarizes for us
all: “Often when people leave a group, participants feel guilty that they may
have done something to create their departure, or feel abandoned by them. If
there are more comments, we can hear them, or just move on.” We decide to
move on. A sense of relief seems to be in the air.

In our review session at the end of the day the three of us discuss the
departure of the two participants. Irit comments, “It was symbolic of the
political reality where some people in each group – Israelis and Palestinians
– are either too hopeless or too angry to try any dialogue whatsoever.” We
were also aware that if these two people stayed, most of the group attention
would have been focused on them as they explored their feelings. Perhaps
now there would be a better chance for meaningful communication between
everyone. It also seemed probable that underneath the anger and
hopelessness of these two women was deep personal pain. Each woman, for
her own reasons, may have been aware that this environment actually was
one in which they could share it. Facing that possibility may have been
overwhelming. People make appropriate decisions.
To let go of any leftover emotions stirred by this event and to revive our energy, Miriam engages us in spirited movement to lively music. We move through the space, feel the floor to ground ourselves, breathe deeply and shake loose.

The focus for the afternoon is an expressive art exercise to help people discover and share their thoughts and feelings about peace and the blocks to peace — particularly in relationship to their ethnicity. As women discuss this subject, the tension in the room escalates. Emotions and reactions increase, making it difficult to listen to each other’s personal perspective. Taking the time to understand each other begins to disappear.

We suggest an art exercise that may help deepen mutual understanding. The exercise consists of creating three different drawings.

1. Peace. What is your experience of inner peace and/or outer peace?
2. Blocks to peace. What is your personal experience of a block to peace?
3. Overcoming blocks to peace. What is your personal vision of overcoming the blocks to peace?

We invite people: “Please get three large pieces of paper and a box of colors -- chalk pastels or oil pastels -- and find a comfortable place to work. Wait until everyone is settled, then we will explain further.” Older women find a table to work at; the younger ones sit on the floor. We are fortunate to have a room with large windows overlooking the rolling green hills facing the Latrun Valley.

The women settle with their three pieces of art paper taped one on top of the other on a backing board. “Please take a few quiet moments to close your eyes and feel the texture of the paper.” As conversations cease and hands explore, a meditative quality fills the air. “While feeling the paper, focus on your thoughts and feelings of peace. It can be inner peace and outer peace. Let your body experience peace. We will put on some music. (“Inner Peace”
by Steven Halprin) As you listen to the music with your eyes closed, let your hands dance in the air to the rhythm of the melody. Whenever you are ready, open your eyes and let your non-dominant hand choose colors, or use both hands to choose colors. Let anything happen on the paper. Don’t worry about the product. It is the process that is most important. You have about five minutes for this. Remember, there is no right or wrong to what you are doing.”

A calm settles in as the women lay their palms on the paper to experience its cool texture. Deep concentration is apparent as colored chalks move across the paper. When finished, the participants are asked to stand and view their own art and create some movement to it, letting the lines, the rhythm and colors inspire them. “If words come to you while moving, write the words on the paper.” Music and movement help participants be aware of their feelings kinesthetically as well as intellectually.

Thus, a thought, a feeling and an image are released on the paper. Then the colors and image are experienced within the body, creating more feelings and thoughts that are written. This integration of art, movement, journal writing, and sound have been termed the Creative Connection® process, by Natalie Rogers. It describes how one art process stimulates and deepens the next one allowing the participant to open to inner realms of insight and creativity.

The women engage in the same process to create the two additional drawings – “Blocks to Peace,” and “Overcoming those Blocks.” A sacred space envelops the room as people journey inward through their art and writing. There are further instructions: “Having finished your three pictures, the next step in the process is to take a body pose that illustrates your sense of peace. Then take a pose that embodies your sense of the blocks to peace. Take a few minutes moving back and forth between these two poses to understand what takes place in this transition. Let your body educate you.”
We witness as women find meaningful poses for peace. Some have arms outstretched, others sit in meditation. Then each person shifts to her concept of a block to peace. Angry gestures prevail. One person hides her head in her hands. We watch them move slowly from one pose to the other, wondering what they are experiencing as they make this shift.

Next, they share their art and process with someone from the other ethnic group. There is a half hour of highly animated interchange. Then the discussion is opened to the whole group. A Jewish woman talks about her process:

It is important for me not to be scared but to have this be in the form of a story... to stay in touch with my body. For the first drawing to music I chose colors randomly. I was trying not to be stereotypical of what each color represents but I was surprised. For me, light blue represents pleasant, open feelings and being able to look into the future. When I stood up to move to my art, the word “leaning” came to me. To me, “leaning” means to trust, or being at home; being able to close my eyes without fear. Being cradled.
The second picture, my experience of blocks to peace, has an orange X in it. This is my image of a block to peace. The process of drawing this came from a lower place in my body -- a place of my drives. The strong crossing, (the X) represents the crossing of opinions without listening to the other side… It becomes noise and I get a headache.
The third drawing is my vision of overcoming the blocks. It is a very pale picture. Here there is the possibility of breathing... of taking one step back to renew myself. The red spots are history that cannot be erased. It is world history. I don’t think we have respect for those footprints of history. What seems to heal the torn parts of me is breathing. To empty oneself in order to refill. It is also true that some things cannot be healed. There are scars, scratches, and scabs that don’t heal.

Then an Arab woman shares her drawings.

My first picture is of spring: blue sky and green grass. (Her voice pleads): Why can’t we all be like the plants in spring?

My second picture is on black paper. This is in Jerusalem next to the Wall. (She is referring to the wall that Israel is building in the West Bank. It is a concrete barrier, twenty feet high, dividing towns, cities and lands.) You see the difference between the Jewish and Palestinian sections. In the Jewish part there are trees, buildings, and everything is green. In the Palestinian part there is nothing. When I go walking I feel dark. There is no green. Only the Jewish section has green. This really hurts!
The third picture is about my family. It is what I prefer to think about. With the government nothing happens, but in my family I can do something to make it good. Only in my home can I have influence!

Natalie reflects on the process that is happening: “We are hearing the deep pain, here. One side has almost nothing and yet can see over to the other side of the fence where there is green and abundance. Am I hearing correctly that this has to do with a policy that fosters discrimination?”

This exercise has brought forth political issues that are now being shared in a personal rather than an abstract way. Individuals are sharing the personal consequences fostered by their political situation.

To try to summarize the long and complex history leading up to the Jewish state is difficult. Yet, it is necessary to put our workshop into context. Because our
workshop group has Palestinian women living within Israel (not from Palestine) the history below focuses on events that underlie the difficulties of Jews and Palestinians within Israel.

In 1917, there was a Balfour Declaration which “views with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for Jewish people.” In 1920 Palestine became a League of Nations mandate administered by Great Britain. After World War I, waves of Jews moved to Palestine. Palestinians resented this influx and rioted, killing 133 Jews.

After centuries of segregation and persecution in many parts of the world, followed by the Nazi holocaust, Jews came from Germany, and many other countries to create their own nation-state in what had once been their holy land. In 1947 the British withdrew from their mandate position in Palestine. The United Nations approved a Partition Plan dividing the territory into two states: the Jews would receive 55% of the land, the Arabs 45%. Jerusalem was planned to be an international region administered by the United Nations. David Ben-Gurion, the Prime Minister of Israel, accepted this plan, the Arab League rejected it. An Arab-Israeli war followed with Israel the victor, creating boundaries for their Jewish state. Muslims in 400 Arab villages were told to evacuate their homes from the land that was now called Israel.

(Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel#Establishment_of_the_State)

Today, there are one million Palestinian citizens of Israel, making up one-fifth of the country's population. Only 10 percent of the indigenous Palestinians living in Israel were able to remain on their land.

The Palestinian Israeli citizens suffer from political, social, and economic deprivation. They struggle with their identities since they are not really included in Israeli society. They do not want to give up their partial privileges as Israeli citizens and move to Palestine, which is economically and technologically inferior. Yet, living inside the green line of Israel they are discriminated against physically and socially. In his book, The Optimist, Emil Habibi describes the
political status of Israeli Palestinians as like a person sitting on a sharp stick not being able to move because each movement causes pain. (E.Habibi, 1995).
The prolonged Israeli /Palestinian conflict has created feelings of fear, anger, suspicion and frustration between Jewish Israelis and Palestinian Israelis.
Officially, Israeli Palestinians are equal citizens; however, in reality they suffer deprivation and oppression. The Israeli Jews, exhausted by the prolonged conflict, are not well informed about the desperate living conditions of their fellow citizens, the Israeli Palestinians. Moreover, many right wing Israelis do not see this discrimination as a problem. This was the political scene we stepped into when we initiated this women's workshop.

Some of the Jewish women who responded to our workshop have been involved in Maschom Watch, a group of approximately 400 Israelis who are responding to repeated reports about human rights abuses of Palestinians as they cross at the army border checkpoints. These Maschom women go to the hundreds of army checkpoints where Palestinians enter Israel to go to work, to school, or to shop. They are forced to be “checked” as to their identity and right to enter. The stated purpose of these armed checkpoints is to keep suicide bombers out of Israel. It may be serving that function to some extent. However, the process of going through these checkpoints twice daily for many Palestinians is degrading, humiliating, and a tremendous waste of their time. The Maschom Watch women have three purposes:

1. To monitor the behavior of soldiers and police at checkpoints.
2. To ensure that the human and civil rights of Palestinians attempting to enter Israel are protected.
3. To record and report the results of our observations to the widest possible audience, from the decision-making level to that of the general public.

“Our quiet but assertive presence at checkpoints is a direct challenge to the dominant militaristic discourse that prevails in Israeli society. It demands accountability on the part of the security forces towards the civilian estate, something hitherto almost unheard of.” [http://www.machsomwatch.org/eng/aboutUsEng](http://www.machsomwatch.org/eng/aboutUsEng)
It is these Maschom Watch women that Irit Halperin, our Israeli organizer and facilitator, is interviewing for her dissertation.

A Muslim woman holds up her drawing: “I feel so frustrated with this situation. I don’t think there is anything I can do about this inequality and it is not fair.”

Irit responds: “I feel powerless, as well. I believe this is my responsibility (as a Jew) as well as yours.”

A Jewish woman: “I love having peace. I love life and my family. And I am happy to be in this group. Yet Israel made a big mistake in not involving the Muslims in the growth of Israel so as to include equal rights and opportunities. Now we have a ticking bomb. Rather than seeing the Israeli Arabs as building a bridge to all Arabs they have pushed them aside. For example, the civil servants in Israel are only two percent Arabs, although the law says there should be equal numbers.”

Another Jewish woman confronts her: “Why don’t you SHOUT?”

Palestinian woman: “As Palestinian women we are suffering from the complex of the ugly duckling. We don’t know how to shout. We need our Jewish sisters to help us learn. The October riots were a wake-up call to Israel to let the state know that Arabs are changing. Maybe they think we are still riding on a camel! They (the Israelis) call it a riot, however we call it a demonstration. I believe the real enemy is censorship. On TV there is only a half hour a day in Arabic on all channels. We are not getting information.”

Muslim woman: “You say we should shout. But I say that since 1948 our kids have not had any opportunity in school to study the real history of our people. They don’t learn anything about the occupation. People who live under occupation look drunk or lazy because we don’t want to face what it really
means to be occupied. We are in denial. We want to live in peace. After awhile we come to believe that we don’t deserve the rights that are due us.”

At this point the Arab women are feeling safe enough to continue talking about their anger and frustration. Some of the Jewish women that have experience in the Peace movement seem willing to listen.

Muslim woman: “Even Jewish children, if they don’t learn about the occupation at school they don’t learn it at all.”

Muslim woman: “There is a book on identity regarding Arab identity and belongingness written by three doctors. This book is not allowed in the schools. It was censored by the Israeli Minister of Education. Our kids don’t have any real sense of who they are. However, we could take the history of our people to our friends and teach our children ourselves! We can take it house to house. The time is now! We can ask the first generation of the Nakba to speak up and inform all of us.”

Her reference to Nakba refers to 1948 when Palestinian Arabs were first expelled from their homes, and 1967 when they were again expelled from their homes and their land was confiscated. It is called the Nakba meaning "disaster" or "cataclysm", by Arab Palestinians.

Up to this point the Jewish women have been listening to the Muslim women with some empathy. They already have some understanding of this situation. They don’t argue much with the above statements or defend the Jewish position historically. However, in the next encounter one Jewish woman challenges the Muslim women to claim their power politically.

Jewish woman: “I am wondering how many of you (Muslim women) used your right to vote for representatives in the Knesset in the recent election? (There is silence.) I was frustrated because we could have had 20 Arabs in the Knesset representing the Arab point of view but Palestinians didn’t use their rights!”
Jewish woman: “As a woman, I didn’t vote. I am tired of men being in control. I want a woman’s party!”

Another Jewish woman: This is not a question about rights.

The tension is escalating and people are not listening to each other. Natalie suggests: “Let’s take a minute to breathe deeply. Let’s be quiet for a minute or two.” There is some silence including some tears. She continues: “I am hearing the deep pain, the fear, the frustration and anger on both sides. Let’s see if we can continue to listen to each other.”

Muslim woman: “Next month is “Independence Day” for Israel. We have always been forced to celebrate. This year our kids don’t agree to celebrate. They understand more. They know it is not our independence. My son is thirty-three. When he was fourteen I explained this to him.”

The discussion continues, particularly among the Muslim women speaking in Arabic to each other. Irit suggests that the women address the whole group rather than talk among themselves.

Palestinian woman: “Speaking Arabic is spontaneous for me. Once again I am being asked to give up something! My Arabic language!”

Irit understands her point, saying: “Not having Arabic here is oppressive to you. Even our workshop flyer was printed in Hebrew and English but not Arabic.”

A Jewish woman has compassion for this omission: “We need space to translate what we are saying into Arabic as well as English.”

A Palestinian adds: “This is a painful issue for me. I am a social worker and I speak to my clients in Arabic, yet I have to write my report in Hebrew. Not
speaking Arabic ruins my Arabic language skills. Hebrew is invading my thoughts and my life!”

Irit: “It is true, we have two Jewish facilitators, one from Israel and one from the U.S. but no Palestinian facilitator.”

Another woman wants to share her art. She brings out her three pictures.

I picked colors: Yellow is for the Palestinian houses with some green starting to come up. The Jewish houses have black fences. These are fences in their souls. And I know we have fences too. We have a lot in common. The house represents the roots of our lives. The house represents all of life. Also, there is this black part. We all need to deal with it!

This second picture says there is something stronger than all of us. It is universal peace. Here is September 11 with the plane flying into the Towers. It was not a human being that did that! That event put black into the whole world. Those men were extremists. I’m afraid it put an end to the dream of peace. Hope crashed! Everyone relates it to Arabs having done this. But we, as a people, had nothing to do with it.

The third picture is our village. There is much in common between Jews and Muslims. Here I have a picture of a peaceful wagon, instead of people exploding themselves with suicide bombs. There is always so much retaliation. Instead of watering the earth with blood, let’s plant roses.

During the day there have been disruptions and distractions. Women leave the room to answer cell phone calls from their children. After lunch many of us sit waiting, wondering where the Muslim women are. Why are they so late? Anger is rising. When they arrive they explain, “We were taking care of ourselves as you stated in your initial guidelines. We need to pray five times a day at certain
times.” Those of us who are non-Muslim become aware of our ignorance regarding their religious practices. A discussion of their rituals follows and the schedule for the next day makes accommodation for their prayers. Within this sharing about prayers, and the necessity to shower before prayers, is an intimate, women’s only discussion of menstruation, men’s attitudes toward women (and vice versa) in the different cultures and different generations. Midst the fast paced dialogue are many thoughts on breastfeeding, birth control, god and prayer. There is laughter, friendly disagreement and mutual understanding of the plight and strength of women.

The afternoon is coming to a close. So far there has been exploration of many issues. Miriam summarizes them for us in our facilitator meeting:

Leaving and staying  
Taking care of oneself and taking care of others  
Occupied people and the occupiers  
Oppression and freedom  
Confrontation and connection  
Peace and war  
Grief and pain and humor and joy  
Invaded and supported  
Known and unknown  
Personal and political  
Wounds and healing  
Fear and love

We announce: “The evening session can be co-created by you!”

When we return, the full creative spirit of these women bursts forth. Songs and dances are shared from each culture. The healing of laughter, music, collaboration, and dance prevails. Circle dances are presented from each culture, colorful scarves wave, and the song, “You and I Can Change the World” plays. That evening, Miriam writes a poem:
The Gaze

something about the gaze,
her gaze,
deep, soulful,
her body trembling as we dance
and move through space,
her space, my space,
american, israeli, jewish, arab,
women, children, daughters, mothers, sisters,
spirits dancing towards peace
we touch hands, our tears show,
i am feeling all the love i have ever been given
and which lives inside me,
i touch her with this love
the presence and gaze of this young arab woman
so beautiful, open,
seeing her soul in her eyes,
in the moment, on the edge, powerful,
yet innocent,
unchained
i see her,
i see her and honor her story,
her womanhood,
her pain, her joy, her life
i honor the life she is leading in
occupied territory
no one can ever occupy her spirit or soul
she has an eagle soaring inside her chest
her eyes pierce through the suffering
towards the light
i see her, i see myself,
i see that which is unseen in her deep ancient eyes.
her gaze is the gaze of freedom,
of peace,
of a new future.

The next morning we hear the Muslim women rise very early to say their prayers. The sun is shining, the sky a cerulean blue. After breakfast, we gather for our last day together. Miriam starts us moving to the beat of Gabrielle Roth’s music, “Bones.” Most of us agree that if we would start every day of our lives with music and dance, we would approach the world with a brighter perspective.

The intention for the morning: have a non-verbal conversation using clay. We
ask the women to find a partner from the “other” group. They place one large piece of paper (18” X 24”) between them as they sit at opposites ends. Each woman has a large chunk of clay. The instruction is for one person to place a piece of clay (in any shape) on the paper. Then the other woman responds with a shape she has created. This continues for about 20 minutes. After 20 minutes, they are asked to write about their experience, and then talk to their partner. Hopefully, they will also read what they wrote.
Again, the women’s focus and concentration during this exercise is amazing. As facilitators, we quietly wander around observing the interactions happening. Some women laugh as they “play” together. Others are in a very serious mood. On one paper there are little piles of clay close together as a circle builds. On another paper the pieces of clay seem very distant from each other. One tower keeps growing. In another place, it looks like a bridge.

The discussion that follows is animated. There seems to be some conflict or disagreement in some situations. When we gather as a whole group to share the outcome of this project we hear different kinds of stories. Here is one that provided an opportunity for the women to see their very different perceptions of how to BE together.
Jewish woman: “I was reaching out, but there was always the wall that she was building. I was feeling trapped.

Palestinian woman: “The truth was that I went into this with a lot of stormy emotions. I wanted to create a strong base for myself. I know she is a good person, but I felt she was interrupting my base – invading. I felt it everywhere. I made a wall, she put a hole in it. There was a moment when I felt I needed a strong center. Even when I created that important center, she put a ring around it. I took it off. It was like a war. I felt I needed to protect myself.

Jewish woman: “I took my sage tea bag and planted it in the middle. She brought some of the black coffee from the coffee pot. That was the place I felt connected, as if we were putting bandages on wounds.”

Palestinian woman: I felt I needed to protect myself. I made an entrance, she created another entrance. I closed the door from that side and I enlarged my door. I feel sorry for her because I can feel the gap between us. I became connected when she took spaces out of the house we built.
Natalie: “It seems that one of you had a sense of reaching out to the other. Yet your partner felt it as constant invasion. It is important to ask yourself what you can learn from this. It can help you understand how your behavior is perceived by another. How can this help each of us communicate more perceptively?

Some women report this experience as delightful and informative. Others say they learn about their partner in some depth. Reading the writing that follows the exercise is helpful, because it brings forth some buried thoughts and feelings.

To end the day we ask the group to write answers to some questions as an evaluation. This allows them to write in their own language. We ask them to finish this sentence: “For me, this group was....” Some of their answers:

- Opening of a new road
- A gift and an opportunity
- A strong emotional experience, maybe a turning point in my life
- An important experience, for the time, temporary
- The ideal community I wish to live in

There were no negative responses. Then we ask: “In one or two sentences, what did you learn from the other culture in this group?”

- That the other side suffers too.
- You can meet and talk about everything.
That religious women can be faithful to their commandments but free in their behavior. I cannot ignore any more. I have to be more involved in the Arabic culture and language. I learned wisdom. That we are all the same. We all want a place, and respect and freedom. Life is hard for them too, so we have to face it. We need self-security to be strong. Not to give up.

We ask them to write: “I am leaving today feeling…”

It is possible that people will love me as I am. Good feeling and hope to keep in touch with the group. I have new friends and new hope. Feeling frustration and confusion. Feeling tired, interested, satisfaction, thankful, excitement, a mission and longing for deep encounters.

As we share some of our answers we find further connection. The women are grateful for this time spent together with a hope that there will be more such events. There is sincere appreciation for each other. “I am glad to get to know women from both sides, especially Arab women that I could laugh with and admire. We are wasting time by not making peace.”

To close, we join hands and sing songs. As facilitators we offer our appreciation of the deep and often intense sharing of personal life stories. As we open ourselves to both sides of an issue we allow for creative solutions. One woman said. “If we are willing to confront, we are willing to love. We had the courage to do that.”

Women take time to share phone numbers and arrange dates to meet on a personal level. Irit discusses her plans to have further workshops, which would include a Palestinian facilitator. We are reaffirmed that if given a safe person-centered environment, women have the capacity to open their hearts and understand the plight of the “other” in a way that reveals we are all One.
References and Suggested Reading

**Feminist views of Israeli/Palestinian situation**


**Expressive Art Therapy**


**The Client-Centered or Person-Centered Approach**

Natalie Rogers, Ph.D. REAT, is the author of The Creative Connection: Expressive Arts as Healing, and Emerging Woman: A Decade of Midlife Transitions. She is an internationally known psychologist and facilitator in expressive arts whose granddaughter is an Israeli citizen. Her work is based on the person-centered philosophy of her father, Carl Rogers. Natalie’s years of facilitating international workshops and her deep commitment to peace led to using the arts to facilitate conflict resolution. She is a Distinguished Faculty at Saybrook Graduate School, San Francisco. www.nrogers.com

Irit Halperin, M.A., is an Israeli citizen and a Ph.D. candidate at Lesley University, Cambridge, MA. As an expressive arts therapist, she has worked in clinical and educational settings in Israel since 1993. She is interested in the use of expressive therapies to create a culture of peace in Israel. She has been a peace activist in Israel since 1982 and has worked in various peace projects.

Miriam Labes, M.A., is a psychotherapist who has worked with children, teens, adults, families and groups in agency, school and community settings. She believes in the transformative power of creativity that guides us towards self-compassion and wholeness. She uses the expressive arts with individuals and in workshops to offer a sacred space for renewed health and peace. Miriam has family ties in Israel.