

Peace Scholars:

What is Their Role in a

Culture of Conflict



Michael Bavly '00 and former Peace Scholar Forsan Hussein '00 at their WBRS radio show in 1999

"No one ever became tolerant because they were told to do so. Tolerance comes from shared activities, shared failures, and shared successes. The appreciation of diversity springs from sharing."

—Peter Cookson Jr., President, Teachers College Innovations, Columbia University

The steady spirit in the Peace Scholars's passionate voices at Brandeis offers a reprieve from the staccato gunfire and explosions in their native Israel. They speak of coexistence, commonalities, and understanding pain rather than the intransigence and enmity that many others view as defining features of current Israeli-Arab relationships. The four Peace Fellows on four-year scholarships at Brandeis—two Palestinian Israelis, one Jewish Israeli, and one Jordanian—and two Brandeis graduates who were Peace Fellows—a Palestinian and Jewish Israeli—have different heritages and often divergent political perspectives. But all uphold the singular vision of finding a peaceful solution to the conflict in the Middle East.

These expressions of a handful of people hardly register through the din of war. Their message and strategies aren't heard by political leaders or detailed on editorial pages. Yet even as the violence in Israel has escalated, the Peace Scholars have remained resolute. "It's important now that people hear our voices," says Maisa Khshaibon '03, a Palestinian Israeli in her junior year as a Peace Fellow. Khshaibon's family has lived in the village Kfar Kana near Haifa since before Israel's statehood. "We need to show people that after living in a region where violence is accepted, we still believe there's a better solution. Others need to see that those of us from Israel believe in peace even though the situation isn't promising."

The opportunity for Peace Scholars to have an impact increases when conditions between Jews and Arabs are poor, says Alan B. Slifka, New York-based investment manager and philanthropist whose family funded the scholarships. The scholarships

are named for his parents, Joseph and Sylvia Slifka. "Newspaper headlines and tensions engender fear. There's much stereotyping and dehumanization during these times, so it's dramatic when those involved break down initial barriers to discover that the people they were demonizing are human beings."

Being a Slifka Peace Scholar dismantled stereotypes for Taher Baderkhan '03, a Brandeis junior from Amman, Jordan: "Before I came to Brandeis I'd never met a Jew or an Israeli. Coming here was a big adventure. I'd heard stories from people in the community that prompted me to create a different view than the reality. Now I've had a lot of opportunity to talk with Jews and hear their points of view, and that has changed my ideas about Israelis and Jews.

"In the same way, many people I meet have crazy ideas about Arabs from the media or from other people, but they've never met an Arab. I hear those views and offer my perspective. I encourage those people not to create their images from one source but to investigate, to look for other sides of the story."

The two-way street that Baderkhan describes is part of the infrastructure the Slifka Peace Scholarship Program aims to build. The scholarship program has two facets: it enlightens Israeli students about coexistence and informs American students about the nature and depth of Israeli society. Slifka explains, "Because Israel is the homeland to the Jewish people, it is essential that the state retain its character. At the same time it's imperative that Israel conducts its affairs so that its 20 percent Arab minority—which was a majority prior to Israel's creation in 1948—feels that its members are equal, respected citizens treated by the state with dignity and civility.

"In order to create a culture of coexistence, you have to create leadership of young people who know and respect each other," Slifka

continues. "Bringing an Arab and Jew from Israel to Brandeis every four years will, in time, produce a cadre of people with shared experience that will enable them to inform and empower others. It's also important that Jewish students at Brandeis meet Israeli Jews and Arabs. Meeting Israeli Jews fosters identification with Israel and interest in visiting the Jewish homeland. Getting to know Israeli Arabs helps American Jews recognize that part of their responsibility in supporting Israel is ensuring they don't foster an Arab underclass by ignoring Israel's Arab citizens."

Applicants for Slifka Peace Scholarships go through a selection process in Israel that considers their high school grades, recommendations, English exam, and interviews. Political views are not a consideration in the selection process. While most Peace Scholars don't enroll at Brandeis as emissaries of Israeli-Palestinian coexistence, their involvement in Arab-Jewish dialogue groups and coalition-building retreats fuels their advocacy of a peaceful solution in their homeland.

Maisa Khshaibon '03 says that when she began her fellowship at Brandeis, she knew she would be working with students. "But I never knew I'd become so involved. My coexistence work has become a major part of my life at Brandeis. It's what I work for and believe in. When you realize the resources Brandeis makes available to help you, you develop more courage."

"We have open doors to support our efforts," notes Peace Scholar Marina Pevzner '04, a Jewish Israeli who emigrated from Estonia to Israel at 10 years old. "The directors of the campus Coexistence Center, the Women's Studies Center, the Ethics Center—they encourage us and provide funding and guidance for programs we develop."

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One such program is the Arab-Israeli Dialogue Group, started by former Peace Scholar Forsan Hussein '00 and his close friend at Brandeis Michael Bavly '00, a Jewish Israeli. Hussein came to Brandeis from Sha'ab, a small Arab Israeli village in the Galilee, and now works as a communications associate at The Abraham Fund in New York, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting coexistence between Jewish and Arab Israeli citizens. Alan Slifka is cofounder of The Abraham Fund.

Hussein explains the Dialogue Group's inception: “Michael and I realized early in our friendship that I had to learn the Jewish narrative and his perception of me and of the conflict, and he needed to understand mine. As an Arab, I have different stories of heritage and different views than he does. These stereotypes and opposing views make the conflict so huge.

“Through dialogue we could begin walking on the right path because listening is the beginning of peace, to quote world peace scholar Elise Boulding. It's only when you listen to every word and try to relate to someone's narrative that you decide not to dehumanize the other, to look at him in the eye as an equal partner who wants to make peace with you.”

Hussein continues, “When we started, we wanted to know more about each other, to know each other's stories. And we had fun. Initially there were several men and we talked about girls and food, then we talked about the conflict. We weren't interested in reshaping the Middle East and resolving issues of borders and refugees but rather why, for

instance, most people haven't heard of the Al-Naqba Palestinian catastrophe in 1948.”

Dialogue Group cofounder Bavly, not a Peace Scholar but highly involved in conflict resolution, talks of the group's commitment. “What made it last was the realization that no matter how strong the disagreements, we would stick with the effort. Even when people called Zionism a disease, we would not leave the room but would listen to their reasoning and then explain why that attitude is hurtful. The dialogue isn't about convincing others about right or wrong but about understanding and listening. You have to step away from the ping-pong of mutual blame.

“The debates were amazing. We shouted, argued, and explained. And we always had food on the table, our native foods like hummus and labene (Middle Eastern yogurt). When you have food in your mouth you can't talk. You have to listen.”

Palestinians, Israeli Jews, Jordanians, Lebanese, Syrians, and American Jews compose the current Dialogue Group. “It's one of the most important things we do,” notes current Peace Scholar Khshaibon. “People from the Middle East and the United States come together and believe in change. We discuss explosive topics from the safety of our group. After a heated discussion, someone can say, ‘Although I don't agree with you, I understand your point.’”

“We don't agree on many things,” says Pevzner, “but we're able to trust each other so we try to understand and learn from each other. Sometimes you have this ‘wow’ feeling that's created in a setting where so many different people come together. It's a microcosm—by seeing it in our group, we see that it is possible on a larger scale.

“This work needs to occur on two levels—a grassroots level and a political level. I think it's more rewarding to work at the grassroots level but more effective on the political level. Maybe if you put Arafat and Sharon through the process we're starting, have them play silly games, smile at each other, and be nice to each other, they will establish trust through which they can see each other not as enemies with a winner and loser but as people who can gain from finding common ground. It's not necessary to reach political agreement on everything but it is possible to come to a place where both parties' most important needs are satisfied.”

Pevzner's perspective on conflict resolution grew not only out of her involvement in the Dialogue Group but from her civil service work after high school with Arab and Israeli youths. “I came from a background of work in coexistence. Since the intifadas started, I've struggled between my desire for personal growth and my need to be in Israel working for change in a peaceful way.”

This summer Pevzner returned to Israel to conduct research on women's role in the peace process. Peace Scholar Khshaibon also spent time in Israel as



Maisa Khshaibon '03 and Marina Pevzner '04

part of her study to promote coexistence. Pevzner and Khshaibon, best friends, buoyed each other back home as both were shaken by the violence and transformation they witnessed in Israel.

"Haifa used to be a place where people wouldn't look at you differently if you were an Arab," Khshaibon describes. "But this summer when I traveled by bus and spoke Arabic, people stared. In Jerusalem I didn't feel safe speaking Arabic on the street. Many of my Jewish Israeli friends made me feel suddenly less welcome. And my views were strikingly different from those of my Arab friends as well."

As a Jew with left-wing politics, Pevzner faced a different brand of antagonism. "I was working in a women's peace organization and wearing a shirt that says in Hebrew 'Daughter of Peace.' I went to buy a falafel and the vendor said, 'You're not ashamed of yourself wearing this shirt?' Another day I was standing in a silent demonstration and was called every curse you could hear.

"Women in Israel play an important role in trying to mobilize objection to the one-sided consensus. We engage in peaceful activities like going to checkpoints. Our presence influences soldiers to be more sensitive.

"In my work this summer, I found that it's the Palestinian and Jewish women working together, not the men, engaged in peace work. While women were giving speeches in peace demonstrations, you heard bombs dropping in the background. Maybe it's because in Israeli society the men focus on the army.

"But my views still are different from those of the average Jewish Israeli woman," Pevzner continues. "Maisa has an easier situation. Society allows her views because of her Arab background. I'm more alone with my politics in Israeli Jewish society. Now, though, with the country resorting to

violence, it's easier for me to make my argument. Every day there is suffering on both sides, the hatred and gap between Palestinians and Jews has grown. So I argue, 'Show me how your way has made things better. You can't.' People can not live with this approach of not negotiating."

Coexistence is the drumbeat sounded by Peace Scholars, supporters, and many academics in the field. "Coexistence work frees leaders to move through conversations at all levels of society," according to Mari Fitzduff, professor of conflict studies and director of the Initiative on Conflict Resolution and Ethnicity of the University of Ulster and the United Nations University. "Coexistence efforts give people space to deal with each others' fears and anger."

"Peacebuilding is about duality, about Arab and Jew brainstorming, doing the work together based on mutual interests," says former Peace Scholar Hussein. "While the Israeli Declaration of Independence guarantees me full equality, the mindset of the people perpetuates ignorance, superficiality, and arrogance. Arab friends back home see discrimination every day. It makes them bitter. The only way for us to be equal citizens in Israel is to reach out to the other side, to destroy what we've all created through decades of intolerance.

Khshaibon relates, "Much of the world tells Marina and me that we're supposed to be enemies. But if I'm upset about what's going on in Israel, Marina is the first one I talk to. She understands what I'm going through, and vice versa. We may disagree on specific issues but we always find common ground."

"We connect because of our commonalities," Pevzner adds. "And the fact that we're best friends is a mirror of our message," a message that Pevzner and Khshaibon communicate in speeches about coexistence through the year. Former Peace Scholars Hussein and his close friend Yoav Borowitz '00, originally from Tel Aviv



Taher Baderkhan '03

and now working in New York, also remain involved in coexistence initiatives.

Pevzner says, "Much of the coexistence work done during the years of the Oslo peace negotiations stopped. The system created to support the work wasn't strong enough to withstand more serious challenges. When we create new coexistence educational programs, we need to consider how to enable them to withstand moments where the relationship between Arabs and Jews is not good. If you come from a basic attitude that violence is wrong, you can sustain a commitment to coexistence efforts."

Scholarship benefactor Alan Slifka holds that every child in Israel should receive a coexistence education, "which along with government policies furthering socioeconomic equality can go a long way to promote tolerance and respect." He explains, "Terrorism arises in part from people feeling impotent, humiliated, disrespected, and unseen. Enhancing coexistence programs like the Peace Scholarships is part of the solution to creating a society where there is respect for difference." ■

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