

## Dangerous Stories: Encountering Narratives of the Other in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

Yiftach Ron and Ifat Maoz  
Hebrew University of Jerusalem

This study explores the effects of continuous long-term exposure to the contesting narrative of the outgroup in the context of the protracted conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Specifically, it examines the extent to which Jewish Israeli facilitators of dialogue with members of the Palestinian outgroup experience their repeated exposure to Palestinians and to Palestinian narratives as impacting their views, feelings, and actions, as well as their attitudes toward the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Thematic content analysis of 20 in-depth interviews with Jewish facilitators of reconciliation-aimed dialogue groups reveals that the repeated exposure of Jewish Israelis to the Palestinian narrative is associated with increased awareness of and moral concern for the suffering and distress of Palestinians. The findings contribute to our understanding of how intergroup dialogues that expose participants to the narratives of the outgroup can help them cope with and even mitigate the destructive role that ethnocentric ingroup narratives may play in conditions of conflict.

*Keywords:* dialogue, intergroup contact, Israeli–Palestinian conflict, narratives, moral concern

Contesting narratives play a crucial role in ethnopolitical conflicts, with each side adopting a narrative that justifies its own claims, demands, and position while delegitimizing those of the other side (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2009). Exclusive exposure to the ingroup narrative reinforces the perceived legitimacy of the ingroup and its actions, contributes to a reduction in the dissonance between belief and behavior (Festinger, 1957; Rosen, 2009), and provides a sense of coherence and cognitive consistency (Rosen, 2009; Bekerman & Zembylas, 2009). At the same time, however, selective and limited exposure to the narrative of one's own side can heighten intergroup dispute

and misunderstanding, as well as strengthen the tendency to exclude outgroups from the realm of moral responsibility (Salomon, 2004).

This study explores the effects of continuous long-term exposure to the contesting narrative of the outgroup in the context of the protracted conflict between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. It examines the extent to which Israeli Jews who have been repeatedly exposed to the Palestinian narrative—through their involvement as facilitators in reconciliation-aimed dialogue encounters between the sides—experience their repeated exposure to Palestinians and their narrative, and how that exposure impacts their views, opinions, feelings, actions, and attitudes toward the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Our study pays particular attention to the effects of confronting the narrative of the other in conflict on the elicitation of moral concern.

Moral exclusion (Opatow, 1990) occurs when individuals or groups are perceived as lying beyond the sphere in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply, and is typical of intractable conflicts, such as the Israeli–Palestinian one (Bar-Tal, Rosen, & Nets-Zehngut, 2009). Those who are morally excluded are perceived as nonentities, expendable, or undeserving. Consequently, causing or

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YIFTACH RON is a PhD candidate in the Department of Communication, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel.

IFAT MAOZ is an associate professor in the Department of Communication, head of the Swiss Center for Conflict Research graduate program, and head of the Smart Family Communications Institute, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

CORRESPONDENCE CONCERNING THIS ARTICLE should be addressed to Yiftach Ron, Department of Communication, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem, 91905, Israel. E-mail: [yiftach.ron@mail.huji.ac.il](mailto:yiftach.ron@mail.huji.ac.il) or [msifat@mssc.huji.ac.il](mailto:msifat@mssc.huji.ac.il)

allowing harm to those constituted as outside of one's moral community is justified and rationalized. We explore here the extent to which the repeated exposure of Israeli Jews to the contesting and disruptive narratives of Palestinian others in the context of an intergroup dialogue can mitigate moral exclusion and elicit moral concern.

### Conceptual Framework

There is a growing interest in the social sciences in the concept of narrative, and the role that narratives play in the lives of individuals and societies. Narratives provide an interpretive anchor for experiences and assist in the process of structuring identity (Hammack, 2008; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; McAdams, Josselson & Leiblich, 2006). Through the creation of temporal and spatial frameworks and by creating contexts of causality and continuity, narratives constitute a structural mechanism through which people imbue their ideological sympathies and personal experiences with meaning (McAdams et al., 2006; Cohler, 1982). Narratives provide a sense of safety and meaning, increase people's sense of coherence (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2009; Duranti, 2006), and contribute to positive self-esteem (Bar-On, 2006).

Bruner (1990, 2008) argues for the primacy of narrative as a central organizing feature of cultural life. Through the provision of meaning, narratives form the salient content of the mind and reveal links to a community of shared stories and practices (Bruner, 1990). In his studies of Israeli and Palestinian youth, Hammack (2006, 2008, 2009) emphasizes the relationship between social identity and personal narrative. Personal narratives expose people's location within the system of power relations in society, as well as the manner in which individuals internalize the social discourse at any given moment. As such, they reveal to us the process through which conceptions, thoughts, and emotions are structured, and provide insights into how individuals and groups understand their social worlds and the conflicts in which they are involved (Hammack, 2009; Ross, 2002).

### Narratives in Conflict

Though intergroup conflicts are often rooted in competition over material resources and political or territorial control, they are made salient through the construction of stories that motivate intergroup antagonism (Hammack, 2008; Kriesberg, 1998; Liu & Hilton, 2005). Group narratives are limited by nature, both in terms of the extent to which they are able to represent others and their otherness, and in terms of the quality of those representations (Bar-On & Adwan, 2006). Group narratives contain core "societal beliefs" that are typically characterized by claims of exclusive legitimacy, victimization, and perceptions of the justness of the goals of one's own group (Bar-Tal, 2007; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). Especially in ethnopolitical intergroup conflict, the opposing narratives of both sides are characterized by the absolute justification and idealization of the national self and the cultivation of its victimized collective identity alongside the exclusion and the devaluation of the "enemy" and its narrative (Davies, 2004; Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008). If it is present at all, the enemy's narrative is judged as morally inferior, because the enemy is depicted as immoral and as holding irrational and manipulative views (Opotow, 2001; Opotow, Gerson, & Woodside, 2005).

As a conflict between rival nationalist movements, the conflict between Israeli Jews and Palestinians is framed in largely narrative terms (Rotberg, 2006). Bar-Tal (2007, 2011) describes the major role of conflict-supporting narratives in the eruption and the persistence of intergroup conflicts, such as that between Israeli Jews and Palestinians, and the ways in which the societies involved in intractable conflicts form and then endeavor to maintain the dominance of these narratives. Clusters of "societal beliefs" about security, identity and history construct coherent narratives told by Israeli Jews and Palestinians that inherently delegitimize the counternarrative (Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998; see also Kelman, 1999, 2007). Salomon (2004) similarly describes the role played by the narratives of Israelis and Palestinians in structuring national identities that negate each other, and in presenting the reality of the conflict as a "zero-sum game."

Given the crucial role of the ingroup's narrative in justifying and perpetuating the conflict, it

is important to understand the effects of confronting the contesting and often subversive narrative of the other, which by definition presents, the outgroup's perspective, experience, and claims.

### **Narratives and Storytelling in Reconciliation-Aimed Intergroup Encounters**

Reconciliation-aimed encounters between Israeli Jews and Palestinians take place between two groups with asymmetric power relations that are in competition over scarce resources: the Jewish majority (approximately 80% of the Israeli population) controls most material and political resources and determines the national character of the country. The relationship between the Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel is also significantly affected by the larger protracted, asymmetrical conflict between the State of Israel and the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Thus, like other contact interventions conducted in the setting of an intergroup conflict, encounters between Israeli Jews and Palestinians are a paradoxical project that aims to bring about dialogue and equality between groups that are embedded in a deep-rooted reality of conflict and asymmetry (Halabi, 2004; Halabi, Sonnenschein, & Friedman, 2004; Suleiman, 2004).

Though much of the earlier research on intergroup contact has centered around its outcomes and effects, over the last decade or so, increased attention has been paid to the communicative, cognitive, and emotional processes that evolve within the contact situation. Stephan (2008), for instance, has stressed the importance of cognitive and affective intergroup processes, such as the reduction of threat and empathizing with the other's suffering. This may also include cognitive moves, such as taking the outgroup's perspective (Chambers, Baron, & Inman, 2006). Salomon (2004) claims that the collective narratives of groups in conflict and their implied delegitimization of the outgroup's narrative should be the main target for change when promoting intergroup reconciliation.

Against this backdrop, intergroup encounters aimed at Israeli–Palestinian reconciliation have increasingly come to focus on the narrative or storytelling approach (Bar-On & Kassem, 2004; Maoz, 2011). However, very little empirical

attention has been devoted to the impact that the exposure to the narrative of the other in conflict has on the participants in these dialogue encounters. The premise of the narrative-based model of intergroup reconciliation is that polarized and negatively interdependent collective narratives serve the function of maintaining (and often exacerbating) conflict (Hammack, 2006). Reconciliation, then, must be predicated on transformations in these polarized group narratives that reconstruct the relation between ingroup and outgroup toward positive interdependence (Kelman, 1999). Maoz (2011) describes the narrative model of Jewish–Palestinian encounters—most prominently identified with the late Israeli psychologist, Dan Bar-On—as one in which participants from both groups engage in “storytelling” their lives and sharing their personal and collective narratives, experiences, and suffering in the conflict (Bar-On, 2008; Bar-On & Kassem, 2004).

The narrative/storytelling model is based on the assumption that, to reach reconciliation, groups in intractable conflicts must work through their unresolved pain and anger through storytelling. Encountering the experience and suffering of the other through storytelling is seen as enabling conflicting groups to create intergroup trust and compassion by rehumanizing and constructing a more complex image of each other (Bar-On, 2006; Maoz & Bar-On, 2002). It is argued that the exposure to multiple stories about the lives of others in the conflict has the potential to increase one's understanding of the complexities of one's own group on the one hand, and of the other group's personal and collective trajectories in the conflict on the other (Bar-On, 2006; Bar-On & Kassem, 2004).

This study focuses on Israeli Jews who have been repeatedly exposed to the Palestinian narrative as facilitators of dialogue encounters between the sides. It examines the processes and effects related to exposure to the narrative of the outgroup in conflict via the reported thoughts, feelings, and experiences of facilitators of Jewish–Palestinian encounters, thus building on earlier studies about the perspectives and attitudes of encounter facilitators (Bekerman, Maoz, & Sheftel, 2006; Maoz, Bekerman, & Sheftel, 2007; Ron, Maoz, & Bekerman, 2010). We are particularly interested in the effects of confronting the narrative of the other in conflict on the elicitation of moral concern. We explore

here the extent to which the repeated exposure of Israeli Jews to the contesting and disruptive narratives of Palestinian others can mitigate moral exclusion and elicit a moral response.

## Method

### Research Sample

The research sample comprised 20 Jewish Israeli interviewees, nine women and 11 men, who were recruited for the research through social and professional networks. All interviewees work or have recently worked as facilitators of Jewish–Arab dialogue groups in an established encounter program in Israel, and have at least two years' experience in the field. Their ages range from 28 to 44. All of the interviewees live in Israeli towns or communities that are predominantly Jewish, and thus have limited interactions with Arabs outside the dialogue. All but one of the interviewees served in the Israeli military and reported minimal contact with the Palestinian population during their service. All the interviewees hold academic degrees in the humanities or social sciences, and four of them speak Arabic.

### The Interviews

Interviews were conducted at locations chosen by the interviewees, generally in their homes or workplaces. The interviews were semistructured and included questions prepared in advance about subjects relevant to the research, with space left for the interviewee's individual story and for additional questions and issues that arose during the interview. The interview structure included two main parts: The first was more open and dealt with the interviewee's individual story, and the second part included the posing of questions about the topics addressed in the study. Nonetheless, both parts included open components, as well as more focused ones (Berg, 2004; Kvale, 1996). The interviews were conducted in Hebrew. Each interview lasted from one and a half to two and a half hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

### Analysis of the Interviews

Our analysis is based on the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which em-

phasizes the generation of theory and concepts based on data derived from the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In line with this theory, several stages of analysis were undertaken (Berg, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first phase included a thematic analysis of each interview, focusing mainly on declared content and less on latent structures (Berg, 2004). The units of analysis were paragraphs or segments of text from the interview. At the same time, the entire interview was also treated as a single segment. The intention was to enable the necessary dismantling of the interview into specific units of content while retaining the ability to see them in their original context (Berg, 2004).

The initial analysis revealed numerous thematic categories emerging from each interview. After rereading a given interview, the number of categories was reduced by combining similar categories and focusing on those that appeared most relevant. Next, the interviews were integrated based on the categories that they had in common. These categories were scrutinized again for centrality (repeated appearances across interviews), for the connections between them, and for their relevance to theory, to the subject of the study, and to the questions it addressed (Berg, 2004; Roth, 2005).

The analysis process revealed major thematic categories, which are presented in the following section.

## Findings

In the following, the main themes that emerged from our analysis of the interviews are presented. These themes deal with the way that Jewish Israeli interviewees experienced their exposure to the narrative of the Palestinian other as part of their continuous participation in dialogue encounters with Palestinians.

### Encountering the Palestinian Other as an Experience Undermining Self-Narrative

Most of the interviewees described their experiences of encountering the narrative of the Palestinian other during dialogue as meaningful and as undermining their own narratives and worldviews prior to their participation in the dialogue. It also brought about a strong emotional and moral response to the situation, perspectives, and feelings of the Palestinian other.

Yair,<sup>1</sup> who participated in a Jewish–Palestinian dialogue encounter as part of a training course for dialogue-group facilitators, described his experience of exposure to the Palestinian narrative:

I can tell you that it was a very meaningful experience . . . It hadn't happened to me, certainly no Arab had ever told me—you are responsible for this and that. It's really powerful. It questions whether my own story, my national story is correct and right. And not only is it not, but I'm a party to something that causes pain and suffering . . . oppression, discrimination. Speaking about how I could support certain things, morally, democratically, humanely . . . Things that hold it up to your face that you are responsible for violating basic rights.

Exposure to the Palestinian narrative is portrayed by Yair as forcing him to question his own “national story.” The experience, which confronted Yair with the pain, frustration and sense of oppression and discrimination among his Palestinian interlocutors, awakened in him a new awareness of his moral responsibility and undermined his self-narrative about how humane, moral, and enlightened he is.

Naama also described a disturbing experience as a result of being exposed to what she called “a very troubling reflection of my identity as an Israeli,” namely, her exposure to the Palestinians' view of her as representing Israeli violence:

Mostly I remember the long workshops, the encounter with the Palestinians as very powerful . . . Up until then I'd thought of myself as left-wing, open. I think that was a very important part of my identity, and I think there was something about the encounter that gave a very troubling reflection of my identity as an Israeli, of my view of myself as enlightened, open. It was a very unsettling encounter . . . And seeing myself through their eyes, and how sometimes they see something very violent . . . It was mind-blowing; it was very, very powerful. Very, very shocking.

Once again, the dialogue with Palestinians and exposure to their perceptions of the conflict with Israeli Jews portrayed an experience that unsettled the Jewish participant's identity and moral self-conception.

### **Pain Alongside a Sense of Meaning and Revelation in Encountering the Narrative of the Other**

Yoav, who also went through a similar process of Jewish–Arab dialogue, described his

emotional and moral reaction to the encounter with Palestinians and their narratives:

Finally my eyes were opened and I understood what the hell was going on . . . I'd go home and I'd be totally wiped out. So emotionally charged and so sad or pained or I don't know what. I went through a very difficult period. But fascinating. Fascinating because I dealt with things that I'd never dealt with before, and they opened my eyes and broadened my horizons . . . It was the first time I could really hear about other people's suffering in the first person . . . It was the first time I realized where I live, in terms of the state, Zionism, all sorts of concepts that I'd been fine with until then . . . And that's where it hit me. It hit me and left its mark, that there are questions and a story I haven't been told. Let's say, they concealed it from me. I wasn't smart enough or sophisticated enough or involved enough to find it out on my own. It took me quite a long time. And it's not a simple story, it's really complicated, and it's to do with me too, with my nation, my tradition, my history.

Yoav described his encounter with the narrative and the sufferings of the Palestinian side in terms of sadness, pain, and guilt. He talked of how that exposure caused him to question his prior narrative (i.e., “It was the first time I realized where I live, in terms of the state, Zionism, all sorts of concepts that I'd been fine with until then . . . there are questions and a story I haven't been told. Let's say, they concealed it from me”). As well as being difficult and painful, though, the experience of being exposed to the narrative of the Palestinian other is once more portrayed as a meaningful and eye-opening experience, and as having fostered a new and more critical awareness.

### **“It's Like the Other Has Got a Face”**

Noga, who was exposed to the Palestinian narrative as part of a dialogue in a training workshop for encounter-group facilitators, also spoke of a meaningful, if difficult and challenging experience that entailed both resistance and guilt:

There was the 3-day seminar, the training seminar that was a really meaningful experience for me, after everything the Arabs had said there, it was really hard for me to accept everything they'd said, but it filtered through. Until then, I wasn't prepared to hear about the terrible things we did in '48 . . . I didn't know the other side of the story, I'd never thought about it . . . So I had a meaningful and formative experience . . . It destabilized me, and mostly taught me that I live by repress-

<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed.

ing, denying, and ignoring. And I still do that today . . . I feel like I live like the lord of the manor. I live at other people's expense in a lot of ways.

Like Yair, Yoav, and many other interviewees, Noga talked about the encounter with the narrative of the Palestinian other as an experience that challenged her existing narrative, precluded self-deception, and produced a new awareness of her moral responsibility as a Jew in Israel: "I live by repressing, denying, and ignoring. I feel like I live like the lord of the manor. I live at other people's expense in a lot of ways."

The following excerpt from Naama's interview more specifically describes the process through which the exposure to the Palestinians' narrative and point of view elicited a moral response in her as a Jewish Israeli:

It's like the other has got a face, and that what I know to tell about history, they tell something else, and to suddenly see things through their eyes. And it's like the very fact that you can look at what happened differently, it was really dramatic. And their description of life in the occupied territories, like, their everyday life, how they live, what happens to them there. All sorts of bits of information that as a Jew, you know, who lives in Israel and watches the news on TV, you've got no idea what's going on.

Naama describes the face that the Palestinian other is given during the dialogue encounter and the opportunity to "see things through their eyes," though implying that the dialogue has brought her to understand that her knowledge and perspective on the conflict—as an Israeli Jew—have been only partial and selective ("what I know to tell about history"). It thus seems that encountering the narrative of the Palestinian other inevitably and powerfully forces the Jewish dialogue participants to confront the incompleteness and selectiveness of their own ingroup narrative regarding the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

### **A Conflicted Jewish Israeli Identity**

Many of the interviewees spoke of how the encounter brought about conflict, moral dilemmas, and even a sense of alienation regarding significant aspects of their identity as Israelis. Naama explained how her identity as an Israeli was unsettled by the encounter with Palestinians and their perspectives, how the dialogue with the story of the other caused her to feel detached from the ethos and symbols of Israeli

identity, and how hard it was for her to take the experience back to her family and friends:

There was something about my identity as an Israeli that was really, really, really unsettled by the encounter, so much so that I left with a really difficult experience of feeling alienated from my identity . . . Alienation from parts of my identity of Israeliness, from symbols, the flag, the national anthem, all sorts of ethos. And a very difficult feeling. It was really hard to go back to my friends, my family, like, how to convey what I'd been through . . . It clashes with returning to reality, to the family, like, things that it arouses in other people.

A sense that their identification with the Israeli state and society had been unsettled, along with feelings of alienation and despair from what is going on around them, was also prominently manifested in the way that many of the interviewees related to the reality and society in which they live. Sharon, for instance, described her experience of Israeli society as follows:

I feel, I see, that Israel is in a very dark place. It's really sad, I mean, a kind of victimhood . . . I think that most people in Israel don't understand that there's an occupation . . . They don't understand what it means, and they don't want to know. They only see how miserable they are, we are . . . We've got racism here which is based on seeing us as good and them as bad and that's why we're allowed to be racist. It's terribly frightening, and sad.

Sharon portrays Israel as a racist country, as a society living in denial and with a sense of perpetual victimization. This very dismal description conveys Sharon's deep sense of alienation from her own society and her harsh criticism of it.

### **Critical Distance From the Social and Ideological Environment**

The sense of conflict and alienation and the criticism expressed by many of the interviewees was not only directed at the state and its symbols, or at Israeli society in general. The criticism that followed their encounters with the other was also directed at who they, the interviewees, had been before the encounter—their previous narrative and state of awareness, and the way they had been raised and educated. For instance, Yoav attacked the "Zionist bubble" in which he had been raised and socialized:

I lived in a bubble; totally, I didn't know what was happening in East Jerusalem. I wasn't very interested either. Even when I joined the army, what did I under-

stand? What did I know? Nothing. I was completely living in a bubble. Really. A Zionist bubble . . . I grew up in a very conformist family. Very mainstream. I mean, what the state says is sacrosanct. Zionism was the best thing ever to happen, no questions asked. I grew up in the bosom of Zionism . . . And I didn't ask too many questions.

What is this "Zionist bubble"? Through this metaphor Yoav sought to characterize the social and ideological environment in which he grew up as powerfully centered on the Zionist narrative and ideology and thus as detached from other realities and narratives. Life in this bubble—as described by Yoav—is characterized by conformism, a lack of knowledge and critical awareness, ethnocentricity, blindness, and indifference to the circumstances of the lives of the Palestinian other ("I didn't know what was happening in East Jerusalem. I wasn't very interested either"). Yoav critically described his family as conformist, and talked cynically about the values he was brought up on ("what the state says is sacrosanct. Zionism was the best thing ever to happen"). Yoav's comments clearly showed how large the gap is between his previous and current levels of awareness, and between his views and those of his family.

Many of the interviewees mentioned a similar gap, and even a sense of isolation from family, friends, or Jewish Israeli society in general. Liat talked about the difficulties that her opinions created in her interactions with her colleagues during Operation Cast Lead (Israel's assault on the Gaza Strip in January, 2009):

The school I'm teaching at now, in terms of its style—it's quite liberal . . . But during . . . Operation Cast Lead, I found myself in a complex position. Friction with other teachers, a kind of sense that any minute the Ministry of Education will be putting out a contract on me . . . I find it hard to shut my mouth and tow the line, so I was in a difficult place there . . . I felt they were blackening my character.

Liat spoke of how even at a liberal workplace she felt rejected and denounced by the society around her ("a kind of sense that any minute the Ministry of Education will be putting out a contract on me . . . I felt they were blackening my character"). This experience of isolation from the Jewish Israeli ingroup is added to the emotional turmoil entailed by having one's self-image and narrative destabilized, and to the Jewish participants' moral response to the encounter with Palestinians and their stories.

Might these difficult emotions spur action? Is there a way to work through the anguish described by the interviewees?

### Alternative Frameworks of Involvement

The interviewees spoke about the different ways of coping with the experiences and emotions that followed their exposure to the narrative of the Palestinian other. Naama, for instance, described her involvement in a social action group with a spiritual Buddhist orientation:

So I think that, as time's gone by, I've found a home in a group called "Socially Engaged Dharma," which is people who, on the one hand, are busy practicing meditation and Buddhism and spiritual work, and on the other, feel that this kind of meaning and work can and should be taken to the spheres of engagement with the world outside. And I think that there I've found a kind of path that feels right to me, a path of nonviolence, because I often think that, in my involvement in left-wing groups and social and political action, I've felt a certain kind of violence converted into another kind of violence. I mean, beforehand, the hatred is directed at the Palestinian other, and now the hatred or the anger is directed at the right-wing other, but it's the same kind of energy, which at the end of the day isn't an energy that I feel can bring about change or healing. And I feel that only with something softer . . . with an ability to see broadly, softly, to see where there are wounds in all sorts of places, in all sorts of sides in this complicated situation, that's where I feel more comfortable to act.

The kind of involvement that Naama has chosen may be seen as an alternative to both the general Jewish Israeli discourse, which she experienced as extremist and violent toward the Palestinian other, and the discourse of protest and political dialogue—a discourse that exposed her to the narrative of the Palestinian other, but also to the difficult experiences entailed by that exposure. Naama has chosen a new framework of discourse and action that she described as "softer." But what does "softer" mean for Naama? In this context it would appear to mean something less conflictual, less political, and more focused on the interpersonal level: a framework of action that would enable a sense of involvement and meaning while being less confrontational.

Similar to Naama, Udi also elected to carry on his involvement with the Israeli–Palestinian issue outside the dialogue framework with which he had worked in the past. Unlike Naama, though, whose moral response to her encounter with the other was translated into a

“softer” spiritual framework of discourse and action, Udi chose to be more active, carrying out fieldwork aimed at promoting civic equality in Israel and dealing practically with the problems that he was exposed to in his encounter with the Palestinian narrative:

At \_\_\_\_ [Udi mentioned the name of a nonprofit organization that strives for civic equality between Jewish and Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel], I’m working on a project . . . and it’s very important for me to step back a bit from facilitating right now . . . and put a lot of effort into my work . . . To see the budgets, to try and influence and make sure that the money will really be transferred. Something more concrete than what happens in the workshops and groups, which is about psychological processes which take longer to bear fruit and the change is, it’s less tangible. \_\_\_\_<sup>2</sup> gives me . . . a feeling that I’m part of certain processes . . . You think less about feelings and empathy and place more emphasis on negotiations and applying pressure and making sure that a few more Palestinians get more of the money that they deserve.

Activist involvement in a nongovernmental civil society organization may be an indication of—and possibly one of the solutions to—the unease, the emotional turmoil, and the feelings of guilt that were elicited among many of our interviewees by their continuous exposure to the story of the Palestinian other.

### Academic Research and Peace Education as “Safe Spaces”

Many interviewees said that they have remained involved with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, sometimes through direct action and sometimes in an indirect and mediated fashion. One way was to focus on the subject in one’s studies or by carrying out academic research. Inbar puts it as follows:

In my studies, even in my studies, I’m writing a thesis supervised by one of the more left-wing and activist lecturers in the department. I’m writing about a subject that is very closely related to narrative . . . My thesis is about the rhetoric of going to war . . . It’s exactly about the kinds of narratives we tell ourselves and how we explain it, and how we justify it, and the centrality of force in society, and the centrality of the militaristic perspective, the concept that there’s no choice, and all sorts of things that afterward you hear children in all sorts of groups parroting these mantras.

It may be that academic research is a kind of “safe space” where one can process the issues brought up by the exposure to the narrative of Palestinians in a slightly more detached and softer manner. Another type of action that has

enabled the interviewees to touch more gently on the issues raised in the encounter is involvement in education for peace with a less political and more interpersonal orientation. A number of interviewees reported that they were involved in such activities. One of them was Yoav, who talked about his work in education toward promoting the message of and accepting the other:

I do see myself in a way as being a kind of emissary. And my task is to be a point in time, be that in the time of youngsters, or older people, to give them the possibility, which I also experienced, of knowing the other side. I think that both peoples have difficult stories, that each has experienced a trauma at one level or the other, and they live here together. I really believe in living together, next to one another, from a place of respect and equality and understanding and listening and acceptance and partnership. And I’m trying to change the place I’m at and what I’m able to do, in my environment and my place. I see my small successes as big successes, and that motivates me . . . I try not to get into definitions too much: Am I Zionist? Is that what I am? I wouldn’t define myself, I don’t define myself as Zionist, I don’t define myself as post-Zionist. I try to live my life quietly, and to do as much good as possible to the people I meet and the people I interact with. From the place I’m in.

Yoav tries “not to get into definitions too much,” preferring “to live my life quietly, and to do as much good as possible to the people I meet and the people I interact with.” It seems that he has chosen to focus on coexistence at the individual and interpersonal level rather than dealing with political solutions, national identities, and the master narratives of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

### Summary of Findings

The main themes that emerged from our analysis can be seen as falling under the following three broad categories:

**1. The experience of exposure to the Palestinian narrative and the moral response to it.** The interviewees related to the experience of being exposed to the narrative of the Palestinian other as meaningful, formative, and “eye-opening.” It was an experience that gave rise to a new sense of moral responsibility toward the Palestinian other, and at the same time, entailing a great deal of difficulty, the destabilization of

<sup>2</sup> The name of the nonprofit organization is mentioned again.



one's own narrative and self-image, emotional turmoil, and feelings of guilt.

**2. The conflicted Jewish Israeli identity following the encounter with the Palestinian other.** Many of the interviewees spoke of how the encounter with Palestinians and their moral response to their story and suffering led to conflict with significant aspects of their identity as Israeli Jews, and even to a sense of alienation. This sense of conflicted identity is added to a feeling of being isolated from family, friends, and Jewish Israeli society in general.

**3. Ways of coping with exposure to the narrative of the Palestinian other.** Our Jewish Israeli interviewees described their involvement in education for peace, academic research, and nongovernmental civil society organizations as related to their participation in encounters with Palestinians and to their effects on their thoughts and feelings, and as offering them a way to work through the difficulties and anguish elicited by interviewees' exposure to the narrative and suffering of the Palestinians.

### Discussion

A number of scholars have pointed to the significant role that Israelis' and Palestinians' narratives have played in sustaining the conflict between the two national groups. Hammack (2008, 2009) claimed that the collective narratives and the role they have played within the discursive field of the conflict reinforce the polar national identities of both parties, as well as the array of beliefs and emotions that has been nurturing the Israeli–Palestinian conflict for years. Bar-On and Adwan (2006) illustrate the manner in which the narratives of each side fit in with what they call “the logic of conflict and contention” (p 206), and Salomon (2004) similarly described the role played by the narratives of Israelis and Palestinians in structuring national identities that negate one another.

However, only relatively little research attention has been devoted to systematically examining the ways in which individuals involved in an intergroup conflict respond to being exposed to the narrative of the other group. This study has focused on the experience, dilemmas, and coping strategies of Israeli Jews who have been repeatedly exposed to the narrative of the Palestinian other as participants in and facilitators of intergroup dialogue encounters.

The experience of encountering Palestinians and their narrative in the context of a structured dialogue between Israeli Jews and Palestinians was portrayed by our interviewees as instructive and eye-opening, and as having destabilized their own previously held narratives and worldviews. As distinct from the concept of “world picture” (“weltbild” in German), which refers to a theoretical view of the external world, a “worldview” (“Weltanschauung”) is essentially a “view of life,” a view of our position in the world and how we should act (Heidegger, 1982; Naugle, 2002). In this sense, the experience of continuously encountering Palestinians in the framework of intergroup dialogue created a transformed worldview: a new consciousness and a moral response to the suffering and distress of the Palestinian other that goes beyond anything that happens in the encounter itself.

According to Levinas, any relation with the other involves an encounter with the face of the other, in which the face is more than facies or a portrait—it is what reveals the otherness of the other to us. Indeed, Levinas believed that this face is significant, not because it represents a particular other, but because it is turned toward “me.” The face of the other presents “me,” then, with an ethical imperative to turn toward it, to change “my” relation to it, to take responsibility for it, and not to remain indifferent to its appearance before “me” (Levinas, 1979).

Hence, one may say that the very essence of Israeli Jews' repeated participation in Jewish–Palestinian encounters involves relating to the face of the Palestinian other, thereby forcing Jewish Israeli participants to confront the ethical imperative derived from facing the face of the other. Our study has precisely charted responses to being presented with this ethical imperative vis-à-vis Palestinians, given that it has often contradicted the interviewees' sense of legitimacy and justice regarding their own Jewish Israeli ingroup identity.

Opotow, Gerson, and Woodside (2005) discussed the possibility of using peace education as a tool for moral inclusion. The findings of our study have shown that the interviewees did indeed describe what they had learned from the encounter and the stories of their Palestinian dialogue partners as having enabled them to go through a process of moral inclusion. As part of this process, our Jewish Israeli interviewees learned to see the face of the Palestinian others

and to better understand their suffering and emotions, as well as their perspectives on the history and reality of the conflict.

Though media scholars have discussed the role of the mediated encounter with the other in enabling inclusion and cultivating cosmopolitan sensibilities among audiences (Chouliaraki, 2008; Frosh, 2006), and others have discussed the importance of the nonmediated personalized encounter with outgroup members in eliciting moral concern (Bar-On & Kassem, 2004; Halabi & Sonnenschein, 2004; Halabi, Sonnenschein, & Friedman, 2004), our study focused on the actual process of confronting the narrative of the other and the consequences of this process as experienced by our interviewees, thereby enabling us to explicitly chart the emotional, identity-related, and moral dilemmas that such confrontation evokes.

The interviews included numerous reports of how hard it was to cope with being exposed to the narrative of the Palestinian other. The experience of exposure is portrayed as meaningful, but also as extremely challenging, as destabilizing the interviewees' own narrative and self-image, and as emotionally confusing. It was also described as accompanied by resistance and by feelings of guilt.

A significant part of our findings touched on the broader consequences of the exposure to the narrative of the Palestinian other, consequences that go beyond the immediate and specific context of participation in the structured encounter. Many of the interviewees said that the dialogue with Palestinians, exposure to their story, and the interviewees' moral response to that story created a conflict, or even a sense of alienation regarding significant components of their identity as Israeli Jews, including ambivalence toward the ethos and symbols of Israeli identity and an unsettled identification with the Israeli state and society. The criticism expressed by many of the interviewees was not only directed toward the state and its symbols or even toward Israeli society in general. Rather, it was also aimed at who they, the interviewees, were before their encounter with the Palestinian story, at their former limited awareness of other perspectives and narratives, and at the way they had been raised as Jews in Israel.

This critical awareness, elicited by the long-term dialogue with Palestinians, and the exposure to the narrative of the Palestinian outgroup,

can be seen as constituting what Bekerman and Zembylas and others have called "dangerous memories" (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011; Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008). Metz (1972, 1980) argues that there are memories of human suffering that interrupt taken-for-granted and fixed historical narratives. These "dangerous memories" are new and subversive "memories," or new practices of remembering the past (Ostovich, 2002, 2005), that question the traditional historical narratives and the static and tribal group identities that rest on a distinction between the "good us" and "bad them" (Hill, 2000). "Dangerous memories" contribute to the formation of an alternative consciousness, one that shows compassion toward others, responsibility and moral concern for their situation, self-critique, and resistance to the status quo (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011). Our findings suggest that long-term exposure to the narrative of Palestinians in the framework of a structured intergroup dialogue may have induced and propagated such "dangerous memories" among the Jewish Israeli participants.

However, these "dangerous memories" brought about by the story of the Palestinian other—the new narrative that has made them critical toward and alienated from the Jewish Israeli collective ethos and the "conflict-supporting master narrative" (Hammack, 2009)—had also caused difficulties for Israeli Jews when interacting once more with their Jewish Israeli ingroup outside of the structured intergroup dialogue. Many of the interviewees reported experiencing loneliness and even reprobation in their interactions with other members of Jewish society in Israel. These were mainly felt during times of war or crisis, when the depth of the gap in the awareness of these Israeli Jews that had participated in an encounter with Palestinians and the broader Jewish Israeli society around them was more prominently exposed.

Previous work on intergroup dialogue and narratives in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Maoz, 2011; Suleiman, 2004) has barely touched on what happens to people who have been exposed to the other's narrative after the encounter ended and they reentered their own society. The findings of this study have uncovered the various strategies adopted by the interviewees in dealing with this "reentry." According to the interviewees' reports, action and

involvement in such frameworks as education for peace and mutual recognition, academic research, nongovernmental civil society organizations, or unique community structures has offered a softer experience of involvement in issues related to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, an involvement that created a sense of meaning and action and constituted a response to the difficulties and anguish entailed by the exposure to the narrative of the Palestinian other.

### Methodological Issues and Limitations of the Study

Despite the importance of our findings regarding the response of Israeli Jews to their repeated exposure to the narrative of the Palestinian other, this study also has certain limitations. First, it is based on in-depth interviews with Jewish facilitators of dialogue encounters with Palestinians. The qualitative research method used here was not intended to provide an exact measure of changes in attitudes or opinions, or of the effects of intergroup contact, but rather to explore the experiences and coping strategies of Jewish Israeli dialogue participants when confronted with the Palestinian narrative. Thus, one limitation of our study is that it cannot point to a one-dimensional causal association between being confronted with the narrative of the other and ideological or behavioral change.

Two additional limitations concern the research population. The participants in this study are or were facilitators of Jewish Israeli and Palestinian encounter groups. Focusing on this research population enables us to benefit from the rich and profound perspective of those who have played a central part both in shaping and participating in the dialogue and who were exposed to the narrative of the other in a large number of encounters over an extended period of time. This enabled us to examine the influence of long-term exposure. However, it is important to note that, both in terms of the intensity and length of their exposure to the narrative of the other, and of their explicit choice to work as intergroup dialogue facilitators, the encounter-group facilitators we interviewed in our study cannot be seen as fully representative of the “regular” participant in Jewish–Palestinian dialogues.

Another limitation is that this study only focused on the perspective of Jewish Israelis who have been confronted with the Palestinian narrative. Future research should also examine the experience of Palestinians involved in dialogue groups and their responses to their exposure to the Jewish Israeli narrative. This would provide us with a more complete picture of the impact of repeated exposure to the outgroup’s narrative in conflict.

However, these limitations notwithstanding, the broader significance of this study lies in clarifying how the development of “dangerous memories”—which deal with the disruptive narratives of suffering others in conflict—challenges hegemonic, exclusionary, and self-justifying perceptions of the outgroup in conflict and potentially extends the realm of moral response so that it includes moments of ethical concern for the other.

### Conclusion

A number of studies have pointed to the significant role played by Israelis’ and Palestinians’ narratives in sustaining the conflict between the two sides (Bar-Tal & Salomon, 2006; Rotberg, 2006), and on the role of narratives or storytelling in the context of contact programs and intergroup dialogue processes (Bar-On, 2009; Hammack, 2008, 2009). Many of the latter studies have made the assumption that exposure to the narrative of others can bring about empathy toward these others and promote reconciliation in conflict situations (Bar-On & Kassem, 2004; Salomon, 2004). Yet the existing literature does not systematically explore the potential of the intergroup-dialogue encounter to change the narrative of those involved by exposing them to the narrative of the other. What sets this study apart is that it methodically examines the assumption that exposure to the narrative of the other in conflict might bring about a change in attitude toward the other, as well as the consequences that such a change might have.

The findings of this research contribute to our understanding of the ways in which Jewish–Palestinian dialogue can help cope with the destructive role that collective and individual narratives may play in conflict. Furthermore, our study helps to strengthen an important link between the recently evolving scholarship on

narratives, group identities, and moral response on the one hand, and the established research tradition on contact aimed at improving relations between conflicting groups on the other. In this regard, our study points to the potential of confronting the narrative of the other in conflict in bringing about change. This potential is realized by creating a greater awareness of unequal power relations and social injustice and by eliciting a moral response to the suffering of others. The aim of confronting contested narratives through dialogue with the other is thus to disrupt those regimes of feeling, thinking, and moralizing that perpetuate a conflicting ethos with others for the purpose of inventing new practices of relating with them.

Confronting contested narratives in ethnopolitical conflict is, therefore, not only a difficult task. It is a transformative form of intergroup engagement because it can create spaces for different affective and ethical relations with others.

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