

Following the Fault Line to Peace – How Tension Can Transform Conflict
September 2, 2011 Jewish News Red Tread Magazine

By Brenda Naomi Rosenberg

Editor's Note: As the world waits to see whether the Palestinian Authority circumvents the "peace process" by requesting formal recognition of sovereign status by the general membership of the United Nations, we asked whether there could be a better way to resolve the ongoing conflict between the PA and Israel. This essay is the first in a series that will look at the conflict between governments, citizens and, ultimately, the intrapersonal conflicts between Abraham's descendants.

We are at a critical moment in history: We can choose to self-destruct or be in the presence of the best of our humanity.

A new form of leadership is needed to address the mounting pressure we see surging in all sectors of society; between countries, within governments, businesses, religious institutions, communities and on campuses.

To seed a new approach to peace, Samia Bahoun, a pro-Palestinian American Muslim, and I, an American Jewish Zionist, created Tectonic Leadership. Suffice it to say, we are an unlikely partnership. We have disparate career paths, religions and perspectives; our common denominator, however, is a shared frustration with "dialogue" and "peace" groups that serve delicious hummus but never address the elephant in the room.

Our goal is to develop and train leaders from opposite sides of a conflict to take joint-ownership in transforming their differences into solutions. We provide leaders with the structure, discipline and commitment to create a New Relational Architecture that sustains seismic events inherent to our civilization. We use geology's Plate Tectonics theory as a metaphor, recognizing that human interaction during conflict is similar to fault lines between plates, which interact, and building friction at their boundaries subsequently causing earthquakes when the natural elasticity of surrounding rocks has been exceeded.

Human interactions can similarly create fault lines. When pressure becomes unbearable, the energy released is Tsunami-like, creating mass hysteria, inciting hate and fear, separating nations, destroying businesses and communities, oppressing people, and instigating wars.

The focus for our pilot workshop was the Middle East conflict. In May 2011, we worked with 16 Christian, Muslim and Jewish University students from four Michigan Universities. Within five days, young leaders learned how to use the tension of hotly contested topics, including Zionism, the Holocaust, Gaza, "occupation" and suicide bombers as an opportunity to deepen their understanding of the other — and not as an obstacle to partnering.

We were invited to present Tectonic Leadership at International Conference on Transforming Conflict in Amman Jordan last July. Sponsored by the Common Bond Institute and the International Humanistic Psychology Association, I attended in the company of Sara Jaward, an American Muslim from Dearborn who graduated from the Tectonic Leadership program.

Sara and I arrived in Amman full of optimism. Once there, the organizers asked us to form a circle and introduce ourselves. Several people spoke before the microphone was handed to a man who identified himself Gady from Tel Aviv. This simple introduction was followed by a scream in Arabic from a young man who ran out of the room, ranting loudly. He was subsequently followed out by 20 more young men and women; at the same time two other women were tugging on his jacket, trying to coax him back into the room.

My optimism vanished. All I could hear were the voices of my well-meaning friends and family saying, "Brenda don't go, Jordan had riots last week; it's not safe for you to be there." One of the organizers said to me, "Brenda, the protestors are out front, we have a bus at the side of the building for the Israelis, please go now."

Her words only reinforced my fear of the very real danger we faced being there. I took Sarah's hand and walked to the bus, my heart pounding. We kept asking anyone who would listen, "Who are they? Why did they leave? Why were they so angry?"

By the time we arrived back at the hotel, we learned "they" were university students and the young man who led the walkout, Abdullah, was the group's organizer. Apparently, when he heard the word "Tel Aviv," he told his group to walk out with him. He was outraged because no one told him Israelis would be in attendance..

The next morning, Sarah and I approached Abdullah in the hotel lobby. We were willing to put the central tenant of Tectonic Leadership to the ultimate test: "Tension can never be eradicated but we can utilize tension to transform conflict."

We spent more than 2 hours listening, with Sarah translating, and the three of us talking. As he explained it, he had "no problem" being in the same room as Israelis but was in such shock that the Israeli contingent's presence had failed to be disclosed prior to the event.

He went on to acknowledge that he had never met an Israeli and needed time to prepare himself and his group. We gained his trust and he was willing to meet Gady, shake his hand and present a collaborative exercise with him at our presentation the next day.

The following day, we presented Tectonic Leadership. Near the end of our presentation, Osama, a Palestinian, left the room. Sarah and I looked at each and shrugged. We believed Tectonic Leadership was a hit as we fielded numerous questions, received hugs and sincere invitations to Israel, Neve Shalom, Ramallah, Hebron and Lebanon.

Afterward, during lunch, Osama approached me and asked if we could speak. He expressed how he was overcome with emotion and left our presentation because he didn't want anyone to see him cry.

He shared with us how moved he felt by this model of interaction, and how touched he felt to see Arab and Jewish descendants from America who care so deeply about Israelis and Palestinians.

My assumption; I thought he left the room when the video referred to me as a Zionist. We hugged and took pictures together, promising to stay in touch.

We continue to believe peace is possible but our efforts need support from all communities. We need to make peacemaking, cross-cultural communication, genocide prevention, and conflict transformation financially viable career paths — not just volunteer jobs for our young leaders. It is up to each of us to empower our young leaders and work with them to make our world a better place.

For more information and a link to the Tectonic Leadership organization, go to redthreadmagazine.com and click the features button on the navigation bar.