
Pro Rege

Volume 40 | Number 4

Article 5

June 2012

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Recommended Citation

Veenstra, Charles (2012) "Musalaha: Opportunities and Challenges in Listening for Reconciliation," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 40: No. 4, 29 - 35.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol40/iss4/5

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Editor's Note: Dr. Veenstra presented this paper at the International Listening Association Convention in Bremerton, Washington, March 22, 2012.

Musalaha: Opportunities and Challenges in Listening for Reconciliation



by Charles Veenstra

One of the most intractable political disputes in recent history is the Israeli-Palestinian struggle over the land. The Israelis claim that God gave them the land at the time of Abraham and therefore they are entitled to it forever. The Palestinians argue that they have lived on the land for hundreds (even thousands) of years and therefore feel the Israeli conquest to be entirely unjust. Israelis claim that they must control the Palestinians because of security, while Palestinians insist that justice requires that they control their own land.

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One searches nearly in vain to find many instances where the sides listen to each other. Furthermore, the theologies of the two sides differ significantly, and those differences make reconciliation of differences harder.

Within the larger Israeli-Palestinian dispute, we find two minorities—one on each side—that appear to have a common religion but differ on political realities. These minorities are the Messianic Jews and the Christian Palestinians. A brief description of each is necessary before moving to a description of how an important movement is working to get each side to listen to the other and move toward reconciliation.

Messianic Jews are Jews who have accepted Yeshua (Jesus) as the Messiah. They maintain many Jewish customs and practices and celebrate Jewish feasts rather than Christian feasts. Although they are a small minority among the Jewish population as a whole, they are quite vocal in their beliefs. In Israel, they maintain, along with many Israelis, that God gave them the land of Palestine.

Palestinian Christians comprise a tiny minority of Palestinians. They are of Arab descent and speak Arabic. Some live in Israel, some in the West Bank, and some in Gaza, but the majority of them today live outside of the Middle East. Approximately 2.3 percent of the total population in the Holy Land are Christian.¹ They are members of various Christian denominations. Their claims to the land are based in legal ownership going back hundreds of years. The oppression of the Israelis

led to emigration of large numbers of Palestinian Christians and continues today.

Although Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians share essentially the same religion, they do not share political views. The result is significant tension. Differing perspectives toward the ownership of the land have divided these two groups. Both sides know that they should cooperate because they believe they must love their neighbors as themselves. Both follow Jesus as the only way of salvation.

One organization that works to get these groups to listen to each other is Musalaha (which means reconciliation in Arabic). Founded approximately twenty years ago by Salim J. Munayer, who is also the present director and a professor at the Bethlehem Bible College, it maintains a Board of Oversight with an equal number of leaders from both Palestinian Christian and Messianic Jewish communities.² Its mission statement is clear from its website:

Musalaha is a non-profit organization that seeks to promote reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians as demonstrated in the life and teaching of Jesus. We endeavor to be an encouragement and advocate of reconciliation, first among Palestinian and Israeli believers and then beyond to our respective communities. Musalaha also aims at facilitating bridge building among different segments of Israeli and Palestinian societies according to biblical reconciliation principles.³

These reconciliation principles focus significantly on communication, particularly listening to each other. Lisa Loden writes, “Listening was often the first step of the journey. Listening and truly hearing the painful stories of the other required openness and a hearing of the heart.”⁴ Listening has been defined by the International Listening Association as “the process of receiving, constructing meaning from and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages.”⁵ This paper will describe the principles for listening that operate in Musalaha. Throughout this description, a fuller picture of the activities of this organization will become clearer.

One principle could be called *elimination of background noise*. Because participants cannot eas-

ily visit each other’s homes, and because travel restrictions make it difficult for them to meet, Musalaha provided neutral ground by developing “Desert Encounter.” Participants travel to the desert—in Sinai, Jordan, or elsewhere—to meet for several days together. There, they live in Bedouin tents. The desert provides a neutral atmosphere where participants must work together to deal with the challenges of the environment. As stated on the Musalaha website, “The challenges of survival and cooperation provide an excellent occasion for relationships and open communication.”⁶ Distractions from home environments are minimized. Participants cannot simply go home at the end of the day; in fact, they must deal with their counterparts for several days—usually a week.

Another principle is the requirement that there be a *balanced situation*, that is, neither side will have the advantage in the desert retreats. As they drove to the desert sites, according to Sarah Atwood, “five or six people were placed in each car and, of course, at least one person next to you didn’t share your ethnicity. You’re very close to each other and you really have to listen to the other side in such a tight place. You can’t really get away if you wanted to. The only thing you have to do is listen.”⁷ Not only is there an equal number of Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians on the board of Musalaha, but each trip to the desert contains an equal number of Israelis and Palestinians. While some may be suspicious at first—as noted by Munther Isaac, “It is understandable that Musalaha is . . . viewed by some as pro-Palestinian”⁸—they learn to listen to each other. Each side has experienced significant pain—one side from the *Holocaust* and the other from *Nakba* (the term Palestinians use for the catastrophe when they were dispossessed and removed from their homes in 1948). The purpose of Musalaha is “not to compare, but to understand the other side’s pain.”⁹

In order to get people to talk in a situation filled with tension, there must be *no hidden agenda*. Clearly, reconciliation between these two groups is the goal. People must be free to express their pain, frustrations, and even anger. If there were not the protections of a board made up equally of Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians, it is likely that some potential participants would be

suspicious.

The opportunity to learn about the other first is essential in this process. Politics, although very significant in the minds of participants, does not come up in the conversations until people have learned about each other. Rachel Feinberg reports, “Evan and Salim [leaders of Musalaha] will tell you: you have to have many meetings before you can bring up politics.”¹⁰ Brittney Browning describes her experience:

Musalaha’s primary focus began with Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians, who both believe that Jesus is the only way of salvation.

The first day was spent in the *khan*, or large tent, at the main camp. Since we arrived early, there was a lot of time to get to know each other. We began with a game in which people were paired and interviewed one another. Amid chuckles and silly comments, we introduced each other to the entire group, and amazingly everyone became quiet as they were given a few facts about each person. There was genuine interest in each one’s background and identity.¹¹

Munayer provides several challenges Musalaha faces in developing relationships:

1. Division between “us” and “them.”
2. Dehumanization: He claims that this is the root of all evil and that they can tell that children already show hate by the age of 4.
3. Failure to see plurality with the other side: People tend to lump all together in the same way.
4. Suspicion of the other side: Must of this is due to ignorance; for example, only 12 percent of Israelis know about the 2003 Arab initiative for peace.
5. Self-fulfilling prophecies.
6. Moral superiority: Both sides claim this.
7. Perceived victimization: Each seems to take

a monopoly on this while ignoring other disasters. Each seems to want victimization.

8. Demonization: For example, the Christian Zionists from the United States come to see the sights of the military, Israel, etc., but do not come to visit Palestinian Christians or even the “holy” sites.¹²

Until Musalaha eliminates these challenges, the two sides will find it difficult to develop respectful interpersonal relationships that encourage listening to one another.

A corollary principle is that *change must begin at the grassroots level*. This means that individuals must listen to other individuals—as early as possible. Consequently, Musalaha regularly conducts sports camps for children and teenagers. Playing together on sports teams, swimming together, and enjoying food together allow people to see each other with genuine human interests and enjoyment. These activities take place *before* participants get into serious discussions of issues that may divide them. Building relationships comes first. Women’s groups are also a regular part of the program of Musalaha.

Clearly, given the impasse in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in the last 60 years, those who live in the land cannot depend first of all on their governments to bring peace and justice. Reconciliation from the top down when there has been deep hurt is extremely difficult. But putting people together on an interpersonal level where they listen to each other provides a significant opportunity for influencing their own governments to secure peace and justice.

Closely related is *bridge building*. Musalaha provides participants with the opportunity to learn about the other side. They learn that both sides have suffered. Yet they learn not to compare one suffering with another since it would then be easy to claim the higher ground. Through Masalaha’s bridge building, people eliminate barriers of ignorance. Rachel Feinburg clarifies,

Maybe I lived in ignorance, but the situation seems to have worsened. Maybe I’m more aware now. I read the newspaper and watch the news, but I certainly wasn’t aware of what was going on before I

came. You live in a bubble I didn't know all the little ways in which other people suffered. The press tells you what they want you to hear, and you live here and just don't know the other side.¹³

Musalaha builds those bridges.

Munayer describes what happens when the two sides meet:

Whenever Palestinians and Israelis meet with each other, on a personal basis, they see that they are actually quite similar, and can relate to each other on a human level. They see that the people on the "other" side are not all monsters, contrary to what they may have heard. The problem is, in their normal, everyday lives, they have no opportunity to meet each other, other than at checkpoints. So they begin to believe the lies they are told about each other. The sooner you counteract the negativity that they are subjected to through ignorance, the easier it is for them to recognize the truth and be set free. The only way forward is to break the cycle of dehumanization and stereotypes. Once we learn to see each other as humans, this is possible. Meeting with each other face to face is the best way to do this, and this is what Musalaha provides: a setting for that type of meeting to take place.¹⁴

Organizers of Musalaha recognize that true listening means providing a *safe place for people to explain their views*. As a result, Musalaha

creates a forum which does not champion any particular theology or political agenda, but which allows believers, regardless of background, ethnicity and theology pertaining to the Holy Land and concepts of justice, to come together to express and voice their concerns and opinions in a safe and secure environment. As such, these divisive issues are not neutralized or considered unimportant, but rather they are articulated in a loving and understanding environment which allows participants to enter into a process of reconciliation with each other.¹⁵

It is clear that when people do not feel safe, that is, when they believe their opinions will not be considered honestly, they will not talk. Agreement is not the first item on the agenda, but talking and listening is. Sometimes people get frustrated, and

frustration happens frequently when one person does not know the other.

For illustration, here is the early experience of Raed Hanania, a Palestinian in Musalaha who was placed in a group with an Israeli soldier:

His name was Mati Shoshani from Ma'ale Adumim. This is a very bad settlement. They have stolen so much water and land from Palestinians. When he started talking the first thing he said to me was that he was a soldier in Bethlehem for five years. He kept talking and I remember all the bad things that soldiers have done to me. I got up and walked away.¹⁶

Not long after this, however, he wondered if this might be an opportunity to purge his hate, so he found the soldier and began talking with him, pouring out all his stories of oppression from Israeli soldiers. The other man listened and acknowledged that he had seen even worse things from soldiers. Because of that encounter, he recognized that he could no longer be a soldier and a Christian believer at the same time, so he quit the army. These two men ended up praying together. No one criticized Raed for leaving the group for a time, but they knew the experience of being forced to remain in the desert for several days would allow for reconciliation, and that happened.

Of course, a *common foundation of values* is necessary for face-to-face communication. Musalaha's primary focus began with Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians, who both believe that Jesus is the only way of salvation. Given this common foundation, they know they must respect each other as believers. Reconciliation is a common goal. Both believe that reconciliation can happen through following Christ's example of forgiveness and healing.

Musalaha hopes to broaden its work to include people of other religions. Common moral values of respect for human beings, peace, justice, and security provide a foundation for the beginning of talk. When people refuse to meet each other face to face, reconciliation is impossible. One can see this problem in other international disputes as well. Demonization of the other side not only results in no progress but also further exacerbates the separation between peoples.

On the other side, *neither can people ignore their differences*. To stay only at the level of agreements would not solve problems of differences in theology, politics, and justice. After a foundation of respect for each other as human beings has been established, participants can and should deal with differences. And they must do so without preconditions (beyond the basic, common values of respect for each other, etc.). The problem of preconditions by participants in Musalaha is described by Charlotte Williams:

On both sides of the conflict, believers have attached various pre-conditions on coming together to reconcile. Some believe that the process of reconciliation can only begin once Jewish restoration the Land of Israel is declared as objective truth by all involved. In this context, reconciliation has come to mean that my true interpretation of Scripture must over-ride your false interpretation of Scripture, before we can enter into a process of reconciliation. This is an inherently violent view employing holy war-type theological hegemony, and alien to the life of service and humility which should be adopted by the believer, and which recognizes with grace and charity that my enemy is also a child of God. Others argue that a pre-condition for reconciliation is that the dictates of justice are met, including the end of the Israeli occupation of the territories. They believe that to meet before this is to co-operate with the “normalization” process which accepts the status quo and legitimizes the confiscation of land, the settlements and the multi-layered legal system which keeps the Palestinians as second class citizens.¹⁷

A challenge for some participants is that of discussing controversial issues after they have formed their friendships. They fear that disagreements will hurt their friendships. Yet,

While we should have respect for each other, and should avoid deliberate antagonism, we cannot allow our friendship to stand in the way of an open, honest, and painful (if need be) discussion of the conflict and the issues that come with it. In fact, we should discuss these issues *because* of our friendship. In the context of friendship, a meaningful discussion is possible, whereas if the foundation of friendship does not exist, people will rarely even listen to each other.¹⁸

Another example of how difficult, yet possible, it is to discuss significant disagreements when friendship has been developed is the true story of Bashir and Dalia in Sandy Tolan’s *The Lemon Tree: An Arab, A Jew, and The Heart of the Middle East*.¹⁹ Tolan examines the Mideast conflict through the story of two individuals, a Palestinian and an Israeli, Bashir Khairi and Dalia Eshkenazi, who both claim the same house in the town of Ramla. This story is about two families, the Kahairis and the Eshkenazis. The Palestinian family, the Khairis, had built the house in 1936 and planted a lemon tree in the yard. They lived there until the war of 1948, when they were forced into exile by the new Israeli army. Bashir Kahairi was six years old at the time of the exile. A few months later, the Eshkenazis, a family of Bulgarian Jews, arrived in Israel after fleeing from the Nazis. After being told that the house had been abandoned, they

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moved into this stone house. The Eshkenazis’ only child was Dalia, who was 11 months old when her parents came to Israel. The Khairis remained in refugee camps after being forced from their home. After the 1967 war, Palestinians could move more freely through Israel, so Bashir set out to find the house with the lemon tree. Interestingly, Dalia let him in and thus began a conversation that would last for the next forty years. While they did not visit together often, they did keep up correspondence through letters and visits and more. Respect for each other prevailed even though they did not agree on all political issues.

Theology, like political issues, is a significant area of difference between the two groups most active in Musalaha. In this case, the theological differences have to do with who owns the land. While separating theological differences from

political differences is hard, there are issues *deeper* than politics.

And considering those deeper issues, leaders in Musalaha recognize that *once people have learned to listen to each other, they must find a way toward reconciliation*. Therefore, they continue to develop a curriculum for reconciliation. Briefly, Munayer describes the following obstacles to reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians generally:²⁰

1. Finding a forum to develop relationships and trust: He claims that trust does not exist now.
2. Dealing with issues too quickly: In Israel today, there is a huge imbalance of power, income inequity, and military inequity. Israel does not need peace because it has power.
3. Reconciliation as ignoring reality or maintaining the status quo.

He offers these stages of reconciliation:

1. Beginning relationships: Much of this has been described above.
2. Opening Up: Participants must be allowed to unload grievances and engage in trust-building exercises.
3. Withdrawal: Here grievance is met with grievance, and sometimes they feel their suspicions confirmed
4. Reclaiming Identity: Through trips to the desert, participants learn to cooperate without sacrificing their own identity.²¹

Musalaha's curriculum, then, "deals extensively with justice and is attempting to develop a theology of reconciliation, which will incorporate justice, as well as mercy, peace, and love, and see the cry for justice in the context of the cross."²²

Essentially, Munayer argues that we need to know the narratives of both sides in order to reconcile them, or at least to bridge them. That knowledge requires extensive listening. Furthermore, he asks that we help each side to accept and respect the validity of the competing narratives.²³ These two bitterly contested narratives make listening hard to practice. But there is no other way for reconciliation.

The challenge of listening goes far beyond the reconciliation of these two little groups of Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians. It extends to the entire population of both Israel and Palestine. But much more than this, it extends internationally. In this case, it involves the moral obligation of Americans, particularly Christian Zionists,²⁴ to listen to both sides in this seemingly intractable dispute. Also, the people of all Arab nations need to listen to both sides in this dispute, as well as to Americans.

The work of Musalaha provides a wonderful illustration of what can be done. Of course, it is not alone in getting Israelis and Palestinians to listen to each other, but it shows the challenges and hope of two groups that share the same religion while differing significantly on the political realities of their lives.

The Musalaha website puts the challenge very clearly: "It is our vision and hope that in listening to one another, in understanding each other's backgrounds and identity, in seeking forgiveness and to forgive, Palestinians and Israelis will build relationships that reflect their faith and bring glory to God and peace to this Land."²⁵ Munayer adds that walking down this path of reconciliation is "a narrow path, and hard to follow, but that in the end, it leads to healing. All other paths lead to destruction."²⁶

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