

DIALOGUE IS NOT THE GOAL

I'm journaling in the garden at the Austrian Hospice in Jerusalem when I receive the email. This is one of my favorite spots in the Old City, just a couple of hundred yards down from Damascus Gate. I sip my frozen coffee—my fifth in two days, to be honest. The Austrian Hospice has the best I've ever tasted. The generous application of whipped cream may play a role in that.

The garden here is a green oasis in the middle of this ancient stone-walled city. Earlier today, I walked through storied streets where millions before me have walked, for hundreds of years. I have visited few places in the world where I feel more connected to the long thread of history than here in the Old City. So many stories converge and diverge. People have journeyed to this place for countless reasons: love, war, greed, faith, certainty, power, wondering, wandering, tradition, longing, escape, belonging. They meet here in this city

for moments, then continue on. All these lives, these journeys, move and change, and this city with them. It's been here thousands of years, yet it constantly evolves.

The ding of my inbox brings me back to the garden. The email isn't long. In fact, I can read the whole thing in the preview text of the message. I wrote to a Palestinian professor a couple of weeks ago when I was home in Nashville. She didn't get back to me right away, but now she wastes no time getting to the point. My request was simple: I'd like to visit her university in the West Bank to speak with her and some of her students about their thoughts on reconciliation efforts between Israelis and Palestinians.

I glance at the preview text and open the message to be sure there's not more written. There's not. Though only sixteen words, her message contains a multitude of stories and frustrations and traumas and longings.

She's written, "This is an inappropriate conversation. We are being occupied. We should talk about justice not reconciliation."

THE EMAIL LANDS in my inbox on the anniversary of Michael Brown's murder by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. When Michael Brown was killed, I was on a retreat in Kentucky. The sound of a gunshot two states away was fueling a national movement that would change America. I came home to news reports of "angry protestors" and black people "rioting." People of color in Ferguson were rising up and taking the streets. They were calling for an end to the police violence that kills unarmed teenagers. They were calling for accountability for the officer who shot Mike Brown. They wanted the world to hear that black lives *matter*. In short, they wanted justice.

Ten months later, another horrific shooting happened. Self-proclaimed white supremacist Dylann Roof walked into Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and started shooting. He murdered nine church members that day, all of whom were black: Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Cynthia Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, DePayne Middleton-Doctor, Clementa C. Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Simmons Sr., and Myra Thompson. Only a few days after this, some of the family members of those Roof had killed faced him in court. And much to the surprise of the nation, some of those bereaved people forgave Roof. The news coverage about this response to white violence against black people was quite different. I remember words like *heroic* and *incredible* appearing in headlines.

This differing language awakened me. In both cases, an armed white person killed unarmed black people. In one case, bereaved and aggrieved people took to the streets demanding accountability and justice. In the other, bereaved and aggrieved people took the stand to extend forgiveness. And mainstream news—which in many ways is a manifestation of the white culture that dominates America—clearly preferred one response over the other.

This was my late arrival to a realization that many people, particularly marginalized and oppressed ones, have known for a long time: People in power prefer a victim calling for forgiveness and reconciliation to one calling for vindication. Forgiveness and reconciliation, it seems, suggest that the status quo may well endure; vindication suggests a reckoning is near. And reckonings rarely go well for those invested in nothing changing.

One thing this truth tells me is that we have developed quite destructive understandings of concepts like forgiveness

and reconciliation. To hear the word *reconciliation* and not imagine a radical shift in unjust power structures is to me to see reconciliation as morally bankrupt, which I don't believe it is. This usually happens because language of reconciliation has been used as a tool to perpetuate people's burdened existence, or because keeping reconciliation morally bankrupt and boring props power up a while longer. In such cases, reconciliation is no friend to people on the underside of power. But those with the upper hand cozy up nicely to reconciliation, as it's one of the names given to the type of experiences that allow people to say, "How can I be racist? I have a black friend."

It's no surprise, then, that calls for justice energize people needing to level power, all while it makes the powerful batten down the hatches. Justice means things need to change. Reconciliation, at least the way the word is often used, means maybe everything can stay the same, as long as we're friendly. Most people on top don't want to be brought low. Why would they? And most people who are held down want the boot off their neck. Why wouldn't they?

The professor's email is timely and unsurprising. I read it again. "This is an inappropriate conversation. We are being occupied. We should talk about justice not reconciliation." While I'm saddened that the word *reconciliation* has been wielded in such a way as to seem dangerous to her, I understand her response. I have spent enough time in the West Bank to not be surprised by her refusal to talk about this subject. Honestly, though, it's this relationship of justice and reconciliation that I want to discuss. I want to dig deep into the effects that manipulative peace talks have had on the Palestinian posture toward notions of reconciliation. I am disappointed we won't get to talk, but I'm not going to try to reassure her and convince her. I'm going to let it go. Too many Palestinians

I know have been wounded by poison-pill notions of reconciliation. She has no reason to trust me. I suspect that to her I'm just another American stranger whose tax dollars fund her oppression. I probably would have denied me too.

I'M IN BETHLEHEM NOW. It's the morning of my first scheduled interview. I tell the Palestinian friends I'm staying with that I'm meeting Ali Abu Awwad. They know his name. His family is famous, and he himself has gained recognition as a Palestinian peacebuilder and advocate of nonviolence. I first encountered Ali through the documentary *Encounter Point*. That film was made in 2005, though, and I'm curious to see how his thoughts and work have changed.

I tell my friends I'm meeting Ali on his family land. His father bought the land as a legacy for his children in the 1970s after the trauma of 1948¹ displaced the family from Al-Qubeiba in Israel, leading to a series of exiles and border crossings, before returning to the West Bank to build a home in the nearby town of Beit Ummar. This family land lies along the highway near the Gush Etzion settlement junction on the road to Hebron. Settlements are Israeli towns built inside the Palestinian territories. International law considers the settlements illegal. Palestinians consider them colonies, one of the more permanent expressions of Israel's attempts to colonize Palestine. I agree. Whether you support settlement expansion

1. In November 1947, the United Nations partitioned Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab one, which the Jews accepted and the Arab Palestinians did not. In the early months of 1948, Jewish paramilitaries, which would soon become the Israeli army, began removing thousands of Palestinians from their homes in certain border areas and around Jerusalem. On May 14, Israel announced its independence, and the next day, armies from surrounding Arab nations invaded, sparking a war with Israel. From the beginning of 1948 until the eventual ceasefires of 1949, over 750,000 Palestinians had been displaced. For Palestinians, this is called the *Nakba*, the Catastrophe.

or not, it is true that many, if not most, Palestinians consider settlements to be one of the largest obstacles to peace.

Ali has built a small shelter on his family's land, with a dream of creating a Palestinian nonviolence center. This place is also the site of the very thing I want to talk to him about: dialogues he hosts with the Israeli settlers nearby. When I tell my friends about this dialogue project—called Roots—they laugh out loud. I suspect a lot of Palestinians would have the same reaction. Some would see talking with settlers—who in many respects are the most extreme of the Israeli population—as a waste of time; others would see it as traitorous. In 2012, I spent a few months in Hebron with Christian Peacemaker Teams, a multifaith network transforming violence and oppression through nonviolent partnerships with people directly affected by deadly conflict. While in Hebron, I was advised not to talk with Israeli soldiers for fear of appearing I was normalizing the occupation. Talking with settlers wasn't even a consideration.

“I know it sounds really extreme,” I say to my friends. “That's why I'm curious. Ali's a dedicated peacebuilder. I respect and trust his wisdom in this work, and so I want to hear why he thinks meeting with settlers is the right approach.” They ask me to report back, and I catch a taxi to the bus station.

I find a van—called a “service” around here—that's heading from Bethlehem toward Hebron. Gush Etzion is on the way. I take the middle seat in the middle row, between a young woman and a middle-aged man. The man has a friendly smile. On the way, we exchange few words, since we don't speak each other's languages. Mostly, we shake our heads at erratic drivers. As we near his stop, his hand, which has been resting on the seat top behind me, moves to my head and gives my hair a gentle tug. I look at him, surprised. He just nods and

says, “*Ahlan wasahlan*, most welcome.” When the van stops to let him out, he tugs my hair once more for good measure.

Midway through the drive, the passengers all start gathering the fares for the driver, as if on cue. The young Muslim Palestinian woman sitting on my left stops studying for her summer exams for a moment and reaches in her purse to retrieve money for the taxi. I search my wallet for some shekels. I have no idea how much this costs, and the woman to my left can obviously tell. She holds up all the fingers on her right hand and says in lovely English, “It’s five shekels.” I smile, thank her, and look in my wallet. All I have is a hundred-shekel bill.

“No change?” she asks, seeing me hold up this unhelpfully large bill.

“Unfortunately not,” I say, embarrassed. I ask her if the driver would take the hundred.

“How far are you going?” she asks. I don’t know the name of Ali’s land. The only name I know is that of the settlement bloc that’s risen nearby. I don’t want to tell her that I’m going to Gush Etzion, though. I’m not sure I can explain the nuances of why I’m getting off there.

I do not want this kind Palestinian woman to think I’m in support of settler colonization of her land. I’m not. In fact, I’ve dodged Israeli military gunfire marching in solidarity with her people’s struggle for freedom. It feels important to me that she know I’m not another uncritical, uninformed American. But then I decide none of that is her problem. She asked me where I was going, so I tell her and brace myself for a justified look of disdain.

“The settlement?” she clarifies.

“Yes, *mustawtana*,” I say.

She smiles. I didn’t expect that. “Here,” she says, producing another five-shekel coin, “I will pay for yours.” I definitely did

not expect that. I protest—strongly—but to no avail. She waves me off, hands her coin to the driver, and returns to her studies.

I WALK DOWN A LONG DIRT ROAD to reach Ali's place. Per usual in Palestine, I'm offered coffee before I've really said hello. I take a seat in a yellow chair in the outdoor common space under a large awning made of tan tarp. Ali sits next to me. His brown watch matches his shoes, and his greenish-gray button-up is tucked into his blue jeans. His black hair is still as curly as it was in the videos I've seen of him, and his face is weathered and kind.

Having watched *Encounter Point* many times, I know a bit of Ali's story. I know his brother was shot dead by a soldier at a checkpoint. I know Ali joined the Parents Circle-Families Forum, an organization of bereaved Israelis and Palestinians using their shared suffering as a tool for reconciliation. I know Ali gained international notoriety for speaking out for non-violence even in the wake of his brother's murder. I know some Palestinians find him inspirational because of this, and others find him problematic.

Sitting with him now, I feel his sincerity, as if he has woven it into a quilt and wrapped it around my shoulders. His wisdom and abilities are in high demand, and yet he is sitting with me, an American writer he's never heard of, and treating our conversation as if it's the only thing happening in the world. That type of presence is hard to come by.

Ali asks me about my project.

"I'm spending the next few months traveling around your country, Northern Ireland, and South Africa to meet with peacebuilders and listen to their stories and wisdom about the possibilities and problems of reconciliation."

“And what have you learned so far?” he asks.

Fair enough. If I’m going to ask him questions, it’s only right he gets to put me on the spot too. I reflect on the email I received at the Austrian Hospice in Jerusalem and the thinking I’ve done since.

“I’ve learned that reconciliation efforts can be problematic if we aren’t careful. There’s something about the language of reconciliation that can seem friendlier to those in power and an enemy to those suffering, while language of justice may be the exact opposite. I’ve learned that if pursuits of reconciliation are not intimately tied up with works of justice, then so-called reconciliation may be unhelpful. In fact, it may actually be harmful.”

Ali flashes a wide smile. “Bravo!” he says, nodding. “This is very important.” And then he starts in, talking first about the reconciliation efforts he was once part of a decade before. “We used to meet—Israeli and Palestinian activists—we used to meet in five-star peace conferences where we hug each other and eat hummus and we feel good about ourselves. And we think we make peace by doing that. And this is nice. This is good, really. Knowing is very important. But what is next, in a practical way, that will serve people’s life conditions? Peace is not to create another bubble. Peace is to bring all the values of legitimate rights into harmony with our daily movements.

“I don’t want to hear a nice speech from Israelis. This is not my goal. *Dialogue* is not my goal. Dialogue is a tool, a carrier from one side’s truth to a bigger truth that also includes the other side. But also, dialogue is not necessarily a place of comfort. Dialogue can be so tough sometimes, especially when it is between enemies, when they have no idea who the other side is. But at the same time, I believe that dialogue for two traumatized nations should be a secure place for arguments.”

This is the second time in a week now that I've heard that sentiment: Dialogue isn't the goal. It's a method of achieving legitimate rights for all people, to improve people's life conditions. And if it's not the goal, then what's the point? I listen with full attention to Ali as he continues talking, telling me why he's in dialogue with the settlers surrounding his land.

"I will speak to anyone about my freedom," he says. "When I came here, I was not expecting Mandelas to come out from these settlements. I knew very well that I am dealing with the toughest community in Israel. And I know that my suffering didn't come from nice left Tel Avivis." He's talking about the political leanings of Israelis in Tel Aviv, the largest and most liberal city in Israel.² "My suffering comes from these settlements," he says pointing to the area surrounding us. "The conflict will never change as long as we think we only need to see the humanity of each other's identity. This must happen, yes. But we must also change the *behavior*. It is not the *identity* of Israelis, of these settlers, that is occupying my country; it is their *behavior*."

Ali says he wants the settlers to know him. He wants to open a window to their community, even a small one, so they might see the consequences of their behavior. The impact of their fear. He hopes to call them away from that fear.

"Don't use that fear," he says. "Don't let it blind you. Because the minute that you do that, you are not victimizing just me or my people; you are victimizing yourself. And this fear of the Jewish nation has become an identity, a bubble

2. If you google this claim—that Tel Aviv is the largest city in Israel—you will likely find sources that list Jerusalem as the largest city. The list usually goes: Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, West Jerusalem, and so on. This means that the Jerusalem listed first includes East Jerusalem, the part of the city claimed by Palestine as its capital. To do that is to normalize Israel's occupation of that part of the city, to ignore the contested nature of it, and to erase the Palestinian claim of East Jerusalem as its capital. I thus list Tel Aviv as the largest city.

around Israeli politics. And whether we like it or not as Palestinians, that fear is our biggest enemy. Because of that fear, we've become occupied."

A group arrives. It seems Ali was scheduled to address this group at the same time as our conversation. Works for me. I'll listen to his talk and then follow up after.

He begins with an overview of his story. "I was born in 1972 to a refugee family from 1948." When he says 1948, he's using shorthand to reference what Palestinians call the Nakba. In Arabic, it means "catastrophe," and it refers to the displacement of 750,000 Palestinians in the months surrounding the establishment of the state of Israel in May 1948. Ali's family was one of those displaced. He was born a refugee in the West Bank, separated from the land his family had called home for generations.

Ali tells us he was born into a very political family. His mother was one of the popular leaders of the Palestinian liberation movement and was close to the infamous Yasser Arafat. He says of that time, "We drink politics, we eat politics, we breathe politics under this title of resistance. We are the heroes who are resisting the occupier." Eventually, his home came under fire from the Israeli military. Arrests. Beatings. He saw his family humiliated and brutalized by Israeli soldiers for their resistance. Ali says, "Sometimes people ask me why Palestinians educate their kids to hate, which is the most—I'm sorry to say it—the most stupid question. Because if you live in such conditions, I'm not sure you need a specific curriculum for hate."

Ali tells us how, at seventeen, he became trained in the use of weapons and hurled stones at the Israeli military during the first intifada, the first national Palestinian uprising. It began at the end of 1987 and ended with the Oslo Peace Accords in

1993. Though he never used his weapons training, Ali and his mother were arrested and tortured numerous times during the intifada. One of Ali's tortures lasted one month and six days.

"And I promise you," he says, "at that time, I was dreaming, hoping that I would die any minute rather than face all of that. I was seventeen years old." A couple of little puppies run into the circle of chairs and begin playing at Ali's feet while he tells us about his torture. The Israeli interrogators wanted him to give up information on his mother. He refused, and Israel sentenced him to ten years in prison.

"I was totally broken," Ali says after a pause. "Because I had dreams. I wanted to travel. I wanted to study. And I had a crazy Palestinian dream to be a pilot. Because where to fly? I have no passport. Who would accept me at all? But you know," he says, smiling, "kids dream. And maybe that dream was just because I wanted to be higher than this environment that raised you to hate *yourself*, not just your enemy."

Despite the devastation of such a sentence at such a young age, Ali says prison was the first place he felt he had dignity. His fellow prisoners created an organized education system to keep their minds and resistance active. Incarcerated, he learned the principles and practice of nonviolence. Hunger strikes became a primary tool for getting the things they needed. Upon his release after the Oslo Accords, Ali joined the security forces for the newly formed Palestinian Authority (PA). One of the PA's responsibilities was to prevent Palestinian violence against Israel, which was a complicated job for Ali.

"The PA's responsibility was to stop violent attacks," he says, "but we were also being challenged by the continuation of the military occupation on the ground. So we couldn't prove to the Palestinian nation that violence is illegitimate because we couldn't bring political rights to their lives. So

I became embarrassed and ashamed by peace. We signed a peace agreement, but it has become a piece of paper. Peace is not to sign a piece of paper; it's to bring what is on paper to the ground. To change life conditions, to bring independence, security for both sides.”

I can see why Ali has become a leader. He's not building a peace brand that relies on inspirational, vague language about bridges and getting along and seeing the humanity in one another (all of which are important). He's talking about actual concrete improvements to the quality of one's life. If peace-building isn't dealing with that, then it's not building peace.

What he's talking about now is his *lived* experience with the kind of stuff I've only studied. In graduate school in Belfast, we discussed how pieces of paper don't make for peace. That's not to say peace accords are irrelevant. The language of those accords is essential in mapping the path forward. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel is often quoted as saying, “Words make worlds.” But people on the ground then have to populate those worlds with the building blocks of peace. So I get what Ali is saying—a blueprint isn't a house, and a peace accord doesn't mean there's peace. It means there's an agreement to try to *build* peace. As peacebuilder John Paul Lederach says, what you really need is people for the *day after* the agreement.

Ali says that during the second intifada, which erupted in late 2000, he was shot in the knee and had to seek treatment in Saudi Arabia. This is the part of the story I'd heard before. Ali's mother went to be with him.

“After one month of being with my mother,” Ali says, “I heard my older brother Yousef, thirty-one years old, was stopped at the entrance of my village Beit Ummar and very violently killed by an Israeli soldier. He had two kids, and he

was the best human being I have ever met. Everyone loved that guy. He was unarmed and never engaged in any violent actions. There was an argument with a soldier that cost him his life. So what do you do after all that?”

I think of all the stories in the United States of black people shot dead by cops who decided that, like these soldiers, their guns were the quickest and safest way for them to end the interaction. And honestly, I have no idea what you do after all that.

“Before I was born, after I was born, until now,” Ali continues, “a story of suffering. The normal reaction is revenge. By revenge, you want to create a punishment. You think that revenge is to create justice. But what kind of punishment is just? The pain is so huge, the revenge must be more so. How many Israelis do I have to kill to bring him back? How many Israeli mothers must cry to experience this salty taste of my mother’s tears? But if all Israel could disappear, my brother would still not come back. So what can justice be? Is it to punish the perpetrator? This won’t be enough to heal that pain. My brother’s life is more holy than anything. When God created all this, he made it for us to enjoy from it, not sacrifice from it. How do we create a normal act from an abnormal environment? So I was stuck—conflicted between my political mind that was convinced in prison about nonviolence, and between my bleeding heart.”

I hear the sounds of a helicopter overhead and cars on the highway nearby as Ali recounts for us his entrance into the Parents Circle. An Israeli religious Jew, whose son had been captured and killed by Hamas, paid his condolences to Ali’s family and invited them to join a group. This group comprised Israeli and Palestinian families who had been bereaved through the years of killing. This shared sense of loss is the common

ground where they stand to see each other's equal humanity. Ali was shocked that such a group existed.

"Israelis don't seek for peace," he tells us, describing the narrative he'd developed at that time, after more than two decades of painful experience. "Even victims in Israel seek revenge. It was shocking that an Israeli was calling us, 'Come to our home.' Israelis never call to come to their home. They come and damage. They don't come as guests. And Israelis don't see us. They don't recognize our pain. They don't recognize our rights."

In 2001, when he met families involved in the Parents Circle, it was the first time Ali saw an Israeli not as *occupier*.

"I couldn't even in my imagination imagine that Jewish people have tears, or they have feelings regarding what they cause us," he says. "This is not the face that you see in checkpoint. These are not the same people. This is not the language or the behavior of the occupier anymore. Then I told myself if this group, who has paid the highest price in the conflict, are willing to act with us for a better future, everything is possible."

This possibility became his life. Ali dove into work with the Parents Circle. He traveled the world, attending conferences and summits, speaking to anyone and everyone who would listen. But eventually, he says, he realized he was living in a bubble. He was spending his time speaking with people who believed what he believed, who wanted what he wanted. People who were on his team, so to speak. All this was and is important. Building capacity among like-minded people is essential peace work. But still, Ali says, it wasn't the work he wanted to do anymore. He was done preaching to the choir. If peace was going to happen, for *real*, he needed to reach his *real* enemies: the settlers.

Here near Gush Etzion, Ali has helped begin an initiative called Roots. He creates a space where Israeli settlers and Palestinians can come together without needing any kind of permit to cross over borders or through checkpoints. Ali says it's about "transformation, nonviolence, and understanding."

"We don't speak about reconciliation ever," he says. "It's not there yet."

I feel such respect for Ali as he is speaking to us. Not only is he fighting an uphill battle with the settlers, but he is also risking the ire of his own community. Often when conversations about reconciliation come up, especially when these conversations assume the presence of dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis, many Palestinians recoil and condemn it as "normalization." In the nearly twenty years I've been traveling here, I've heard this word often. Tremendous power imbalances are at work through the occupation. Pushing for dialogue can come dangerously close to normalizing the disparate power realities on the ground, whether intentionally or not. For a Palestinian to show up and sit side by side with an Israeli can feel as if they are supposed to pretend all is equal. Their worth as people is equal, of course, but their lived experiences of justice and freedom are not. Ali's sitting with settlers will certainly spark anger in some of his compatriots.

But Ali tells us again that dialogue with settlers—or with anyone else, for that matter—is not his goal. "Part of the problem is dialogue has become a goal for many Israelis," he says. "Dialogue is not my goal. Dialogue is my carrier to freedom. So what are you expecting of me? To be a nice Palestinian that is always speaking about peace? I will not do that. I cannot do that."

The moment he says this, I know those words may be some of the most important I hear during my next three months of travel through divided societies. "Dialogue is not my goal.

Dialogue is my carrier to freedom.” In other words, dialogue as an end unto itself is an inappropriate conversation because it likely benefits only those in power.

I am thinking now of respectability politics, as it’s called back home. Of how in the United States, white people like me tend to have all kinds of ways we want people of color to express their anger. The first is that we’d like them not to be angry. Frustrated, maybe; concerned, okay. But what we really want is for people of color to assume we’re doing the best we can and (perhaps) to inform us *gently* of an occasional misstep so as to *encourage* us and not cause us feelings of guilt for the consequences of our whiteness. Given what Ali is saying, I’m assuming that this is true to some degree in Israel as well. “So what are you expecting of me?” Ali has just asked. “To be a nice Palestinian that is always speaking about peace?” I imagine that when Ali speaks about the injustices suffered by Palestinians because of the occupation, some Israelis listening may respond the way some—or most—white people back home do: “Enough talking about all the problems. Do you have a solution? If everything is so bad, what’s your plan for fixing it? And if you don’t have a plan, why haven’t you left yet since life is so miserable for you?” It’s hard to imagine solutions together, though, if you don’t agree on the problems. It’d be like medical professionals trying to agree on treatment when they disagree on the diagnosis. The diagnosis matters. To act like it doesn’t matter is to likely feel responsible, or at least fear you’ll be *held* responsible, for the disease.

When the news media started covering Ferguson and Baltimore and all the other black intifadas at home, I do not know how many times I heard a good-hearted white person say something like, “Why can’t we all just sit down and talk together? Why do they need to protest like this? Can’t we

all just dialogue together respectfully?” Ali has given me the language now to ask, “Dialogue to what end?” Because the dialogue can’t be the goal. We’ve got to dream beyond that. Dialogue must always be a tool in service of liberation, of more justice and equity and human rights. If it’s not, then it can become a means of maintaining oppression.

I return my focus to Ali. He’s mentioning the national nonviolent movement he’s spearheading called Taghyeer, which means “change” in Arabic. This nonviolence, he says, is about deepening trust within the Palestinian community, giving up acting as victims and taking responsibility for their fate, forcing themselves and the occupation they resist to encounter their humanity, and building up the power of Palestinians to work together for lasting change.³ He’s also talking about the complications of a one-state versus a two-state political resolution. He tells us that whatever path these two societies choose, there’s a price to pay.

“The question is,” Ali says, “are we able to accept the painful price of peace or the painful price of war? Because we are victims. The price of war is still more acceptable than the price of peace. And this competition of suffering between us and this competition of rightness keeps us dying. I promise you, Israel will not disappear. Palestine will not disappear. We are here. This is our destiny. Whether we are left wing, right wing, peacemakers, extremists—this is the reality today. So how will we be able to manage living here with values of dignity, freedom, peace, whatever, and stop this competition? It’s by knowing and acting, without denying the other truth.”

3. See more about Taghyeer at <https://www.friendsoftaghyeer.org/>. As of publication of this book, Ali’s primary efforts are ensuring the growth of Taghyeer Movement among Palestinians in the West Bank, and developing Karama (Dignity)—the Palestinian Nonviolence Center—on his family’s land. While supporting his legacy in Roots and its local efforts, Ali no longer represents or speaks for that initiative.

I glance at my phone to check the time. I need to leave soon if I'm going to make my next meeting. Almost as if he could sense this, Ali begins to wrap up.

“So peace, by the end of the day, is not just about partnership. It's about our choice as a Palestinian to adopt nonviolence to become an identity and carry us from suffering and injustice to freedom and dignity. This is what we believe. Even if we will not have Israeli followers, this is our choice. This is our strategy, and that's our belief.”

AFTER THE CONVERSATION WRAPS UP, I gather my things and extend my hand to Ali in thanks.

“Was this helpful?” he asks me. “Did you hear what you hoped to hear?”

“More than you know,” I assure him.

On the ride back to Bethlehem, I'm lost in thought. Driving through the heart of the West Bank, I look out the window. Israeli flags. Military towers. Barracks. Settlements. Soldiers. Ali's land is occupied. He has lived under the control of another government his entire life. And this has led him to know that dialogue and relationships matter because separateness can breed single stories. This life has also led him to know that dialogue and relationships only matter so much. If pursuits of dialogue and relationship with those on the other side are not actively leading toward a secure, peaceful, just, and equitable future for all involved, then they aren't worth having.

I'm grateful that Ali's story and the Palestinian professor's email marked the beginning of this journey. I wasn't expecting this.