

Jewish-Muslim best friends make peace by stressing fault lines

No, we can't all just get along, say the co-directors of the Tectonic Leadership Center. But we can still talk

BY MIRIAM GRONER | April 9, 2015, 12:10 am |

NEW YORK — Even as a teenager back in 1970s France, Samia Moustapha Bahsoun was vociferously anti-Israel. She was so passionate about the Palestinian cause that she and her friends would walk through the cafeterias on college campuses near her home and squeeze all the Jaffa oranges to a pulp, rendering all the Israeli produce useless.

“We were your older version of the BDS Movement,” she joked recently in a telephone interview with The Times of Israel.

Bahsoun, 54, was born in Dakar, Senegal, to Lebanese Muslim parents. She speaks seven languages and is an electrical engineer by training and a telecommunications executive and serial entrepreneur by trade. She moved to France as a child where she became a self-described “anti-Israel militant,” participating in and leading pro-Palestinian demonstrations throughout her teenage years. When she moved to the United States to attend college in 1979, she continued her work and took her protests with her to campus.

When in 1982 her grandmother and great-aunt were killed by Israeli raids over southern Lebanon, her anger toward Israel — and her activism — escalated.

It wasn't until 1985, when she was hired as a research scientist at Bell Labs, that Bahsoun met an Israeli for the first time as she found herself working alongside Israeli scientists from Haifa's Technion, the Israel Institute of Technology.

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Now 30 years later and living in Asbury Park, New Jersey, Bahsoun is still strongly pro-Palestinian, but her advocacy work has taken a decidedly different route.

Together with Jewish Zionist interfaith activist Brenda Naomi Rosenberg, 68, of Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, she is the co-founder and co-director of The Tectonic

Leadership Center, an organization that trains leaders in conflict resolution and cross-cultural communication. Unsurprisingly, most of their dialogue work revolves around the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In November Bahsoun and Rosenberg presented a workshop on Tectonic Leadership (TL) at the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom's (SOSS) retreat. The SOSS retreat was an interfaith conference held in Philadelphia for over 100 Jewish and Muslim women from around the US, who gathered to network and discuss ways of bringing interfaith dialogue to their communities.

With tension running high following the summer's war in Gaza, and with the women looking for new ways to address contentious topics surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Bahsoun and Rosenberg's workshop proved one of the most popular at the retreat.

"Israel killed 2,000 Palestinians in this war! 70% civilians! And you call this a war on Hamas?" Bahsoun confronted Rosenberg — her voice rising.

"Israel has the responsibility to defend its citizens from Hamas rockets!" Rosenberg countered, her tone matching Bahsoun's.

"By killing children and bombing schools and hospitals?" shouted Bahsoun.

"But Hamas is using children as human shields, Hamas is using schools and hospitals to send out rockets from!" argued Rosenberg.

"Hamas needs to fight the Israeli blockade!" exploded Bahsoun.

To the captivated audience, their skit seemed authentic. And Bahsoun is quick to point out that they're not in fact acting out a rehearsed performance. Their tension, anger and frustration is real. Their skit showed how a conversation on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict often pans out without the techniques their TL discipline teaches.

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In fact, the defining principle of their discipline is that unlike many other dialogue and negotiation groups which seek to bring people together by attempting to find the common denominator, TL doesn't require participants to change their long-held beliefs. Rather, using various meditation techniques, it teaches participants to use the inevitable tension found across religious, cultural or

political divides to come to a mutually respectful place.

"We believe that tension contains easy information," Bahsoun told The Times of Israel. "Tension

informed me as an Arab that there is Jewish fear. Ask any Arab around and I don't think anyone of them know that... They see Jews as being powerful in media and business. It's almost too great a paradox for them to grasp."

Bahsoun and Rosenberg met in 2009 through Debbie Ford, the celebrated transformational coach whose theories on The Shadow Effect, the dark side she says are inside each person, helped define TL's theory.

"Debbie always used the example of a beach ball floating in a pool," Rosenberg recalled. "If you repeatedly attempt to push [a suppressed emotion] down to the bottom of the pool, it will continue to bob up."

With that refrain their credo, and after two years of developing their model, the TL founders launched their pilot program in 2011 with a five-day retreat in conjunction with the University of Michigan. The diverse participants included Jews, Muslims and Christians.

Though at first the tension was palpable, particularly among the Jewish and Muslim attendees, they said, they began to see results from day one.

"On the second day people still walked away from the room — but they came back," Bahsoun said. "We saw that every time there was a point of contention, a new level of understanding was reached."

At the first retreat, and in subsequent ones, they encouraged participants to work in pairs, rather than as individuals, as a way to take joint ownership in transforming the conversation around conflict. The pairs were tasked with using tension as a catalyst for discussion and looking at their role through the lens of evolution and not merely survival.

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"Our whole concept is based on looking ahead towards the future," Rosenberg said. "I leave history to the historians."

Since then they have trained groups in colleges and universities, as well as community organizations across North America. They've even brought their workshop to Jordan.

Their discipline, they claim, can be used to resolve any tension and is translatable to any field. Bahsoun has used TL theory to win contracts in tight bidding wars with other telecommunications vendors.

They're the most unlikely of partners. Bahsoun, the scientist, has a lingering French accent, no-nonsense attitude and long history of anti-Israel activism. Rosenberg, the self-proclaimed fashionista, is warm and chatty and an ardent Zionist with over 10 years of experience in interfaith work. She was, she proudly said, part of the first interfaith discussion in Michigan

between Muslims and Jews following 9/11.

Bahsoun is the former executive committee president of the International Telecommunications Council for Lebanon and visits Lebanon at least once a year to visit family. Rosenberg is a former fashion executive (senior vice president of Federated Allied Department Stores) and is heavily involved in local Zionist chapters. She makes a trip to Israel at least once a year.

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Yet they're the best of friends. They speak so often on the phone that when the telephone rings in Bahsoun's home her husband assumes it's Rosenberg. They Skype almost weekly and, like any old girlfriends, they go shopping together. Rosenberg picked out Bahsoun's outfit for the SOSS conference.

But their relationship didn't start off this chirpy. Back in 2009 when Rosenberg picked up the phone to call Bahsoun for the first time after Debbie Ford's suggestion, she was met with a hostile and uninterested

interlocutor who accused her of using the Holocaust to validate the Zionist cause.

"I wanted to hang up the phone and end the conversation... I figured it was totally hopeless to enter into conversation," Bahsoun recalled.

But Rosenberg, with years of experience in dialogue work under her belt, was patient — and very determined. She responded calmly and respectfully, giving Bahsoun the space to air her grievances. It was this first phone call that led to months of discussions and the building of a long-lasting friendship.

Today, as if on cue, they finished each other's thoughts, chuckling as they recalled their first conversation six years ago.

"We're kind of magical together," Rosenberg said.