

## *Conflict and Compassion in a Global Community*

Excerpts from a plenary session at the  
Authentic Leadership Summer Program

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### 2. TWO STORIES FROM THE MIDDLE EAST ZOUGHBI ZOUGHBI AND YITZHAK MENDELSON

**Zoughbi Zoughbi:** I appreciate being here, and I'm happy to be with you today. My name is Zoughbi Zoughbi. You can call me by either name. [Laughter] I am from Bethlehem, Palestine, next to Israel. I am an activist, and I run a center called Wi'am, which is an Arabic feminine word meaning "cordial relationship." I spend my time as a mediator. And, you know, business is good there. [Laughter.]

I come here on a journey of healing and compassion, to learn more and to look for synergy, and to put myself in the shoes of those who are ahead of us and to try and learn from their experiences. I am also here to share my experience, which is not very difficult.

I consider this situation to be promising. I appreciate this program and the people who are in it and who are celebrating their stories and their experiences.

My journey of compassion started when I was a kid. I was four years old when Israel occupied the West Bank, in 1967. The seed of compassion which my mom planted in me has been growing ever since then. I remember when I was six years old, I had a terrible headache. Of course everything had been devastated as a result of the occupation, so we had no medicine, but my neighbor who worked in an Israeli hospital brought me an aspirin. I refused to take it because I thought it was a conspiracy; the Israeli soldiers would like to kill me. My mom said, "No, you take it. The best friend of your dad was a Jew. You should take it. There are things in Israel which are good."

I couldn't believe that, because what I saw were rifles. Later I went to the United States to pursue peace studies. I was a Palestinian studying peace at the time of the occupation. What kind of work would I do?

When I graduated, I was happy, and I went back home with my wife, Donna Reed, who is a Hoosier from Indiana—don't hold it against me please [laughter]. Her peace studies professor at Manchester College, Ken Brown, was planning to visit the Holy Land, Israel-Palestine, and he asked me to be his guide.

My wife and Ken Brown asked me if I had ever visited the Yad Vashem, the holocaust memorial. I said, "No." They said, "Would you be so kind to take us there? And we would like to visit different places in Israel, talk to different people, and also go to the refugee camp." Finally I said, "Well, why not." But I was reluctant to go. What would be the price if an Israeli soldier asked me for my identity? What would be the cost if they discovered a Palestinian in West Jerusalem? Prison? A beating?

When I entered the holocaust museum, I couldn't hold myself, and I cried. I saw the different chambers and I cried. The rationale behind my crying came later, as a reflection. I cried because this horrible holocaust had happened, and I cried because there are many massacres in the world, and many people are oppressed and their stories are unknown.

I also cried for a third reason, which is that I am the victim of the victims. That was heavy stuff. I decided not to go on with the journey we had planned. I said, "I'll take you to these tourist places, we'll have lunch and meet people." But they insisted on seeing the political situation. They wanted to go to one of the 28 camps of Palestinian refugees who were cast out in 1948 and who were living under bad conditions.

While we were at the camp, an Israeli jeep came, and the soldiers asked us questions and then took the three of us to prison. The other two were put in one jeep and I was honoured to be in another jeep of my own. Later I discovered that the Americans had flashed their passports and were immediately freed. They gave me a blank check in prison. Do you know what I mean? This is a term we use when someone is kept in prison without being charged, without courts. This law came from the British regulation Emergency Laws of 1945. The British nullified this law, but the Israel government kept it, as if they were more British than the Queen.

I don't want to describe the prison, but I will tell about one thing that happened to me. There were twenty or thirty of us in a four-by-four-metre room. The captain came and asked us to count ourselves-1, 2, 3, and so on. We had no names, just numbers. Then he began to give us instructions. He said, "If the captain or any soldier opens the ventilator, you should stand up." I said, "At night or in the morning?" Other prisoners laughed, and he felt humiliated. He took me to solitary confinement, where I spent a lot of time in reflection.

This was another step in my life. I continued with my journey of compassion. I found that you cannot be compassionate with others unless you are compassionate with yourself. You cannot be compassionate with the other society if you are not compassionate with your own society. So it is a gradual growth.

The issue of Israeli-Palestine, and the issue of how to be compassionate with people but not with the system, was something I needed to understand. Because I wanted to change the system. I needed to travel and discuss it with other peoples.

I learned something important about this from my extended family. While I was on my tour of the States, I met with my kids' godmother, who is from the First Nations people. She is married to a white person, and I asked her in the absence of her husband-I was chicken to ask in front of him- "How do you feel about the white people?" She said, "Everyone is capable of doing evil." This has been a reflection for me: I could be the oppressed, I could be the oppressor.

This growth in the journey of compassion led to different trips and different studies. My trip to Shambhala Institute was one of these. Through these studies I have learned one thing: If you have grudges, it diminishes you. As a mediator at home, I am trying to learn how to be a healer, because mediation is not about solving a conflict per se, but about healing.

I will finish by telling a story about a family of three people—a husband, wife and mother. I see these three as resembling Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle East. Like the people in this story, everyone has a certain need, a certain wish, and they have been praying to God for ages.

One time, God sent a Genie to this family, who said, "I can grant you one wish." The father, who is like the patriarch in the Middle East, said simply, "I want to have a better life. I don't want to be poor any more." The wife said, "I need a baby; the baby will be our future. He went to the mother, and she said, "My eyes need to be recovered. I want to depend on myself." But the Genie needed just one wish, so he called for a meeting of the three parties. The shuttle diplomacy of the Genie had failed. But when the Genie tried to elicit one wish, the meeting turned into fist fighting.

A healer passed by and was invited inside. He listened to their stories, and he said, "I have a solution." The healer said to the husband, "Don't ask for anything for yourself or for your wife. Just ask God that your mother will be able to see her grandson having enough honey and milk on the table." [Laughter]

I believe that with such a healer, with such a journey, with such a compassionate approach to listening to stories, we will be able, as Palestinians and Israelis who have shed lots of blood, to move from what is going on to a better, promising future.

Thank you for making us agents for such a change. [Applause]

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**Yitzhak Mendelsohn:** I also want to say that I appreciate having been invited to come here to be with you, and that I can have a bit of rest from what is going on in my city, Jerusalem.

I was born in Mexico, and now I live seven minutes from Zoughbi's house, despite the fact that we cannot meet. I am a psychologist, and I am working with several groups of survivors of terrorist attacks and also with groups of Israeli Palestinians and Jews, and groups of Palestinians and Jews from the Territories.

I have visited the Bosnians and Serbs, to learn from the Kosovo conflict, and my journey has included three visits to Rwanda. Each time I learn a little more about how to find compassion and how to do something with my own people and with my neighbors.

[Turning to Zoughbi] Maybe the best thing I can do is to say that I'm really sorry for what the occupation has created for you, since you were four years old. I think that the occupation is doing a lot of damage to you. It is also creating a lot of damage to me—to my people and to my country. The situation that bothers your people and my people, the situation in which we are compelled to live, is full of paradoxes. One of the paradoxes is that you are a victim of the victims. Another paradox is that I am a victim of the victims as well.

You [Dave Steward] mentioned the tenth of May, 1994. The night between the ninth and tenth of October, 1994, was also a memorable night for me. On this night I was severely wounded by a terrorist attack. There were seven people wounded and two people killed. Unfortunately, one of the people killed was an Arab. So in a sense I felt a bit like you. You are a victim of victims, and I am also a victim of victims.

What happened since that night is that my life started to be full of paradoxes. The first is that I became special. I have to give you a little bit of background. Being a survivor of a terrorist attack before September 2000 is very different than being a victim of a terrorist attack after September 2000. They are two completely different stories.

When I was wounded, I was in a coffee shop. I was very lucky because my son was walking in the same street, and fifteen seconds after he turned to the left, the shooting started. I was too slow in my responses, and two bullets hit me. My son came back and went with me to the hospital. I was very, very crazy. I was trying to say, "Whose fingerprints do I have in my body? The Egyptian one or the Palestinian one?" It took me three days to recover. I received about 24 portions of blood. I was really crazy. I remember being very busy trying to find which of the two terrorists shot at me.

Since then I realized I wanted to recover my autonomy, my independence. I wanted to stop the process of being a victim by recovering myself, by using this horrible experience to prove many aspects of my humanity.

One way of doing this is to be compassionate to many of the people who have been killed since October 2000, when the political situation between us changed a little. The difference between being a victim who is a victimizer, and a victim who is only a victim dramatically changed.

My position is also very difficult because I consider myself to be a victim of the peace process. I was wounded after the Oslo Agreement, and I accepted that I was a victim of the people who hate the peace process, of people who hate peace. Whenever you have negotiations, hostilities and violence increase.

Now I think it is a little more difficult to be a victim, because people are no longer victims of the peace process—they are victims of real violence. What I discovered after Prime Minister Rabin was killed was that I needed more compassion towards my own people. I used to be very identified with the suffering of the Palestinians and a little less identified with the suffering of my people.

The real compassion we are trying to develop includes having a position, because you cannot be only compassionate. You must also have your own principles and your own ideas. At the same time, I can see how hatred is so blind that even with the best principles it creates the same process of destruction.

I don't really know how to finish my part in this presentation, because for me to be here, on the one hand, is a big gift. On the other hand, it creates for me quite a lot of suffering, knowing that it took you [Zoughbi] three days to come here [because of closed borders and travel restrictions], and for me it took only one day. It is quite horrible. Listening to your stories about the suffering you came through, not in my name but through my army and my government, is difficult.

Maybe I'm really willing to hear for once that there are some Palestinians who feel sorrow for what happened to me. And that Zoughbi can hear some of us feel sorrow for what we did to them. I also have the hope that when everyone has finished this conflict, the time of healing will finally arrive. In the "good" days between the Oslo Agreement and September 2000, we led dialogues, and we still have plenty of friends in the territories. We keep hope, and we keep the deep interpersonal relationships that we built, waiting for the time of healing. [To Zoughbi] I am sure that the checkpoint that divides your home from mine will finally come down, and then we will find healing together—me with your people, and you with my people. Thank you. [Applause.]