



Episode 15: The Rebels as Peacemakers with Kobi Skolnick and Aziz Abu Sarah

Transcript *(lightly edited for readability)*

Roxy Manning 00:15

Hi, I'm Roxy Manning.

Sarah Peyton 00:16

And I'm Sarah Peyton. We're the hosts of the Fierce Compassion podcast.

Roxy Manning 00:22

In this episode of Fierce Compassion, we talk with Kobi Skolnick and Aziz Abu Sarah, friends and colleagues from Israel and Palestine, who have worked together to foster understanding and dialogue between the two communities.

Sarah Peyton 00:36

In this session we learn about the importance of being a rebel in the journey to becoming a peacemaker.

Roxy Manning 00:44

We share some of the early experiences Aziz and Kobi had that led to their radicalization as youth and discover what made it possible for them to embrace positive peace.

Sarah Peyton 00:54

We explore the way that self concept can be lost into social identity, especially during times of war. We also learn what these peacemakers wish people outside the conflict areas knew about the conflict and its roots.

Roxy Manning 01:12

And we get inspired by the enduring commitment to action and dialogue.

Sarah Peyton 01:18

Join us as we explore how curiosity, connection, and empathy can create bridges for change with Kobi and Aziz.

Roxy Manning 01:33

Welcome to Fierce Compassion, the podcast that explores the power of compassion and creating an antiracist society. I'm Roxy Manning.

Sarah Peyton 01:40

And I'm Sarah Peyton. We're deeply moved to be joined today by friends and peacebuilders; Aziz Abu Sarah, who is also an author, cultural educator and entrepreneur, and Kobi Skolnick, who works in leadership development, crisis management, and organizational change.

Roxy Manning 02:04

So Kobi and Aziz, we're so so happy that you're joining us today.

Aziz Abu Sarah 02:08

Thank you.

Kobi Skolnick 02:09

Thank you. Glad to be here.

Roxy Manning 02:12

We know that you both have grown up in different communities that have been suffering for over 75 years. Can you each share a little bit about your backgrounds?

Aziz Abu Sarah 02:21

Yeah, I grew up in East Jerusalem and Palestine. And as a kid, I thought my childhood was normal. You don't know that it's not normal until you meet other people. So I grew up in a place that had zero development, zero playground, zero community, anything for kids. My activity that was kind of fun, as a seven, eight years old that we figured out was throwing rocks at soldiers, because what else is there to do even before we became knowledgeable of the whole Palestinian-Israeli conflict and occupation, and all of that. To us, there was just nothing else to do when you grew up in that reality. When I was nine years old, my brother was arrested from home, was tortured in prison, and died as a result of that when he was released from prison. And that shaped a lot of my life growing up, because that became a very monumental moment of shaping what I believe in, what I think, which was pretty much trying to get revenge for his murder, his killing, and from the people who did it. And for the next eight years, that was pretty much all I was focused on. But it's true that there were many other similar stories. My dad's cousin was killed by a group of settlers

at his work. Other people in my family have been arrested or killed as well. So it's been my dad's other cousin was killed in 1967, as she was escaping the war and the bombing. So this kind of story of death and suffering, it's been around for quite a while for my family and affects many of our thoughts and opinions. Obviously, there was a moment of transformation, but assume you want to talk about that later.

Roxy Manning 04:37

I definitely want to talk about it. And I'd love to just hear Kobi also share a bit about his background. And then we can hear like, what changed from this desire for revenge to the peacebuilding that you're doing now. Kobi.

Kobi Skolnick 04:51

Thank you. I grew up, not so far from Aziz when we think about it, in fact, 15 minutes. In fact, my first trips as a child were to Jerusalem, were to East Jerusalem. So can definitely could be... I can even set specific years, we can both be on the streets throwing stones at each other. Literally. I grew up south of Israel in a working class town called Kiryat Malachi, to a family of 10. I grew up very ultra-Orthodox. In the first 10 years of life, I did not even leave the kilometers or two of the neighborhood, it was from the religious school, to the synagogue to the house. But it was a lively community. I had a lot of friends, I went to only boys school, of course, it's orthodox. And it was the 80s right? 80s and 90s. I did not know much about the conflict, just to any people surprise, they don't understand it some, as Aziz said, when he shared his story, when we grew up as a child, it's not necessarily that you know, so many things about conflict. But, in my own environment, Palestinians were something... it's difficult to say those words now but we do want to be transparent... were like animals, they were like something that you cannot even look at, they will always want to kill you. They will come to your house and stab you. And I'm saying those things in purpose to to understand later to get a process of radicalization. So for me when the Oslo process started, when the peace process started, and many Israeli liked it, I and my community people hated it. Not only hated it, I was a activist in the local Chabad chapters and every time I would go to the intersection between center of Israel to the south and block it. I will organize my friends and we would put tires and put them on fire, will fight, would have posters saying Rabin is a traitor and against the peace. I got arrested when I was 12, because I bit a police officer because he tried to push me from the road that I was protesting against this. And that was my childhood until 13, 14, when I was so ultra religious and nationalistic that I even told my mom, "You know what? I don't like just ultra-Orthodox, I want to go ultra-nationalist. And I went to the Shiva High School in a settlement, in nearby Nablus, which again was a nice experience and very particular worldview, which was the nation, the Torah, a very extreme version of Jewishness in that perspective. And that was my growing up; a lot of hatred and, unfortunately, a lot of, as we go later, a lot of loss as well. Good friends and people, but also definitely active physically against the peace process and what I'm saying, "Oh, I could meet Aziz in East Jerusalem," because 12, 13, 14, 15, I would go there physically, and a lot of people, Aziz probably know those days, called the Jerusalem Day, and I will go with my friends throughout Jerusalem and throw stones and push Palestinian youth and get physical with them.

Roxy Manning 08:27

I want to ask something because I imagine that a lot of our listeners are from the United States. And so, that's what I'm hearing is Aziz describing having family members murdered by the Israeli police. And I'm also hearing you Kobi talking about Jewish youth going into where Aziz's family and people would live to attack, like they weren't coming into where you were, you were going there, but also some this place where you'd within indoctrinated to believe that they were coming to murder you. So, it sounds like there was a lot of indoctrination around - these two people can never see each other, but then also I'm also hearing Aziz's community was also suffering and being murdered, being attacked quite often. Am I understanding correctly what it was like then?

Kobi Skolnick 09:18

I think Aziz can answer from his perspective. For me, it's also lived experience in a small communities when people tell you the enemy is so brutal and for those communities it's a self fulfilling prophecies because you live it people tell you but when you go to the street you see it. And I think for a lot of Americans, or people who hear about the conflict, they don't see this nuance of lived experience, of trauma, that triggers, as Aziz spoke about, the family, the intergenerational. For us it's not something that's happening now; it's every event goes vibrate throughout the generations, throughout the last even 20 years, from our experiences. When October 7 happened, and then the world is caring suddenly about what - this horrible conflict, each of us in the communities around have been suffering for many years. So it's not just it's coming now. It's this complexity of the cycles of conflict, and how can we create something different?

Aziz Abu Sarah 10:23

Yeah, I think there's both perception lived experiences and reality. Most Palestinians feel the occupation on a daily basis. If you talk to Palestinians in Gaza right now, for example, it's a daily thing. It's not just a perception. It's not just a feeling it's, you know, you having things happening to you. That's true, obviously, for many Israelis, but I don't think for every Israeli in the sense, Kobi lived in Hebron, lived in the West Bank. So he was more close to Israel and Palestine and the areas of conflict. Many of my friends who grew up in Tel Aviv didn't have that, but they still would have the same perception, even if they didn't, because of what Kobi was talking about; if something happens in the West Bank, or if somebody was stabbed, it makes it, "Oh, they all want to kill us." And when people have a perception, they have a perception. You can't just brush it off, you have to talk about it.

Sarah Peyton 11:32

Part of what we wonder about and part of why we wrote the book together, was we were thinking a lot about self-compassion - how it touches these international and global issues, between the personal and the systemic. What self-compassion been like for you, Aziz? How would you define it? What kind of influences it had on you?

Aziz Abu Sarah 11:55

Are you talking about growing up? Are you talking about now? Because those are totally different things.

Sarah Peyton 12:02

Do you have a sense that there was self-compassion when you were a child?

Aziz Abu Sarah 12:05

No. No, absolutely not.

Sarah Peyton 12:07

Okay, then we'll go to now.

Aziz Abu Sarah 12:10

Yeah, so that's what I want to say; I don't think there was a self-compassion growing up, because there was a mission. And when you're on a mission, the focus of self becomes much less important.

Kobi Skolnick 12:23

I didn't impose an important point we can talk about later; the self, in that context, the self and social identity and in conflict, specifically, what happened to the self, it's important.

Aziz Abu Sarah 12:35

Yeah, so you don't focus much about yourself, you don't focus about your well being, you don't focus about your school, your future. None of that becomes important. When my brother was killed, I remember my mom thought always was an excuse. But it was real. When my brother was killed, I used to be the best student in class, grades-wise. From the year after, I never - I went from an A student, to a B, to a C student, within a year. And that's... it wasn't a coincidence, because suddenly, education became much less important. Who cares about what grades you're going to have when you're having a much bigger war to fight, something more important to care about? And so, that was the first thing I had to deal with. But even after becoming a peace activist, and after starting to work with some Israelis, I think you'll replace the mission. Self-care is something that takes many, many years to really address because you're still on a mission, there's something very important and you yourself is much less important than everything going around. And it took me probably at least about 10 years after even going through a transformation to start understanding that to be able to achieve something, you have to also take care of yourself, you have to also deal with your own trauma. And to me, it happened, I was working - I still remember I was working in Syria at that time, and the Syrian conflict, and I was in a refugee camp, not refugee

camp, internally displaced people camp, inside Syria. And I started feeling something off, I was angry. I was really mad about the reality there. And it was reminding me of a lot of things I saw growing up. And I still was fine, until I got home back to the States. And... when you're doing whatever you're doing, there's so much adrenaline, your body makes you keep going. And then I came back home, and that all collapsed, and I ended up in the hospital that night. I thought I was having heart attack, but I was I think too young for a heart attack. So eventually, the emergency room said you need a psychologist and you need a psychiatrist to deal with. That's when I started my journey of learning why it's even important to take care of myself. I started in the beginning, just because physically it was not possible to keep going. And then eventually I realized why it's also mentally not possible to keep going and to be productive without getting the help you needed and going to counseling and, and that in itself, trying to find the right counseling in a different country where people don't really understand what you're talking about. And they know this is true, even today, with many of my friends trying to find counseling in the States, with everything happening in Israel, in Palestine, and in Gaza, it's been a nightmare, to find the right people to go to and people who can empathize and people who don't have political views that makes them say, sorry, I'm not gonna even help you because of that. So this is a an unfortunate reality.

Sarah Peyton 15:57

And Kobi, how do you define self-compassion?

Kobi Skolnick 16:01

It is evolving. Over the years, it really evolved, I will speak for where I am now. I do remember having almost a decade ago conversation with Roxy about that. I'm talking literally a decade ago, and it was around, burnout compassion. There was a particular social movement in the States. And then I was communicating with Roxy to prepare for facilitation. And I remember giving and receiving so much, and with so many things happening that what Aziz is describing in this way, I was depleted, I gave so much that I was empty. And I expanded to see it and understand that. And then I started to do more meditation and talk and try physically, to get the the cortisol, stress hormone out for me, nowadays, self-compassion is making sure that I eat well, sleep well, and breathe. Nowadays, what I'm talking nowadays, because we, Aziz and me are here, but we're not really here. In terms of the war, our hearts and our people are suffering and everybody's communicating with us. Like even now that we do we get messages from the frontline and people are, unfortunately, hurt. So nowadays is small things, maybe later it will be more running and yoga or all of those deeper things. But right now, the minimum standards and I can eat well, can I sleep well. But I think a lot of people don't understand what it meant on October seventh for many of us. I did not eat for like a week. I couldn't sleep for a week. I couldn't... I talked to hundreds of people within like, few days, but my being was so diminished, demolished from within because of this work. Because we know what that means, what's happening, we can translate into the undercurrent of the society, we know what that mean to the psychology of so many communities, because of our path and self-transformation, that means that in each of those communities, if it's within Israel, there's like 20,000 different people and different opinions with the Palestinian society. And we're fortunate enough to meet so many people. So that impact on the psychology

and the historical trauma, we see it a little bit more [the raw of it]. And that, to be honest, is so so painful. And that's where the self-compassion is difficult. So as I'm going through that anger, because who the hell I am to start self-compassion now, when mothers cannot give birth, and kids are dying, because of man-made that could be stopped a week ago, two weeks ago, there is no reason to continue. Everybody knows the actors what's going on. So why? So if I do self-compassion, I feel it's either I put the kids or someone in front of me I say that's good for them. But it's difficult. It's difficult when you always get, and you know what's going on. Sorry that I'm going on and on because it is important point right? Because not only self-compassion is the secondary trauma. People talk about post-trauma, but it's secondary trauma. When you exposed long term, so many times, it's becoming part of you. And a lot of people don't get it and that's what Aziz is describing sometimes, I believe. Even in good psychologist or counselor - it's not even post trauma; it's ongoing trauma. There's no post, yet. It's been 300 more days, so it's not a post. It's trauma, trauma, trauma, all level, question your life, question your values. It's a shake to both societies that we don't even know how it will translate yet. It's so often taken into the realm of what do we do? When it's more about how do we sustain ourselves in the middle of war and of losing everything.

Roxy Manning 20:13

And I was really, I was really struck by the dilemma of self-compassion, that's focused on yourself, in this safe place, feeling almost pointless. And then the recognition that if you don't do that, then you're not actually going to be available to do the work that you want to do. And so that tornness around, there's so much to do, and I need to take care of myself. So I was really struck by that.

Sarah Peyton 20:39

And you had mentioned that you had some thoughts about the self, which seemed slightly different than the self-compassion question. Are you willing to say a few words about that?

Kobi Skolnick 20:52

Sure. You know, the self... And I'm not like a deep social psychologist. I think Roxy has more training than myself in these spaces, but in wartime, especially in continuously, the self identity completely changed in wartime. Whatever happened in September 11, is completely different. In Israel, Palestine, now, we've seen people change who they are 300 degrees. People that were peace loving, become what we call in our language [...], that the more far right you can ever imagine. And a month ago, they will sit with us and do peace activities. What happened? How would that change? I have an answer, but I'm trying to write in a book of something deeper, right. But when there's a continuous bloodshed, and you live in the society that is so centric in the national identity, your self becomes molded toward the national in a way that not many people outside the context understand. Most of Israelis disappeared their own personal, in a way, because now is the nation, is the neighborhood, is my friend that died. So I think a lot of time, when we try to have a dialogue with them, which in other times will work, now you cannot because that person is so trapped in their own social identity, that is threatened right now, is not

imaginative this death, he died, he died, did you have pictures in the psychology and you had to have the pictures. I have hundreds of people died the last three months. Aziz, too. So that self is changing as we speak with you, in both societies in multiple ways. And that is the inner work of war and conflict resolution that not many people are aware of it. Everything is changing now, and conversations are different, like I have different conversation with my family, when they have different opinions. I cannot talk to them the way I talk to Aziz even, because I have - I feel closer in wartime to Aziz, a Palestinian, then - I know my family will not like it - but to my family. Why? Because he can see my pain. I can see his pain, I can cry with him about Palestinians and Israelis. With my family, is limited. They cannot talk to me about those others. Why? Because the self is regular now, even though I'm part of a family, today until the war is ending, don't talk to me about those; they are animals and should be dead. So what I'm supposed to say? Not talk to my family? Some of them I will not. Right. So it's weird. The self in wartime, especially in continuously is...

Aziz Abu Sarah 23:28

I would add to that. I know, Kobi, you might disagree. I agree with what you said. But I think the biggest surprise to me was seeing how many people who described themselves as peace activists have completely reverted to self focus in the sense of "It's only my story." Israeli peace activists who will only talk about the hostages now, but they will not mention a word about what's happening in Gaza, because Gaza doesn't exist for them. And when you mentioned anything they're like, "Oh, I'm just focused on one mission." And obviously for Palestinian peace activist that's driving us crazy, because from our perspective, we lost a partner. And vice versa; there are Palestinians who didn't say a thing after October 7. And so for Israeli peace activists, they felt they lost a partner. And, overall i would argue the peace movement in general is in crisis because of this, because of this inability for most people to say what Kobi just said. We understand each other because we understand the pain each of us goes through. While, I would argue, today that is not the case for the majority of people even in the peace movement. I struggle when I see people I consider friends completely becoming one sided, ignoring everything happening, but it's unfortunately a real reality right now.

Kobi Skolnick 25:02

Because the social identity, the self, the self move towards social identity. So then the social identity in the social identity, I cannot - there is no peace right now, because look what it did in October 7. The slaughter, the brutality, stays so strongly. So, right now I'm in my own social identity. There is no peace at the moment.

Roxy Manning 25:25

One of the things that I'm really struck by is where y'all started, where you each described being, in that kind of nationalist place, as a young person, really kind of fighting for what you believed was the truth, to this transformation, where in the midst of war, in the midst where you're seeing members of your community, people who identify as peace activists, becoming more and more polarized, that you're each still saying, "And we can see each other, we can empathize with each

other, we can grieve together, we could acknowledge the horror that's happening for everyone." And I have so many questions, but I'm really curious about the transformation. What got you each from the child you were, who was throwing rocks, who was trying to beat up, you know, Palestinians, who was seeking revenge, to the person who said, "I am standing for peace, and I'm going to see the humanity of this other person, regardless of what's happening." And Aziz, I'd love to start with you if you're willing.

Aziz Abu Sarah 26:23

I think for me, it was meeting different kinds of Israelis, because the Israelis I knew growing up were all soldiers, were all settlers, were all people who I saw as kinda like Kobi said, but like, the other side, people who wanted to kill me, people who restricted my freedom, people who shot at me. I've been shot at many times. And so, meeting something different was what started my transformation. And it happened when I was 18 years old and I went to study Hebrew for the first time. And I studied Hebrew in a Jewish Institute for Jewish newcomers to Israel, immigrants, were everybody in the class was pretty much either Jewish or foreigner, except me and the teacher was Israeli. And that was my first encounter with normal civilians who we can have normal conversation with. And I still remember, I think one of the biggest movement, in my mind happened due to my teacher walking to me and just being nice to me and smiling and saying, "Welcome," in Arabic. I think she felt my uncomfot in the classroom. That was very confused, because I think that was the first time an Israeli has treated me as a human being. And it's not to say that there were every soldier I met was awful. There were some who are nice, but I never felt like a human being because they still had a gun, and had the powers to tell me whether to pass or not to pass a checkpoint. So it wasn't an equal footing kind of relationship. While in that class, it became more a human relationship, a friendship if you wish. And it took a while, it wasn't like on day one and she was nice to me and I was like, "Oh, okay, things change." It doesn't happen like this. I think often would like to believe this is how the world works. It doesn't. It takes a while, you question things, you start asking questions. And so for the next few months, I've started going through this process, building slowly relationship with the students in the class who - you know, was very interesting, they would say, "We never heard of a Palestinian peace activist," but I also told them, "I know, I never heard of an Israeli peace activist growing up." And we all know the people on our side, but know so little on what's on the other side that if I don't know it, then it doesn't exist kind of thing. They all want to kill us. That's what I see in TV. That's what they see in my experience, and therefore there isn't anything different. And that was a shock for them, because they thought there's a huge Israeli peace movement. So how could you not have heard of it? Maybe on the Israeli side, I didn't see it in my village. I didn't see it in my television. I didn't see it in the checkpoint, you know. So having those conversations and starting to ask each other questions and verify a lot of misconceptions and realize that we can care for each other and realize that we have the power to make our own choices, regardless of what others have done was such a redeeming thing. And that set me up on this path of wanting to learn other narratives, wanting to learn the perspectives and the perceptions from every possible point of view, regardless if I agree with it or not. And for years, it became a learning mission, just going around

and learning and visiting places and talking to people I heavily disagree with and trying to understand their points of view, and it set me up on everything I do today.

Roxy Manning 30:21

There's still a part for me, that's really curious. Because you're talking about just jumping into this learning mission, seeking out people who are different than you. And even that seems like it's huge, that a lot of people wouldn't have been able to do that. So there's a part of me that still wondering, like, what made that possible for you? Yes, this teacher approached you, spoke in Arabic, welcomed you, and for a lot of people, they would have still stayed closed, they still would not have been desiring to seek out and learn more and be curious. So, I'm so curious what it was that got you on this path that made you open and receptive to this?

Aziz Abu Sarah 31:01

That's a good question. I think, one, growing up in the reality I grew up in, makes you a rebel, in some ways, makes you willing to do stuff that very off the normal path. Like, I went to school, I was a rebel there. I barely attended any classes. I was very involved in politics. I rebelled against authority all through my life, and whatever people would tell me don't do, I'll go and do. So that's probably got in me this ability to just do things that are crazy. And then in the class, I think if we only met once, it would not have made a difference. I think if it was one instance, we met for 10 minutes, she was very nice to me, and then I left and never seen her again, I think it would have fallen flat. But because it was a sustained meeting, I went to that class every day. And I didn't go to that class because I wanted to, it was the only way to learn Hebrew, and that was the only way to eventually work and go to college and so on. Like, there was no other options, really, if I wanted to move on, in life. And, I felt I had to do that, I was forced in some ways to do it. But meeting day after day after day after day for four hours every day, eventually, you realize this is real, you realize her treatment of me and the other students were not just oh, she's smiling for a minute acting like she cares, but she doesn't. And that slowly makes you rethink like, why is she nice? What, what does she want from me? What's her ulterior motives? And eventually, and she did more than that. I realized, for example, she cared about my culture. So she would say, "I know this is a Hebrew class, but we're gonna teach Arabic culture as well." And I thought that was confusing. Like, why would she teach Arabic culture? So she would tell me sometimes, "Why don't you bring your favorite Arabic song, me and you will sit and translate it together to Hebrew, and then we'll play it for the class. And then we'll explain to them what it means?" And it's still a Hebrew class because we are doing it in Hebrew, but they are listening to Arabic music, they're listening to Arabic words, they're listening. So that stuff... she almost got me into working together without realizing we were working together. And I think it did help also the moment I left that classroom, there was a platform I could join. There were organizations that helped me quickly be plugged in. Organizations like the [Bereaved Families Forum](#), or the [Combatants for Peace](#), which I was very close and I eventually worked for parents' circle - the Bereaved Families Forum, which is a group of people who all lost family members in the conflict. So, I ended up being plugged into a platform, into some system, that helped me go through that transformation. And the same with the

[Combatants for Peace](#), which I'm still very active with. That I think helped me continue through my process.

Roxy Manning 34:19

We've had a couple of teachers on the podcast, and you've just spoken so much about the power of people, like, the teachers are peace activists. And that's one of the things that we always want to highlight. So that is such a moving example. And Kobi, I would love to hear about your transformation, too.

Aziz Abu Sarah 34:38

That's actually awesome. Because one of the main things I've been doing in the last seven, eight years is work with teachers. And mainly I tell them this story, to remind them of the power they have, that often they don't realize they have. Teachers change so many lives, and they don't often realize it, and it's just so powerful what they can do without even notice what they can do

Kobi Skolnick 35:07

This, just speaking of teachers, we did something for NBC Nightly News a month ago, and we put it on LinkedIn, and one of my ESL teachers reply to it. And I replied to her, and I said, "Whatever I do now is you is because of you." Because she would come at 7am, the class would be from eight to three - I took this intensive ESL at New York, the community college - and she would come at seven just because I wanted, I was motivated, I've been wanting to know English. I'm not talking for a week; weeks, weeks. And without her, I would not be able to speak with you and I still need to practice and get better, but she gets that foundation and it stays forever, not only the ESL itself, but to handle the diversity of the class, adult learners, I always respect - a lot of respect for teachers and educators. Speaking of which, when you asked me before that about my transformation. So, it's long, I've tried to put it in like three anecdotes, and connect them. So I will try to take it to like snap shot of three points of a narrative. You know, I grew up in a Hasidic community. Then I moved to the settler community, which is still Ultra, but a little bit not as ultra-Orthodox. And like any Israeli at 18, I did go to the army, and I was a paratrooper. And at some point, I find myself in Hebron City as a soldier, exactly when the Second Intifada, which is the second uprising of Palestinians happen. And to make the story short, there is a shooting and there's a lot of violence going on on the street. My commander, sent me with an another small units to a corner, and as we walk to the corner, kids or youth throw huge stones at us. Many times people think that people throw stones, but it's stones it's huge; if it hits you, you out, right? And we're getting those huge stones and my commander told me shoot. And we see the kids, but you're not allowed to shoot live bullets, at least at that particular point. You have to change it to rubber bullets. So, took me 45 seconds, and I wasn't as good as the other experienced soldier. And I'm looking around and it's literally the same street that I throw stones at Palestinians when I was 13, 14. Not a maybe - 100% is the same street. Actually, Aziz and me went to that street together with groups. And I realized at the moment, oh my god, this is me. I'm shooting at myself. And I'm saying there's a metaphor, but it was true - can be a red flag from my perspective. Okay, there's a

cycle here. He's throwing at me, I'm shooting at him, and I came here full of hatred... Took me a while to be a little bit less, because there was secular in Tel Aviv when I was in the army. And I'm like, okay, something's not okay here. Moving forward, there's many incidents like that and I'm realizing this is like a cycle; they hate me, I hate them, but what can I do? To make the story short, I'm finishing the army, the same week that I'm done with the army, my friends called me and tell me that my good friends got killed by a Palestinian gunman, in Nablus. So, I run to his house, to his family, and all of his kids are coming and jumping on me. "Kobi, Kobi!" This is the babysitters, babysitting for them. "How are you?" I'm like, "Their dad just died," and they didn't get it. So I said, "Okay, I'm not seeing...I have nothing to do." I stayed up for the seven days of the Jewish morning with the family. But this was back in the middle of the Intifada... shooting... the kids are traumatized. I'm staying with them for seven days. And then I'm staying late, more, to help the community. But I see how the kids come and say, "Where's papa? Where's papa?". And then other kids come in and the bullets in their car. Oh my god, this is the kids, but the parents brought them here. These are all ideologies, brought them here. The kids, their dad died, people are dying and it doesn't have to be like that. So a gunman, a young Palestinian man, came with a gun, AK47, to the settlement that I was in while the kids were playing basketball and start to spray them and killed three of them. And I was around few 100 meters from there. So I ran and tried to help and two of them died. Killed that night. And another one ran away, was able to hide, and a month later got killed in a suicide bombing in Jerusalem, although he escaped from that gunman. And the community went to his funeral. When they came back, there was another gunman, killed another six of my friends. And all of that in a small community in the most extreme ideological community in the West Bank. Why I'm telling you all of that situation - because two things happen that night. One, after my friends killed that young Palestinian gunman, that killed the students, I was sitting down with two paramedics, and one of them got a cigarette, and they looked at the scene and they're like, "Oh, my God, this guy could play with them in the basketball. Why did he shoot them?" And I was asking it not in an ideological way - why he press on that, to a 14 years old, other 14 years old. I wanted to understand it and I went to the States, just a week later, after those incidents, I was overwhelmed, with that mission in mind. Luckily, as I went through the depth of it, and after a few years in the States, I started to learn English and getting different psychology classes - going back to teacher, this Professor Tingley (sp) from Borough of Manhattan Community College, tell me look you have interesting things to say about process of radicalization, you should write about it. So I started to write how person become a terrorist, from a Jewish perspective, from a Muslim perspective, from all of those perspectives. And I dived in. Then it was academic and transformation, because then I met Roxy - I met you in 2010 - and I met Aziz, and I met other people that had the questions and they were willing to sit and dive in but also do, not only stay in questions. Aziz and me talked about it that you know, this social, oh, other people ask from other sides and question. So what are you going to do about it? Great, I'm transformed. And then so let's do a narrative with a friend Scott. Let's create experience where actual people can come to Tel Aviv, see the Jewish people, go to Bethlehem, sit with a Palestinian family. Nobody tell them how to think; they experience it with the people, not the media. And we did it. So then I find myself going to places with Aziz in peacebuilding groups, to Jenin refugee camp. I went to a lot of refugee camp with Palestinians, but Jenin is a particular one. Because even now, there's a lot of fighting there. A lot of Israelis died there in 2000, in the Second Intifada, and probably some of my friends.

And I said, I'm going all the way want to talk to everyone. So we went to places where I sit and can meet, maybe, someone that shot at my friends. But that was the point, I'm going all the way. I could die in all of these incidents. I want to understand why that kid shot my friend. Why I wanted to kill someone that throwing stones according to the rules, but I throw the stones, too. And I don't care what other people said. And that's going back to making our own choices, asking, reflecting, and then doing something about it. And that's what I think a friendship with Aziz and people are like that... we move from the ideas to do something about it. And hopefully more people will do; take the trauma or the pain, and not wait for someone else to do it, just start to make things.

Sarah Peyton 43:35

So you've started to touch on this thing that Aziz spoke about in the [TED talk](#), that you created the [MEJDI Tours](#). And I'm wondering, what do you envision for touring for the future? Has everything been stopped by the war? What's happening now for you in terms of finding a way for your mission to move forward?

Aziz Abu Sarah 44:00

I'll start with that. And then we've done more than just tours together and I'll leave the other stuff the Kobi, so I'll talk about the tours. Yes, [MEJDI Tours](#) were established as a way to kinda do that, to show the narratives, to explain the different point of views and to understand every voice, every perception, for travelers who are from abroad and for locals. Right now, obviously, it's not possible to do most of that. The only travel happening right now are called solidarity tours, which are pro-Israel tours that are going to show solidarity with Israel. You can't do the Palestinian ones because you can't really access Gaza and it's also even not safe. We are doing one trip in March that I'm going on as a solidarity for everyone, not for a one sided kind of tour, and we're meeting Israelis and Palestinians, and hearing their stories and mainly focus on what can we do together to end this madness. But overall, yes, tours in Israel and Palestine have stopped. Fortunately, we do run trips in other places, and that helps us a little bit, keep going. So... and it's similar mindsets, like we do Jewish-Muslim stuff in Morocco and in Spain, because the story, there's more to the story. Some of it is positive, as well, a lot of it is positive in those places. So we do Morocco and Spain, we're doing Northern Ireland, with Catholic-Protestant, doing Colombia, we do the Balkans with Serbian and Bosnian. So we're doing also these things that we have learned from what we did in Israel and Palestine, and that keeps us getting some stuff going. But yeah, in relation to Israel and Palestine, I think we have to go beyond only tourism and think about what can change people's perceptions locally. So we've been working through [Interact](#). And again, I'll let Kobi maybe say a couple of things. But I want to say, through [Interact](#) to a nonprofit, that we also started to focus on those multiple narratives, not just through tourism, but even from your own home, even for people who feel, "I don't want to take a tour. But I still curious, and I'm afraid to go and see people." So we've just started that. And then Kobi, you can take it from there.

Kobi Skolnick 46:35

I want to connect three things that Aziz said. For us that MEJDI, was transformative for so many people. It got all the way from in National Geographic, to schools in the States that came with the students. The idea that we saw happening was that people have the perception about the conflict, about each side, and when they experience that fully, they see the complexity that fuel the conflict. So, which is part of the problem now, in the States at least, from my perspective, that people don't understand it yet, even though it's been so long. So how can we take the transformation that happened to people there, plus what's happened since October 7, and bring it here to the States? Not only to do work that, I know that you both appreciate, which is deep dialogue and not being afraid from what's come up. So we were sitting here for few months thinking through and the idea that emerged is the Interact, which is coming to schools, coming to institution, and using conflict resolution, dialogues, things that I've been doing for the last 15 years or so, and Aziz in a different way, and bringing it to the educators. So we're doing train-the-trainers for educators, we're doing train-the-trainers for corporate, that having the courage to have the conversation in the space, and to governmental and institutions that really care to have a dialogue in boundaries they can handle, you know, but professionally. So we would professionalize that way that, hey, we expert in dialogue, and we can take every conversation that we need to do. This is like a climate change - October 7, but bubbling for years. Me and Aziz, if you look back, you put "Aziz and Kobi, Hamas," there's an article from 24, from 2010, which we're both saying, if you're not engaging with the youth of Gaza, they will come and something will happen. And so these things are predictable. And we cannot wait for someone else to have those dialogues. We need to have the courage to sit in rooms and create curriculum and quit simulation. So we as educators of people who care about society and compassion, have the skills to handle this conversation. Right now we have a problem. People are not able to handle the conversation, with the pain and what is triggered within the conversation. So hopefully, what we tried to do now is to have a system that can support different community and institution to do so.

Roxy Manning 49:12

Ah, before we even start thinking about closing, I have to understand like, what are some of the elements of this dialogue that you're teaching people? That what is it that you would want people to say if you're going to go learn about or do something or have an impact or gain skills, what should they be focusing on?

Aziz Abu Sarah 49:31

Big part of it is learning about our experience and the skills we gathered working together; the ability, the importance of listening, the importance of understanding, the importance of knowing that there's a difference between my perspective and the perceptions and people's perceptions that are different than yours, and trying to understand what those perceptions are. What does joint resistance, what does joint work look like? How can we work together instead of working against each other? There's a lot of skills that we can do. I think the power of storytelling. Storytelling is a major aspect of the work, Kobi and I are doing. And so we've been both of us individually, and together. I think our first workshop we did for storytelling was in 2010, or 2011.

We did campus tours together, went around many universities teaching storytelling; how to use stories as a way to help people change perceptions, and understand other, the other groups, whatever that is, mindset.

Roxy Manning 50:40

Something comes to me as I hear this. So you're telling a story. And we know that one of the things that's happening, that you all talked about, is that people have gone away from like, being individuals, who I imagined might be moved by your story, to being locked in this, like, nationalistic, "I can't hear you," view. So what are some of the things that they need to work on to be able to hear these stories, to listen with a fully open heart?

Kobi Skolnick 51:03

In the seminars that I designed, and these workshops, what Aziz is saying is the backbone, right? The storytelling, the NVC, the Nonviolent Communication. But we also do it in a professional way. What I mean by that... there is a lot of good tools, for instance, intercultural assessment; how do you speak? What happened to you, when you communicate under conflict? Right? So you do it with a group, together. And then have a conversation about it. So you get out of that identity that we talked about and show that there's these other aspects. How we talk to each other, right? The interpersonal space. And then how the inner self informed the interpersonal. How system thinking work, right? We'll break those down to educate them. And say, the self, the society, the system thinking, then when you talk about changing the long term, what that mean, from a conflict transformation perspective. Yes, is 25 years and so how you do that? What is conflict resolution? People have a lot of ideas, but it's the field. So I'll break that down to people. But then how do you take the theory and bridge it in the space? So we use a lot of simulation. So we'll do like a tough conversation, and you will have a person that go through it. So if I'm right-wing, ish, I will put a different perspective, and we'll simulate conversation, then the people who are in it, having the experience and they will reflect on it. And then a second time, we'll do it again, based on what we learned. But sometimes in between, we'll put a unit of conflict transformation and explain people what we mean by that. I think there's a lot of missing, specifically in the media, to be honest, in social media. There is hundreds of books about those issues, and depth of learning that we missed. We really miss this generation. Our generation, the younger generation is one person in other countries, is messed up, because we don't do those things, right? So for me is, is not only a learning in the class, it's taking it from a micro to the macro and saying, myself and the social system I'm engaging with, what do I do to change it? And what are the tools on a daily basis that I can do? So we try to take the ideas of peace and change, and bring it to the class in a way that through the practice and through what do you do, you live and do, not leave it in the theoretical, right? So simulation, learning reflection - "hey, I need to know more about how to enter the conversation, difficult conversation. You gave me a little bit, but I need more." So we try and also to have a reflective space, where people can see the gap between their own vision and organizational vision, and say, "Okay, now the mission of the organization of a larger institution in the States is a dialogue." But then, this Israeli-Palestinian conflict come and everything collapsed, they're not able to do that. So there is a gap between the mission and the institution. We close the

gap, the institution people. So in the room, we can create and show them, hey, what is the gap? How can we close it? What are the tools collaboratively? And let's create something simulation, learn from it and keep going. I hope that makes sense, right? So this is storytelling, but system thinking, longterm. We know conflict, we're taking conflict is a long term view, a generational term view. So then we'll bring it here to educators. Don't think is a magic. That's what happened. You didn't look at all of those things that me and Aziz have been saying for decades. Please look at the youth. Look what's happening to them. If you analyze from their perspective, you could see 10 years what could happen, and unfortunately we were too correct. So now people are trying to learn and we're like, "Hey, let's take everything we learn together. Put it in a curriculum with good educators, do training, do dry runs and then share it." We know what works well, across culture and from our experience, and packaged in a way that's customized to the people in the space, if it's at school, or any other place. Makes sense? I hope so.

Sarah Peyton 55:09

It makes so much sense. And I'm starting to think as we're moving towards the ending, one of the things that I've been thinking about is the kind of resistance that you meet, because you mentioned your family, that there are some of them that wouldn't want you to be talking about this, or wouldn't want to be talking to you, at any rate. And then also this sense of, like, here Aziz and I talking about, for a decade already, that we need to look at the youth. So it seems like another form of resistance that you meet is a kind of obliviousness, or ignorance, that's deeply rooted. Are there any other kinds of backlashes or resistance to your work that you'd like to name? Aziz, what is it like for you?

Aziz Abu Sarah 55:55

Yeah, I think both of us will find opposition in our own communities. And, I mean, you have your own communities in some ways, not everyone, but definitely there are people in our own communities. Anything 'peace' in Israel and Palestine can be seen as pro-this or pro-that, depending on where you're on... So you have large segments here in the US that opposes any avenue of resolution, or they want to talk about peace, but they really don't want to talk about change. They want to talk about peace, but they would like to continue the status quo. I would argue, the institutional powers around the world is comfortable with the status quo, even though the status quo have caused so much suffering so much pain. You know, what we see today is absurd. And yet, you look at international institutions, powers... we facing a very hard reality in the sense of opposition for bringing an end to this conflict. And it makes it harder, but also, I think, in some ways, it makes me more determined. I would also even add, I think, it's very hard to often mention the word "peace" when we do the work we do, because it's been so watered down. I just was looking at, I wouldn't mention names, so I was looking at the conference today, it was announced for peace in Israel and Palestine by people who claim to be pro peace. And it had speakers who literally calling for displacement of Palestinians publicly, as great peace activist. And so when I go to my community, and I tell them, "Hey, I want to do a peace event." And they say, "Oh, but you worked with this person, this person also wants peace." That becomes a problem. And so sometimes we avoid the word "peace," because everyone says I want peace. But what they

mean by it, is something different. So we have to be really careful how we're presenting ourselves, because the connotation of peacebuilding, unfortunately, is now negative for both, for Israelis and Palestinians.

Kobi Skolnick 58:15

I wanted to say this is a really, really important point for good Americans in this country. Because when you say, "peace in Israel," for different... the complexity of the meaning making within both societies. For Israelis now peace, not all of them, some Israelis, peace is to destroy Gaza, because that will bring peace. Right? So going back to the complexity of applying what we know, in different contexts, the meaning making is different. And this is really important point. Not to end like that, but...

Roxy Manning 58:48

No, no, but this, for me is exactly the heart of some of our work, you know, this difference between negative peace and positive peace; we can have peace, and it's the negative peace when we can ignore the suffering and what that peace, the cost of that peace, right? And so it's super important to talk about that and to name it. I'm so so grateful that you all have been here. And yeah, I don't want the conversation to end. But I also really want to honor your time. I'm really grateful that you're here, and I cannot wait for our community to hear this. Because I think you're going to add a perspective and a wisdom that's missing, that I think a lot of folks in the States don't have and don't understand. And hopefully it will spark a lot of reflection. I'm really curious, like, I mean, I am already kind of going I want to be part of your program! I want to do it also! But how can people learn about it? How can like if someone has an organization, how could they reach out to you and say, "We want to be part of this, we want to learn this and bring this to our organization?" Or how can people support your work?

Kobi Skolnick 59:47

That's a wonderful question. Thank you. We have a wonderful website. It's [Interact](#), we can submit to you also. You can see the mission and what we're doing. We also just working on it more and more in the coming weeks. Soon enough will be also different categories of catalogs that we deliver. And people can donate, people can be in touch through social media. Aziz is more good at social media, I'm more LinkedIn person. We can send you all the information. Thank you. Aziz, anything else?

Aziz Abu Sarah 1:00:18

Yeah, I put in [MEJDI's website](#) as well. If people traveling they're always welcome to check what we doing and if there's a place we traveling through that they looking to go and see, that will be fantastic. But yeah, [Interact website](#), MEJDI's website, and they can find him on LinkedIn, I'm on others, as well, social media, and happy to connect with anyone.

Kobi Skolnick 1:00:47

Appreciate you both, Roxy and Sarah. Thank you for having us.

Sarah Peyton 1:00:50

Thank you so much for being with us. And as we turn away from you with great regret, we'll turn to our listeners. Please support this work in the world by going to antiracistconversations.com. You will learn how to purchase our books, how to have antiracist conversations, and the antiracist heart, and you'll be able to listen to past podcasts and learn about upcoming podcast guests and new classes. Thank you so much!