

Thoughts on these Dark Days

In the early 2010's, toward the end of my 30+ year career working in local Public Health, I was invited to take part in a meeting that I have never forgotten, all the more memorable given the dark events of the past week and the days to come.

The meeting, part of a nationwide tour sponsored by the U.S. State Department, was with a group of Public Health officials from the Israeli and Palestinian Health Services. The topic of the gathering was to compare and learn from one another about effective approaches to promote individual and community health, focusing on healthy nutrition, physical activity, and avoiding tobacco and misuse of alcohol and other drugs.

The first thing I remember about that day was watching out the front window as the delegation(s) got off the van they were traveling in together; my colleague and I both remarked on how we had no idea who was Palestinian, and who was Israeli. This remained true throughout most of our conversation together.

The next thing I remember is the similarity and symmetry of the ideas that were shared that day – the commonality we shared around the challenges for addressing health problems for individuals and communities, as well opportunities and strategies for promoting health and well-being, whether in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, or the Twin Cities.

The final thing I remember, which has come to mind even more in recent days, was when our conversation turned to the topic of violence prevention, a field that was and remains foremost in my own work. Again, I would have guessed that beliefs and strategies would have varied greatly among us all, yet what we found was that we shared remarkably similar ideas and hope, despite all of the obstacles to people being able to live together in Peace, again whether in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, or the Twin Cities.

While I do not recall other details from this part of our conversation, what has stuck with me all these years, and haunts me in these dark days, was the agreement among all sitting around that table that the starting point to preventing violence, and to living in Peace, might be as simple as eliminating one word, one concept, that tears us apart from seeing one another as brothers and sisters in this life: the word *Them*. While it can come to be seen as easy, and even expected and righteous, to commit atrocities against *Them*, these same actions are far more difficult, if not impossible, to commit against fellow humans regarded as *Us*.

As we continue on through this terribly trying time, I dedicate this remembrance to the remarkable people I met that day. As the son of Jewish immigrants to this country who fled pogroms and the Holocaust, I send my hopes for peace and health to all of us who met that day, to all my fellow humans in this life, and especially in these days to Israelis and Palestinians.

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