

Transforming Relationships Between Israeli Settlers and West Bank Palestinians: Assessing the Case of “Roots”

Ben Mollov
Bar-Ilan University

Chaim Lavie*
Bar-Ilan University
Shaare Mishpat Academic College

This article will present an advanced evaluation of “Roots” a cutting edge effort at dialogue and conflict resolution in the highly fraught area of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict between Israeli settlers and West Bank Palestinians. We present quantitative and qualitative empirical data to assess the impact of its main activities with reference to several important conflict resolution strategies. We assess that while its influence on the macro level is limited, Roots appears on the local level to be an effective agent to promote more civil and constructive interactions between Israelis and Palestinians, along with generating spill over effect into larger circles of influence for peace building.

Keywords: Roots, peace building, Israeli-Palestinian, inter-religious, dialogue, Federalism

INTRODUCTION

This paper will present an advanced evaluation of a cutting edge effort at dialogue and conflict resolution in a highly fraught area of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict namely between Israeli settlers and West Bank Palestinians. This research effort, building on the foundation of an initial evaluation (Mollov and Lavie, 2018), will provide more detailed quantitative and qualitative empirical data to assess the impact of a relatively new Israeli-Palestinian initiative known as "Roots" or Shorashim in Hebrew and Judur in Arabic.

Indeed, the venue of the Root Center is located in close proximity to Gush Etzion (a burgeoning area of Jewish settlement with deep historical roots in both ancient Jewish history and Zionist pioneering in the 20th century), and which is accessible to local Palestinians from the area between Bethlehem and Hebron.

It is important to note that the Jewish population of settlers in the West Bank/Judea and Samaria are heavily comprised of religious Zionists who along with local Palestinians tend to see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as rooted heavily in their respective narratives with their foundations in the respective religious traditions of both Judaism and Islam.

The activities of this Center, established several years ago, will be framed here with reference to four approaches relevant to Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding: (1) Inter-religious Dialogue as the basis for conflict management and perception change (Abu-Nimer, 2001; Amir 1969 ;Bekerman 2002; Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana 2009; Furman 2011; Mollov and Lavie, 2001, 2006; Rokeach 1960; Tange 2010);

(2) “Sustained Dialogue” aimed at groups engaged in inter-group conflict and seeking relationship transformation (Saunders, 1999); and (3) a federalist approach to conflict management/resolution between Israelis and Palestinians with emphasis on “social partnership” particularly as both groups represent “two peoples on one land” (Elazar, 1991; Elazar, 2017).

The formation of the Roots/Shorashim/Judur group is in itself an example of relationship transformation between Israeli Jewish settlers and Palestinians. The key Palestinian leadership from the village of Bet Ummar all had backgrounds as militants/political activists in the first intifada of 1987. They concluded that Palestinian violence has brought neither side benefit and that they were required to reach out to larger segments of Israeli society, particularly their own neighbors from Gush Etzion who are representative of the national religious public.

The Jewish Israeli core leaders and initiators underwent parallel transformations. From the point of departure of living in Judea and Samaria, the heartland of Biblical history, as a means of realizing the Jewish ideals of building the Land of Israel they came to realize that they could not ignore their own Palestinian neighbors. In fact a number of Rabbis came to focus on Jewish sources that could support the idea of Jewish-Arab partnership on the Land as opposed to an exclusivist interpretation and mindset towards their Arab neighbors.

Extremely impressive is the fact that the Palestinian leaders have been able to articulate an understanding of the Jewish Biblical narrative and Jewish connection to Judea and Samaria and the Land of Israel in general, which in the past has been either ignored or entirely denied.

The activities undertaken by Roots, which are being assessed, focus on: (1) an on-going core leadership group of Israeli settlers and Palestinian activists from the immediate area; (2) a three year old very active Israeli-Palestinian youth group (ages 15-18) for Jewish youth from communities throughout Gush Etzion and Palestinian youth from Bet Ummar and Bethlehem; and (3) lectures and meetings with hundreds of Israeli youth participating in pre-Army study programs, to expose them to the more human side of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with particular relevance to the upcoming military service of the students.

In all cases qualitative data (involving both observation and interviews) along with quantitative questionnaire based data was collected and analyzed as a means of assessing the efficacy of the activities referred to above. Important to note is that a central criteria for assessing the impact of activities such as these are the degree of relationship building and perception change fostered among participants as a result of such activities as cited in a United States Institute of Peace Report (USIP, 2004).

Roots Core Leadership Group

The core leadership group comprised of approximately 20 key Israeli and Palestinian activists have been meeting at regular intervals during the last five years. Their discussions have focused on a large array issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; along with attempting to agree on and define common goals which the Roots Center is meant to fulfill. The consensus of the Group is that Roots is meant to foster “relationship transformation” based on sustained dialogue and also where possible, carry out intervention with Israeli authorities to provide practical solutions which Palestinians encounter due to day to day difficulties which exist primarily as a result of Israeli military occupation. Relationships have also been transformed partly as a result of powerful inter-religious activities such as a joint “Iftar” Ramadan fast breaking which also involved parallel Muslim and Jewish prayer.

Observations to date have been instructive. In the core leadership group the tendency of the Israeli participants has been to emphasize the goal of creating good neighborly relations and peace building as the two groups live so close yet so far from a psychological and environmental perspective; the Palestinians on the other hand while endorsing this goal emphasize that their day to day reality which includes negotiating the difficulties of a military occupation with which they contend must also be addressed as part of dialogue and peace building. As part of on-going relationship building the Israeli settlers have become more aware of these day to day difficulties and try to utilize their contacts and good offices with Israeli military and civil authorities to help alleviate particular cases of hardship encountered by their Palestinian neighbors. It is also important to note that Roots has also organized solidarity visits to Palestinian and Israeli victims of violence. While some of the Palestinians wish to move Roots in the direction of undertaking concentrated

political action designed to affect macro political policies, the general consensus of both sides has been to eschew this approach as being both unrealistic and divisive.

Qualitative observations were gathered on the meetings of the on-going core leadership group, which also related to the on-going discussions of the goals/vision of Roots in which a spectrum of positions have been voiced. The discussions observed took place in an atmosphere of cordiality and trust, even when there existed disagreement on fundamental issues of perspective and definition (such as what constitutes terrorism). Both groups often dealt with the challenge of relating their insights and experiences of relationship transformation within their own communities. It is also worth noting that the solidarity of the group had also been buttressed by some powerful inter-religious activities.

However despite the sometimes opposing views expressed within the Core Leadership Group it is very important to cite the important work that Roots leadership has done in attempting to alleviate hardships faced by Palestinians on the ground and strengthening liaison functions with [Israeli] authorities which for instance has in some cases also reduced violence such as rock throwing by Palestinian youth. In addition during the current Corona Crisis the core leadership group has been able to maintain their own going consultations despite the difficulties in meeting face to face.

The Trump Middle East Peace Plan which was issued earlier this year was also a subject of intense discussion among the participants. The controversial plan which provided for Israeli annexation of substantial portions of the West Bank along with presenting the basic contours of a future Palestinian State, elicited strong opposition from the Palestinian participants, both in terms of its substance and as important the unilateral manner in which the plan was presented by the U.S. Administration. Interestingly though, a leader in the Efrat Israeli Jewish settlement who attended a special Roots forum on the subject articulated the view, that while the plan was considered highly favorable to Israel, that any stable agreement needed to be achieved through engagement with the Palestinians with an awareness of their needs and not only by unilateral fiat. In addition as more concrete plans to annex the designated areas of the West Bank/Judea and Samaria were advanced by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu the leadership group issued a joint Israeli-Palestinian statement opposing these plans which reached media outlets throughout the region.

Core Leadership Group: Quantitative Data

In addition to anecdotal observations of the dynamics evident within the core leadership discussions referred to above we have surveyed core leadership members for their attitudes on a variety of issues such as: the degree to which each side is able to be empathic to the fears of the others; the degree to which both sides understand the particular tie of the other to the Land of Israel/Palestine; the degree to which both sides believe in the possibilities of peace. This also serves as an important indicator of the degree of progress in attitudinal change which the Group has made over time.

Below appear a questionnaire of 12 parallel items administered respectively to the Israeli and Palestinians members of the core leadership group.

Items: Israelis

1. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have become more aware of the Palestinians not just as the enemy but as real human beings just like us.
2. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have become more empathetic to the needs and problems of my Palestinian neighbors.
3. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have become more understanding of my Palestinian neighbors connection to the Land of Palestine and their identity as Palestinian Arabs.
4. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have developed more trust in Palestinians.
5. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have developed a greater belief in the ability/possibility of Israelis and Palestinians to cooperate for the good of all.
6. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have developed a greater understanding of the difficulties which my Palestinian neighbors face on the day to day level of maintaining human dignity in the face of some Israeli policies and behaviors.

7. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have more belief that Palestinians are able to acknowledge the tie of Jews to their ancestral Biblical homeland.
8. Since the beginning my involvement in Roots I have more confidence in the belief that Palestinians can be empathetic to the problems which Israelis living in the same area face.
9. I make a distinction between the attitudes which my partners in Roots hold in contrast to the general Palestinian society.
10. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I am more optimistic about the chances of peace developing between Israelis and Palestinians.
11. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have become more aware of the problematics of the way my society thinks about and relates to the Palestinians.
12. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have a greater interest and willingness to expend energy towards creating reconciliation.

Items: Palestinians

1. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have become more aware of the Israelis not just as the enemy but as real human beings just like us.
2. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have become more empathetic to the needs and problems of my Israeli neighbors.
3. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have become more understanding of my Israeli neighbors' connection to the Biblical Land of Israel.
4. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have developed more trust in Israelis.
5. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have developed a greater belief in the possibility of Palestinians and Israelis cooperating for the good of all.
6. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have developed a greater understanding of the fears of my Israeli neighbors particularly in terms of security.
7. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have more belief that Israelis are able to acknowledge the tie of Palestinians to Palestine and their identity as Palestinian Arabs.
8. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have more confidence in the belief that Israelis can be empathetic to the problems which Palestinians face on the day to day
9. I make a distinction between the attitudes which my partners in Roots hold in contrast to the general Israeli society.
10. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I am more optimistic about the chances of peace developing between Palestinians and Israelis.
11. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have become more aware of the problematics of the way my society thinks about and relates to the Israelis.
12. Since the beginning of my involvement in Roots I have a greater interest and willingness to expend energy towards creating reconciliation.

Subjects were asked to choose one of five responses with each designated with a number value (which appear in the tables below with their corresponding questions)

Greatly Agree [1]

Agree [2]

Disagree [3]

Object [4]

Greatly Object [5]

**TABLE 1
CORE LEADERSHIP GROUP**

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12
Arab Average	1.4	1.8	1.6	1.8	1.6	1.6	2.6	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.4	1.4
Standard Deviation Arabs	0.55	0.84	0.89	0.44	0.55	0.89	1.52	0.55	0.55	0.55	0.55	0.55
Jews Average	1.08	1.23	1.15	1.38	2.08	2	1.15	2.15	2.31	1.85	2.69	1.62
Standard Deviation Jews	0.28	0.44	0.38	0.65	0.64	0.71	0.38	0.55	0.75	0.9	0.48	0.97

Main significant results: Based on the 12 item survey the Israelis generally were able to express more empathy to the fears and tie of the Palestinians to the Land of Palestine, than vice versa; however the Palestinians expressed a greater degree of trust in the Israelis and optimism in the possibilities of peace actually developing between Israel and Palestine than vice versa. Interesting as well is the fact that the Palestinians believed that the Israelis were less able to understand their tie to the land, than what the Israelis actually reported about themselves.

Youth

The Israeli-Palestinian youth group now in its 5th year of activity has involved approximately 30 youth annually about evenly divided between Israelis and Palestinians, from which it is hoped that many will become “agents of change” in the future. Some of the issues which have been discussed in this framework are similar to those of the core leadership group, but special emphasis has been placed on understanding and developing empathy for each sides’ fears, concerns and aspirations. Significant emphasis has also been placed on understanding the religious culture of each side.

Observations of the Roots Youth Group were conducted, and highlights of their activities included inter-religious themes and discussions of commonalties such as those that occurred in time proximity to the Jewish festival of Purim and observances of Ramadan. In fact, as part of joint social action activities connected to Purim the Israeli and Palestinians youth cooperated in preparing "care packages" of food to needy families, both Israeli and Palestinian in the adjacent areas, which is a Purim custom in extending this type of support to others and related to Ramadan as well. The youth group also conducted general hikes and tours of various areas in the Land of Israel/Palestine. The group's discussions also veered into current and even controversial developments in which the Palestinian youth tried to make the Israeli youth aware of the hardships which they faced in comparison to their lives as Israelis. The Palestinians though found it difficult to understand that the Israelis also had their fears related to security and potential threat. In general though it seemed that the youth were less equipped to conduct discussions of a political nature and it's not certain if enough balanced adult guidance was available to guide these discussions into useful areas.

In sum, the four year old youth group has provided an opportunity for Israeli youth from the settlements and Palestinian youth from neighboring villages and cities to form relationships and encounter the other through the mediums of life style, understanding mutual fears, inter-religious bonding and also political discussion. In addition social action for needy families has been undertaken by the group and for the first time a Roots “alumni” Shabbat/Friday Jewish-Muslim weekend was held to maintain and strengthen the youth network and foster the possibilities that the youth could be “agents for change” even after they have been active participants.

Further bonding was also achieved through a number of special Seminars abroad, particularly one which took place in Switzerland which became a strong bonding experience though the students wrestled with divisive and painful discussions of contrasting narratives. In the youth meetings in general the organizers observed that on both sides there was about a one third core group of particularly committed Israelis and Palestinians who continued relationships outside of the formal meetings. Indeed some of the Israeli Jewish students made a particular effort to study Arabic on their own, which further promoted relationship building.

Laudably, during the Coronavirus lockdown the group continued to meet regularly via the Zoom medium with positive dynamics evident, according to the facilitators. Recent discussions emphasized inter-religious themes such the origins and customs of the Moslem Eid al-Adha festival and the Jewish solemn day of mourning Tisha B'Av. The controversial Trump Plan and its provision for annexation of some territories in the West Bank/Judea and Samaria resided in by Jewish settlers was also discussed. More recently, given the relaxation of some health restrictions the group was able to come together to participate in an actual hike to the Dead Sea and Jordan Valley.

Quantitative Data

In order to better evaluate the impact of the Youth Group questionnaire based data was gathered from the participants based on before and after assessments. The same questionnaire had been used in previous research evaluations to measure Israeli-Palestinian perceptions and attitudinal changes (Mollov and Lavie 2001).

The results of the questionnaires were analyzed and divided into five factors as dependent variables for attitudes and perceptions.

Each factor was measured according to different questions. For the purposes of this study responses of both the Israeli and Palestinian youth are presented in composite form showing the efficacy of the Youth Group as a whole.

- FACTOR (A)** Considered willingness of subject to have contact with the other side (Direct Attitude)
- FACTOR (B)** Inquired into the subject's perception of him/her (Perception)
- FACTOR (C)** Considered willingness of subject to have contact in other areas (Contact Willingness)
- FACTOR (D)** Assessed general attitude regarding the other side (General Attitude)
- FACTOR (E)** This factor examined how each side evaluates the other's characteristics (Traits)

Each question could be answered on a scale from 1-5; with 1 representing the most favorable attitude.

**TABLE 2
YOUTH GROUP**

Youth	Factor A	Factor B	Factor C	Factor D	Factor E
Before	1.790476	2.8	1.825	2.765	3.236111
After	1.699134	2.295455	1.727273	2.781818	3.411111

Main Result

As can be seen factors A, C, and D (measuring willingness for contact and general attitude) began and remained relatively favorable. Factor B (measuring perceptions) improved substantially as a result of the combined activities and relationship building. However Factor E, measuring perceptions of character traits began relatively negative and remained as such following the Youth Group activities.

Pre-Army Preparatory Programs

The Roots Center hosts annually hundreds of Israeli youth participating in pre-Army study programs as a means of enlarging their perspectives and the possibility of peace building between Israeli and

Palestinians, prior to entering the Army and potentially encountering complex situations requiring cultural sensitivity. Assessing the impact of such exposure will help determine the degree in which Roots is able to affect larger numbers of Israelis with a new view of Palestinians and the possibilities of peace building.

These encounters held primarily with Palestinian leaders of Roots are meant to provide a “humanizing experience” for the youth who will soon be beginning their I.D.F. service often in elite units and in military service in the territories. According to anecdotal reporting, the participation of one of the Palestinian representatives who has been meeting with the groups has been particularly effective. His thoughtful message to the students has emphasized the importance of their coming service to provide protection against terrorism that can threaten both Israel and the Palestinians; however at the same time he has stressed the need to treat the Palestinian population with dignity and respect which can impact on how Palestinians view Israel and Israelis.

Quantitative Data

As a key phase of this evaluation research samples of such pre-army students have been surveyed through questionnaires, of the type used above, to measure the impact of such activities on perceptions and attitudes towards Palestinians. Before and after data serve to measure the effect of their visit to the Roots Center and the discussions with the Palestinian and Israeli speakers representing the organization. Assessing the impact of such exposure will help determine the degree in which "Roots" is able to affect larger numbers of Israelis with a new view of Palestinians and the possibilities for peace building, to better guide them during their military service, and their subsequent lives as Israeli citizens

Two Army Preparatory Programs participating in these encounters were surveyed for “before” and “after” responses. Group A is a secular oriented Program based in Jerusalem and Group B a Program based in Tel Aviv and affiliated with the Jewish Reform Movement.

In both cases quantitative data has further corroborated the positive effect of the meetings. (Scale—1= most positive 5=most negative). In this case responses were organized into two main clusters measuring Contact Willingness and Perception of Characteristics of the Israeli Jewish participants towards Palestinians.

**TABLE 3
ARMY PREPARATORY PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS**

Group A			
Contact Willingness	Before	2.4161	31
	After	2.1139	18
Perception of Characteristics	Before	3.3760	29
	After	2.9738	18
Group B			
Contact Willingness	Before	2.2500	15
	After	1.8250	14
Perception of Characteristics	Before	3.3556	15
	After	1.9556	10

Main Results

Group A- a completely secular Pre-Army preparatory program registered (before) positive attitudes towards Contact Willingness with a slight improvement following the encounter (after). Their Perception of Characteristics (before) were more negative than their Contact Willingness score, but also improved somewhat following the encounter (after).

Group B-the Pre-Army preparatory program affiliated with the Reform Movement registered positive attitudes towards Contact Willingness (before) prior to the encounter with a slight improvement following the encounter (after). However the most dramatic improvement was registered in the perception of

Characteristics category which began (before) fairly negatively but then dramatically improved following the encounter (after).

Attempts by Roots to Expand Range of Activities

Although this paper has focused its evaluation on three main activities, namely the Core Leadership Group, the Youth Group and the meeting with the Pre-Army Preparatory Programs it is relevant to briefly mention a number of more recent initiatives spawned or inspired by Roots which is also indicative of its expanding impact.

In recent months a high level Inter-religious Adult Dialogue Group involving approximately 15 Muslims and Jews has been meeting in the Gush Etzion area, at the Roots Center. Participants including Jewish educators from the area have discussed themes such as reward and punishment in Judaism and Islam and the place of the “other” in both religions. The interest which this group has elicited is another expression of the positive impact which Israeli-Palestinian inter-religious dialogue can have on attitudes, perceptions and relationship building (Mollov and Lavie 2001, 2006).

In the settlements of Ariel, Shiloh, Bet-El and Ofra in Northern Samaria a core Israeli leadership has emerged who have engaged with local Palestinians from Nablus and Ramallah and together have formed an equivalent to the Gush Etzion Core Leadership Group. Their regular meetings have focused on similar themes discussed in the Core Leadership Group in Gush Etzion and they appear to have achieved a solid basis of relationships leading to a sustained dialogue (Saunders 1999). Much of their cooperative work has focused on common local needs such as sewage and environmental protection given the proximity of these locales to each other.

In the particularly volatile region of the Southern Hebron Hills the beginnings of a dialogue have been achieved between local settlers and Palestinians initially facilitated by a secular Israeli Peace activist. A key personality who has helped nurture this budding initiative is the daughter of the late Rabbi Menachem Fruman, formerly the Chief Rabbi of the Jewish settlement of Tekoa who steadfastly promoted Israeli Jewish and Palestinian Arab Moslem ties and peace building. .

Relevance of the Federalist Theme

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the theme of federalism or “thinking federally” has also been reflected in the work of Roots. The larger vision inherent in federalist type of thinking emphasizes the promotion of constructive interactions between different population groups in conflict in the same geographic area aimed towards achieving social partnership and mutual responsibility even if partners don’t necessarily agree on common definitions and/or political positions. Indeed, Daniel Elazar a prime architect of federalist thinking articulated the manner in which federalism could be applied as a strategy for Israeli-Palestinian peace building (Elazar 1987, 1991). At one fairly recent meeting hosted by Roots, an Israeli activist who has sought to help promote federalist solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian, presented a federalist model which elicited a good deal of positive interest among the Palestinians in attendance.

Indeed, the vision of Roots is an example of such federalist thinking on the micro level (Elazar 2017). For whatever more formal arrangements are advanced by Israeli and Arab leaders, including the Palestinians, relationship transformation is an indispensable element of peace building (Saunders, 1999). Indeed according to interviews with key leaders of Roots channels of communication established with local Palestinian communities have contributed to quid pro quos which have balanced and facilitated the local needs of Arab communities with the need to maintain stability between the Arab and Jewish communities of the area.

DISCUSSION

The main activities of Roots which this paper has evaluated have focused on the Core Leadership Group, Youth Group, and meetings with Israeli students in pre-Army preparatory programs. These activities of Roots have reflected three approaches to conflict resolution;-the inter-religious dialogue buttressed by the contact hypothesis, relationship transformation through sustained dialogue, and developing “social

partnership” despite differing positions reflecting a “federalist approach “ to peace building. In the majority of the activities cited, elements of the inter-religious dialogue were highly evident and contributed to strong relationship building and transformation. In addition sustained dialogue was a key component of the dynamics of the Core Leadership Group. Furthermore the positive impact of meetings with pre-Army pre-Army preparatory programs, facilitated by the contact hypothesis was clearly discernible.

Roots on the micro level has served as an important example of developing social partnership between Israelis and Palestinians, even if the partners don't necessarily agree on common definitions, which is a key element of the federalist approach. In fact channels of communication established through sustained dialogue have contributed to quid pro quos which have balanced and where possible and helped facilitate the needs of local Palestinian Arab communities along with maintaining stability between Arab and Jewish communities of the area.

Overall, while there is evidence that Roots has not necessarily convinced the participants that peace on the macro level between Israelis and Palestinians is readily achievable, however on a local level in a particularly explosive context; Roots appears to be an effective agent to promote more civil and constructive interactions between Israelis and Palestinians. It has also been able to generate a degree of spill over effect into larger circles of influence for peace building.

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