

Marc Gopin. *Bridges across an Impossible Divide: The Inner Lives of Arab and Jewish Peacemakers.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 256 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-991698-6.



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Academic literature is filled with studies on the Arab-Israeli and Jewish/Palestinian conflict, identifying the historical, economic, social, political, and psychological roots of a seemingly unsolvable and never-ending struggle that is commemorated and internalized in competing national and personal narratives. Marc Gopin, a rabbi and director of the Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution, and James H. Laue Professor at George Mason University, is all too aware of the obstacles and barriers to peace. When one is entrenched only in one's own narrative, peace appears far-fetched and at most something worth striving for. Yet Gopin, the peacemaker, leaves the comfort zone of the Jewish narrative and a closed community by extending his hand and heart to others, Muslim and Christian Arabs, who are willing to reciprocate in the here and now. *Bridges across an Impossible Divide* takes the reader behind the scenes and into the inner lives of Arab and Jewish peacemakers, whose unusual friendships provide hope that incremental steps toward mutual understanding

may lead to positive change and create an environment of peace. While Gopin's peacemaking is admirable in its objective, passionate in its rationale, and compassionate in its relationships, it is downright dismissive of policymakers. His words are carefully chosen when dealing with the other on the grassroots level, but unequivocal in their antigovernment and antiwar bias. He does not depart from the liberal critique of U.S. foreign policy, holding policymakers implicitly responsible for the violence in the Middle East as a result of their ill-conceived wars and sanctions.

Initially begun as a film project titled *Unusual Pairs*, Gopin's book not only profiles the peacemakers and lets them speak in their own words, but also attempts to draw some specific conclusions about the inner lives of those who build bridges across enemy lines. Surprising and humbling to scholars is Gopin's revelation that "many of the best social geniuses globally who build love in impossible spaces of violent conflict have little formal education." In fact, the author explains, their expertise is not drawn from books, nor do

they write about their activism, but these peacemakers' skills are based on their own "intuitive study of people and the circumstances of life" (p. 209). And it is this discovery that leads Gopin to his theory of conflict resolution, one that is being built every day "inside the minds and hearts of victims and of would-be aggressors who have consciously worked through their pain" (p. 9). Revenge is an understandable human reaction; so is self-defense. But both have contributed to prolonging the Arab-Israeli conflict. Hope and resolution, says Gopin, only lie with the "self-reflective victims of violence who experiment, who invent a winding road that passes in between radical injury and revenge and beyond to inner and outer peace" (p. 9). In a recent blog commenting on the Syrian catastrophe and the futility of fighting violence with violence, Gopin reaffirms his findings after years of experience in conflict resolution. "At the end of the day," he concludes, "all social change that is lasting, and that dwarfs militarized chaos, is the change that happens inside hearts and minds, the change that happens in between human beings of great diversity and difference." [1]

Bridges across an Impossible Divide introduces the reader to a sampling of extraordinary people, who have made peace the essential focus of their lives. People like Ibtisam Mahameed, a Palestinian religious Muslim from Israel, who "has worked tirelessly for interfaith dialogue and for women's empowerment" (p. 29); Eliyahu McLean, an Israeli Jewish interfaith peace activist; Gabriel Meyer, an Israeli Jew who has used a "unique combination of dialogue, music, and dance celebration of all human cultures" (p. 101); and Hind Kabawat, a Christian and Syrian Canadian attorney, whose "valiant attempt to educate all segments of Syrian society, and to create a nonviolent bridge between all sides in Syria" is not diminished, says Gopin, by the catastrophe of civil war (pp. 121-122). He scoffs at the naysayers and realists whose exclusive resort to military options has only increased the misery of the civilian pop-

ulation in general and exacerbated the Syrian situation in particular. War and violence are never part of Gopin's solution. Instead, he is intrigued by what happens inside the minds and hearts of peacemakers, the place of true change and revolution. Whether it is Ibtisam's feminist Muslim spiritual philosophy of land and peace that offers "a shared bridge of love of earth, water, and greenness" (p. 43), or Eliyahu's nonintellectual and anti-elitist common bond with Arab laborers--to Gopin all peacemakers are "boundary crossers" (p. 52), who "make inroads in precisely the kind of communities that traditional progressives and mainstream negotiators always avoided" (p. 54).

Gopin does not deny that peacemaking comes at great personal sacrifice and is wrought with setbacks. Seminal life experiences set them on the journey of peacemaking, yet what keeps these extraordinary peacemakers going is not just incredible inner strength and spirituality, but the sustenance provided by deep friendships. The reader learns that the inner lives of peacemakers are just as vulnerable and under siege as anyone else's, but their critical self-examination finds love, openness, and forgiveness in unity with a kindred heart and soul across enemy lines. Making peace is not simply a pragmatic event, explains Eliyahu: "[M]y work is about building a deep, deep connection, and friendship, and partnerships, with Palestinian Muslim Arabs, Christians, and Druze" (p. 57). Gopin explored the essence of social network theory in *To Make the Earth Whole* (2009) and describes Eliyahu as a "classic connector of diverse worlds," whose actions have "a cascading effect" (p. 58).

Whereas the reader can identify with the logic and significance of friendship in bringing about incremental change, it is the anti-intellectual tenor of Gopin's revelations that might be a hard sell to academia. Peacemaking, asserts Gabriel, is "not about politics, it's not about ideologies, it's about taking into account the other" (p. 109). Peacemakers, Gopin elaborates, are able to cope

with endless disappointments because they “have a profound sense of the spiritual and philosophical significance of their work” (p. 61). Yet at the same time they show great humility and a “general anti-intellectual trend of questioning the value of too much knowledge and too much certainty” (p. 60). In fact, the anti-intellectual bias turns antigovernment in character in the words of Gabriel: “We are the grassroots, we are the people that will bring the change. And the politicians? The governments will come after us, not the other way around” (p. 110).

This book holds both much promise and potentially, great disappointment for the theory and practice of conflict resolution. The author admits that he offers but a small sampling of peacemakers who build bridges across enemy lines, because there are only a few who have been engaged for many years and not lost heart. He encourages the world of ivory towers to learn from these extraordinary people. As a rabbi and academic himself, Gopin knows all too well that knowledge alone does not solve conflicts. Peacemaking involves hard work, on the ground, exposed to the dangers of rejection, always searching for the humanity in all of us. While his book emphasizes the interfaith dimension of spiritual unity, one is reminded of the kabbalistic concept of *tikkun haolam* (repairing the world) in this process of peacemaking: the peacemaker, in constant self-discovery, and in the unity of opposites, is able to bring out the spiritual values inherent in all things. Accordingly, Gopin reiterates the virtues of self-examination and true partnerships that come from “truly engaging peoples at war in peace processes” and concludes that only then can “society-wide healing” occur (pp. 190-191).

Ultimately, Gopin is optimistic about human nature and even allows for the redemption of the corrupt and flawed on the grassroots level. He is realistic, if not pessimistic, however, when it comes to the U.S. government and its foreign policy. In a Hobbesian inversion, he sees change on

the grassroots level as the best and only protection against the entrenched interests and evils of governmental elites. His moving profiles of peacemakers show change in the microcosm of grassroots activism, but the question remains whether macrocosmic change can occur without the participation of elites in power.

Note

[1]. Marc Gopin, “Humanitarian Missiles are Better than Cruise Missiles,” *Huffington Post*, August 31, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marc-gopin/humanitarian-missiles-are_b_3831768.html.

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