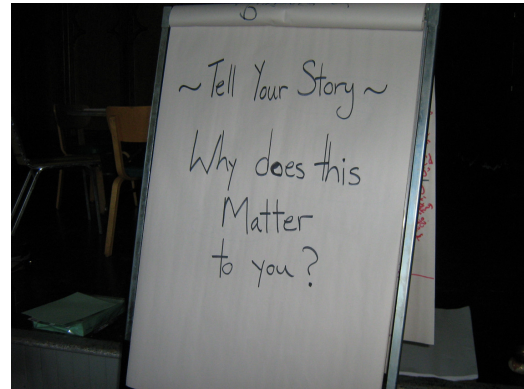


Patterns Emerging from the Stories

- 1) Different factors caused a number of the participants, at different moments in their lives, to recognize and question the stereotypes embedded in the dominant culture. For many, moving away from home served as this catalyst.
- 2) This is the first opportunity to engage with this issue in an open forum on a personal level.
- 3) It feels good to actually discuss some of these issues out in the open
- 4) Being stereotyped by others, especially when one is a visible minority, is very difficult.



***Jean's reflections***

*I found it so beautiful that the space was safe and open to all kinds of discussion from a diverse group of people. In the past I have found bringing together "two" (Jew/Arab or Israel/Palestine) sides can be quite hostile and I get into this defensive mode. Having the safe space allowed me to be more critical in my thinking since I wasn't trying to defend myself in an argument and it really allowed me to look at my views with a clearer head. It was really empowering to have all of these people come together and talk about the issues regardless of background. It gave me a lot of hope. I was also really impressed by Bob opening the circle with no assumptions. I think that speaks wonders about how we should move forward with this conflict.*

competing interests make it extremely difficult to gain some sort of understanding of the conflict.

- 5) Hearing the various personal stories of the different participants validates my feeling of the complexity of the issue.
- 6) There are a number of cultural similarities between Jews and Arabs (i.e. food, language).
- 7) The mainstream media is a very negative source for information. **Where can we get straight information?**
- 8) The proliferation of so many different passionate narratives and

### ***Aftab's reflections***

*The session was very powerful for me personally. It was interesting to me to hear so many birthright trip stories from the Jewish students (what a privilege to be able to get to know first hand what is so central to one's identity!) and to realize the level of reflection and questioning that had already taken place among the Jewish students. I think the Muslim students had more of an eye-opening experience because, as some expressed, it was their first chance to hear the story from the "other side" and begin to question their own patterns of prejudice. I feel like the additional factors of being visible minorities and in most cases first-generation immigrants complicate the Muslim experience. In my experience, we tend to be more isolated in some ways so the opportunity to interact in this way is particularly powerful and important.*



- 9) A number of stories shared had to do with the Birthright Israel trip, as Jewish students who went on this trip or who planned to go on it felt that they could not engage with this trip passively but had to question its underlying assumptions.
- 10) What role exactly do our individual identities play in this conflict?
- 11) Maybe the mixing of religion and politics is a dangerous idea.

12) Bringing people together for dialogues like this gives hope.

13) Sharing personal stories like this is an important step for understanding.

### **Open-Space Reports**

#### ***Table 1: I want to talk about physical disconnection.***

There was not a great deal of interest at this table, as it appeared that many people who were interested in this topic sat at Table 2 as the issues overlapped.

#### ***Table 2: I want to discuss the role that our individual identities play in analyzing the conflict. What is the role? What should it be?***

- People often feel pigeon-holed by society because of their identity, especially being a visible minority. It often feels like society expects something of them.
- The media, politics, and money have an overwhelming negative influence on the conflict in the Middle East. It was said that

### ***Rammi's reflections***

*What I really liked about the event is that it brought Muslims and Jews closer together, and opened up a much-needed dialogue between both parties. I guess my biggest hope/inspiration about this event is that it will one day (hopefully within our lifetimes) be recognized as an act responsible for uniting Palestinians and Israelis to live peacefully as neighbours in the same Holy Land ('Ard Muqadasa in Arabic), if even for a day!*

the media does not do anything for the people, but just perpetuates the messages that the people in power want to send out – often divisive ones. It was also said that politicians don't really represent the will of the people and will often be unwilling/unable to do what is in their best interest.

- All religions, at their core, have the same message, despite what the media wants us to believe.

**Wendy's reflections:**

*I am a Jewish student who came into the world cafe with no definitive opinion on Israel/Palestine or the conflict going on there. While I still struggle with the way I feel about what's going on, the world cafe did have a strong effect on my plans for the future: I am going on a Birthright trip this summer, a free trip to Israel for Jewish youth sponsored by wealthy Zionists, and I realized more than ever after the discussions we had that as a Jew, and especially as a Jew going on a Birthright trip, I have a specific responsibility to recognize my implication in the conflict in Israel/Palestine, and to better understand the situation and promote concepts of social justice and human rights for all people in the world as well. As an indirect result of the world cafe event, I decided to apply for an alternative-to-birthright trip that I will embark on after birthright, which shows participants the other side of the story - I will visit Palestinian cities, villages, and refugee camps, and meet with Palestinian and Israeli NGO representatives, peace activists, political figures, and families. I am really grateful for having participated in the world cafe, because it had a big part in leading me in this direction.*

- Israelis are much more critical of Israel than the North American Jewish Community which has a much more limited realm of discourse.
- It is confusing to figure out how to self-identify, especially when others want to choose our identity for us
- We have a responsibility to choose how we want to identify ourselves.
- Every person is a combination of multiple identities, including their religion, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, interests, passions etc. Therefore to define a person simply according to their religion and to expect them to act in a certain way is not only racist, but foolish. This is the problem with creating artificial boundaries between people.

participants mentioned that they felt pressured, whether internally or externally to identify with Israel.

- While everyone is entitled to believe what they want, it is wrong to try to force one's beliefs on others.
- A lot of the things which are said in the name of religions – all religions – these days are an abuse of beautiful ideas.
- Any 'ideology' is dangerous when it is totalizing and does not allow for dissent



### ***Alia's reflections***

*Though this event did not appeal to me initially, attending was worthwhile and interesting. There were many issues that went unaddressed- those ranging from the obvious ones such as the wall or the settlements to those of things like privilege, the occupation and so forth. The most interesting thing for me was arriving and noting many people that I already knew through other friends, school, life etc. who were Jewish. This of course played into my paranoia that is oh-so-present when faced in a situation where I feel outnumbered. I came to learn later that some of my Jewish friends had the same feelings, which was quite reassuring. The contrast between unaware Jewish people and more aware Palestinians/Palestinian solidarity people was quite stark- an interesting concept I noticed was that of Israel being this abstract and foreign place that Jewish people feel they needed to have a connection with, and most had been there. While on the other hand many Palestinians have never been there but could name all of the important dates such as Sabra and Shatila, both Intifada's, Sheik Ahmad's assassination along with many other everyday people who have been killed. I honestly feel like awareness was raised for people who when faced with their Grandmother's stories or the stories on Al-Jazeera naturally subscribe to the former. Without the shields of friends, family etc I feel it was easier for both sides to hear each other out and feel for their fellow human beings. The format of this event was quite well done and I advocate for more events of this sort to continue.*

***Table 3: I want to come up with ideas for possible means to an end to the conflict, locally***



- The creation of an internet group amongst the participants (and other interested people) where people can share ideas and resources, build friendships, and organize events
  - The creation of an Israel-Palestine Peace Garden
  - Social events
  - The organization of dialogues like this on a regular basis which deal with different issues.
- Engagement with people who fall into these demographics but who may not have been actively involved in the past.
  - Work towards improving dialogue in the classroom (maybe make some sort of module to present to classes? Maybe some sort of teacher training?)
  - Teaching liberation theology in the school system.

### ***Allie's reflections:***

*The cafe taught me that grand complicated narratives like that of the "middle east" become much simpler over shared food, when the opportunity for real stories can leak onto the floor like spilled hummus.*

- The creation of a conjoined film festival.
- The organization of a variety of food-centered events.
- More guest speakers should be invited to campus. The hope is that if the trust already exists, there may be a larger audience for these speakers than existed previously.

### ***Maya's experience***

*Coming from a small multicultural high school, I had taken for granted that friends could discuss issues that they did not agree on. It was typical for a conversation to begin "my father tells me that..." or "when my grandmother lived in Palestine..." It was understood that we were teenagers, who inherited from our parents and upbringing a discrete knowledge, and as questioning young minds were trying to get a better picture of the full story. I know that I for one relished in learning from my peers. I was therefore surprised upon leaving this safe environment to learn that this was not the typical scenario. I have met individuals who have been best friends since kindergarten, one being Jewish and the other Lebanese, and they are firm that they will not discuss middle east issues in front of each other. As part of a Model United Nations society the number of Jewish students who refused to represent the Palestinian Authority in simulations, or the number of students from any background who were uncomfortable at even discussing the issues shocked me. I acknowledge that I come to any table of discussion with pre-conceived assumptions and am aware that my opinions are not always the best-informed and often irrational, but I believe in the need for discussion. No one can assume to possess all the answers or to know the truth, as I think it safe to say they do not exist. But I believe that discussion fosters greater understanding and that a friendship based on open dialogue has a firmer foundation. Beginning to believe that my high school upbringing was a rare blip in the system, I was thrilled to meet like-minded peers at the "Middle East Café." I look forward to acting upon some of the ideas we have brainstormed and hope to help continue the movement towards dialogue in Halifax.*

### **Extra thoughts about this event in relation to future events...**

- 1) There is so much good will here, but we need to be careful, as we need to undertake dialogue with a higher level of risk. But setting a good foundation is important.
- 2) Perhaps it would be productive to have events where we simply criticize each other. That needs to be qualified: Perhaps a possibility would be to write down a statement relating to the topic at hand, and then give other people the opportunity to write critical responses. Criticism can be very mind-opening and productive.

### ***Bob's reflections:***

*My wish for this group is to build on the work that has been started, so that there are several people who can act as conveners, and to invite more people into this work. Even though there were some suggestions at the end that we get to the "tough stuff", this dialogue was clearly a very important foundation. I found the patterns and insights particularly penetrating and thoughtful – and I can't wait to see what happens next!*

***Mordecai (this is a segment of an article he wrote for the Canadian Jewish News)***

*Having to tell another's story and listening to one's own story being told were a little like playing an advanced and risky game of Broken Telephone. I realized how much gets lost in translation and how difficult it is both to make oneself understood and to truly understand where another is coming from. But it seems that this dilemma is representative of the conflict as a whole – so much is embedded in complex narratives that are hard to untangle.*

*This was a fascinating and important exercise to undertake and a necessary first step in trust-building. I found it encouraging to see people cautiously correct their partner if they felt they were not being properly represented. Given the risks involved with this type of exercise, there was remarkably little (if any) hostility in the air. It was also interesting to see that no two people came to the dialogue for exactly the same reason...*

*...Because of the friendly, comfortable atmosphere that was created, it seemed that people might have been a bit guarded in these discussions. I found that I could not express precisely what was on my mind and felt that others might be in the same boat. I found that the discussions themselves did not quite get to the heart of the matters at hand. This question occasionally crossed my mind: should a discussion on a topic as challenging as the Middle East really be this relaxed?*

*The conclusion that I and others reached was yes. As an initial step to further dialogue, this was precisely what needed to be done. The organizers themselves harboured no illusions that solutions could be achieved in one simple afternoon in Halifax. Still, this event demonstrated that there is both a need and a will for residents of this city to discuss these matters in an open setting. For myself and others, this event served as a powerful alternative to the common fare available in Halifax, and I hope it is not the last of its kind.*

***Table 4: Needs, Wants, Entitlements***

- People want a place to belong
- Israel feels like a safety net for Jewish people
- Does this 'safety net' actually makes Jewish people safer, if it comes at the expense of neighborly relations?
- Fear underlies the establishment of the State of Israel
- Perhaps it is safer to make oneself more vulnerable, than to close one off in the name of protection

***Ari's reflections:***

*There was this really cool realization of how the Jewish attachment to Israel is based on needing a place to go or a safe place. It was amazing to come to this realization that this needs to be worked out in peoples consciousness.*

- In the Middle East and all over the world perhaps it would be more beneficial to build grassroots community, as opposed to focusing directly on the political project
- We need to address the source of fear which drives need. It might be better if it is addressed locally

### ***Larry's story***

*... I chose an event that happened when I was not far from the age of the students and had a profound influence on the rest of my life. I told it in order to impress upon my Palestinian interlocutor why many Jews cannot and will not openly question Israel's actions...and why I do.*

*My dad was a former Auschwitz inmate who, like most of his co-survivors hardly ever talked of his horrific experiences to his children. But the little he did mention made the mass of information available elsewhere particularly alive for me.*

*In 1968, with the Six-Day War raging, my dad was glued to the television, exulting at every Israeli triumph, every Arab humiliation. In an exchange fraught with intergenerational conflict, I asked him, "I thought it was the Nazis that committed the Holocaust. What have the Arabs ever done to you?"*

*He flew into a rage and told me the Arabs were trying to wipe out the Jews. Even at eighteen I could see that Israel was not the Jews and asked why, if Israel was so in danger of being wiped out, could the Israeli air force wipe out the air forces of four Arab nations on the ground on the first day and proceed to defeat three armies and capture three times its original territory in another five? At that he threw me out of the house. (Not permanently, but he wouldn't talk to me for a week.)*

*I decided that from then on, unlike most Jews, I would take a questioning, if not skeptical, view of the Arab-Israeli conflict. I also sensed that Israel's seeming invincibility could not continue and that it could achieve security for itself and Jews, not through military superiority, but by making a lasting peace with its Arab neighbours, and especially the Palestinians within its (new) borders.*

### ***Table 5: I want to hear stories and draw***

- There is a similarity between Jews and Palestinians – only there's a time lag of 30 years. When I was young, my parents told me not to make a big deal of my Jewishness. Now I have Palestinian students who may never disclose that they're Palestinian.

### ***Table 6: Israel-Palestine peace garden***

- This table did not attract a large crowd as it was essentially an idea for a specific local idea that could be put forward in Halifax. As a result, it fell under the category of table 3.



## Conclusions

This was a modest event with modest goals. The hope was that it would be the foundation for future action both within and outside of Halifax. As a result, the success of the event can be judged solely out of what comes out of it. It's up to all of us now to continue this dialogue, to engage in critical enquiry, and to be part of the solution...



### ***Magi's reflection:***

*I came to the open cafe with great trepidation. I did not know what to expect. Will it be a violent verbal fight? Will it be an exercise in futility and frustration? I came expecting very little and was equipped with my strong headache medicines for the aftermath. I was not surprised, pleasantly surprised, or any kind of surprised. I was moved, I was inspired and my hope renewed.*

*From a theological perspective, humans are made in the image of God and so on and so forth....., however, in the Open Cafe it was no longer "so on and so forth....," - book talk. It was real. my hope in people was renewed. I was awed at the ability of young people to transcend the brain washing they had all their life, and actually step out and meet the other.*

Bob has put forward the idea of creating a core group out of the Café's participants which will organize and coordinate a variety of events next year. If you're interested or if you know someone else who was not able to attend the Café but would be interested, please send an email to [bensaifer@gmail.com](mailto:bensaifer@gmail.com) and we'll put this together.

Thanks again for all your support!

***Ruba and Ben***