

Moderating among moderates

By [GAIL LICHTMAN](#)

The spacious and lovely home of Dr. Muhammad Dajani in Beit Hanina is only two minutes from the Pisgat Ze'ev expressway. Yet for the 17 Israelis who came there last week, it was like entering another world. The familiar street signs in Hebrew were replaced by Arabic, and up ahead loomed the checkpoint through which one enters the enclave where Dajani lives. "This is Palestinian land," exclaimed one woman with a sense of trepidation and surprise.

The Israelis had come to Dajani's home for a meeting with moderate Muslims, arranged by Trust (Emun), a new NGO that focuses on building understanding among peoples, and Wasatia, a new social movement for moderate Islam.

The aim of the evening, which took place on the same day that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert met with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in Jericho, was to build trust between Israelis and Palestinians. But unlike many other encounters, there was no discussion of politics or conflict resolution - only a genuine attempt at fostering human contact.

"Most Israelis live their lives in cocoons, meeting only people who are like them," explains Trust co-founder and director Elana Rozenman. "In Trust, we are trying to go beyond dialogue so that people can see one another as human beings. Unless people are ready to trust one another, it will be impossible for things to change."

For this reason, Rozenman prefers to hold Trust meetings in private homes. "It is hard for people to feel trust. But meeting in homes gives people the opportunity to see how people live and to understand their culture. Going into Beit Hanina is going into unfamiliar territory for most Israelis. This brings up fears, both internal and external. But entering a warm, home environment provides a safe place where people can interact."

"Trust is ground-breaking in that it gets away from politics," notes Ester Golan, one of Trust's founders and a participant in the meeting. "A person is more than politics."

For Rozenman, Trust is the culmination of a decade of working toward non-violence and understanding. In September 1997, her 16-year-old son Noam was severely injured in the triple suicide bombing on the Ben-Yehuda pedestrian mall. He spent six weeks in the burn unit at Hadassah and months more in rehabilitation.

"Thank God Noam recovered. Today, he is married and the father of twins. But as a result of lying on mattresses in the burn unit next to him, I had time to think," Rozenman recalls.

"I concluded that to do nothing was to collude with violence. The root cause of violence comes from fear and mistrust. It is easy to demonize the other and once you do that, you can do anything to him. So I decided to work on building trust and understanding. This is the only way to make a difference."

DAJANI, THE scion of a distinguished Palestinian family, is the director of the American Studies Institute at Al Quds University. Highly educated with two PhDs from American universities, he is also a signer of the Ami Ayalon/Sari Nusseibeh Statement of Principles.

In March 2007, Dajani started Wasatia, which comes from a term in the Koran that means "moderate." He hopes it will someday be an alternative to Fatah or Hamas.

"Islam is moderate," Dajani explains. "There is no radical Islam, only radical Muslims. There are extremists who are interpreting the Koran in an extreme way. They are making Islam radical, which it is not. In Wasatia, we would like to show the common ground of values [of the monotheistic religions]."

"The name Wasatia comes from a verse in the Sura of the Cow," he continues. "It is verse 143 out of 186. It is exactly in the middle, which is where God wants us to be. The verse says: 'And we have created you a mid-ground [moderate] nation.'"

Dajani couches his approach in the language of the Koran. He admitted during the meeting that saying "democracy" to Palestinians doesn't work. The word is linked to the West and turns people off. But promoting values such as tolerance, justice, fairness and acceptance of the other through the Koran is speaking to Palestinians in their own language.

"I was very impressed by the quality of Israelis who came to my home," he adds. "They were not 'the usual suspects.' Also for many of the Palestinians, this was the first time they met regular Israelis. The important thing is that we get to know one another as human beings and not as soldiers or terrorists."

THE EVENING started off with an exercise designed to help the 35 participants, who ranged in age from 16 to 83, to get acquainted. People paired off with someone they did not know and then had three minutes to talk about a person they trust and why.

"Trust is something one has to work on building over time," explains Golan. "Being able to listen to the other without judging is an essential ingredient for building mutual trust."

"I have never been to a meeting quite like this one," says Reuven Rosenfelder of Katamon. "I was paired off with a young Palestinian who is about to graduate from Oberlin College in Ohio. My nephew studied there, so there was an immediate connection. He told me that he had a tough time in finding his place when he first arrived in the US. This brought back memories of when I was an Israeli student trying to adjust to college in America. He reminded me of myself and how I got to know America as a foreign student."

"Then he told me the strangest story," Rosenfelder continues. "Somehow, he was put in contact with a blind American rabbi at Oberlin. I know this doesn't seem like a combination that goes together - a Palestinian student and an American rabbi - but they developed a close friendship and this rabbi became his guiding light in becoming part of college life. He chose to talk about the rabbi as the person he trusts."

"This just proves that you can never assume things about people and you never know what to expect. I was also surprised to see religious Jews at the meeting. To me, they are associated with the right. So you can never really know," he concludes.

Dr. Esther Silver, a Canadian/Israeli psychoanalyst and pediatrician, admits to never having been to a meeting like the Trust/Wasatia one. "I haven't even been in this part of Jerusalem in years. The encounter was a bit of an eye opener. It was the first time I have been in open dialogue with Palestinians since medical school. And it was something I never really expected to happen in Israel because everyone is so polarized, political and defensive. It was a delightful surprise. I spoke with Dr. Hulat Dajani, Dr. Muhammad's sister-in-law. We have a lot in common. She also moved from pediatrics to more community-based medicine. She would like me to train Palestinian medical personnel in recognizing behavior disorders, my area of specialization."

Nabil Kayali, the director of two private schools - Bridge Academy in A-Ram and Bridge International in Beit Hanina - said he came because "I think such meetings give hope. When people can communicate, then there is a spark of optimism that one day coexistence will be a reality."

At the meeting, Kayali spoke about the importance of educating children to seek openness. "We try to convey the message to our children that they should look a little further beyond closed ideas and have an open mind. We also try to show them how conflicts can be resolved peacefully." He also expressed an interest in having ordinary Israelis come to his schools and speak with the children.

As an initial meeting between Israelis and Palestinians, the encounter barely scratched the surface. Nevertheless, participants universally expressed the desire to meet again. "I realize that we did not get beyond general positive impressions," says Rosenfelder. "There was not much time to really progress. I look at this meeting as an appetizer. I would like to meet again to hear more about moderate Muslims."

Both those from Trust and Wasatia were also well aware that conducting the meeting in English was a limiting factor. Most of the Israelis were highly educated, native speakers of English or those who had lived or worked abroad. The Palestinians were also highly educated and the elite of their society.

"Even if this is a self-selected group, it can still have influence," Rozenman explains. "Those who took part witnessed a different reality and will go home and tell their friends and neighbors about their experiences. They will help open the minds of others. They will tell them that they met Palestinians who want a normal life and are really ready to live with Israelis."

A number of years ago, she met the Dalai Lama and told him about her efforts. "He said I should not worry about being only one person. Right now, all over the world, one person in one little place is doing something and each one is changing the world. It made me recognize that I am already making a difference."

"Peace is built on better understanding of the other," concludes Dajani. "Yes, this is a narrow group. But it is better to start here than wait another 10 years. We have already lost so much time. We are fated to live together, not only next to one another but also in the midst of one another. We cannot isolate ourselves from the other. Our grandfathers planted the seeds of conflict. We should plant the seeds of peace for our grandchildren to reap."