

## YUSEF BASHIR: GIVING PEACE A CHANCE

**Joshua Holo:** Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball campus in Los Angeles and your host.

**JH:** Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, and to our episode with Yousef Bashir. Born in 1989, Yousef Bashir's life changed drastically during the Second Intifada, when armed conflict invaded his home and family farm in Gaza. Shot in the back by an Israeli soldier and subsequently treated by Israeli doctors, Bashir recuperated and moved to the United States, where he studied and ultimately wrote the book "The Words of My Father: Love and Pain in Palestine" while he was attending college. Bashir also worked in the House of Representatives and the United States Senate before he joined the General Delegation of the PLO to the US as the Congressional Affairs Advisor. Yousef Bashir is now a full-time author speaking about his book across the United States. Yousef Bashir, thank you for joining us, it's really a pleasure to get to know you.

**Yousef Bashir:** Thank you for having me and good to be with you.

**JH:** I'd like you to tell us a little bit more of the arc of your personal story before we launch into this particularly moving book and the relationship with your father. Can you give us an outline of the arc from Gaza to the United States and the conflict that's so shaped your life?

**YB:** My story began, as you said, in 1989, but it would really begin in the Second Intifada when it broke out in 2000, when the peace talks failed at Camp David hosted by President Clinton. I was 11 at the time. The Palestinians had decided to uprising against the occupation, and the Israelis, of course, they see it differently. They retaliated. My house was located near a settlement that was built when I was born in 1989. And when I say next to my house, I mean the kitchen is next to the kitchen. They see us, we see them, we see the settlers, and we see the soldiers. Until everything changed when the soldiers started shooting at the house nonstop. The first time they did it, they terrified the whole family. I remember we... As soon as we shut off the lights after dinner, waves and waves and waves of bullets entered all through the kitchen windows. We crawled to the floor and we made it back to the living room. My father, who was committed to peaceful coexistence, not only with the Israelis but with all his neighbors and all the peoples of the world, refused to leave the house. The soldiers came and asked him to leave and he again refused and to make the long story short, a few days later they came back with more soldiers, more equipment and took over the second floor, third floor.

And from September of 2000 to August of 2005, they controlled the entire house where we slept in one room at night, where we had to ask for a permit to go to the bathroom, kitchen. We had to leave as a group to go to school and once a week to go get groceries and other things that had to be arranged through the soldiers and be approved by the soldiers. In 2002, they shot at my father, and in 2004, they shot me, putting me in a wheelchair. And throughout the entire experience, I found myself questioning my father's convictions of peace when I just simply have to point to the actions of the Israelis who he says are my cousins and are people that I'm going to live in peace with. And my father refused to allow me to hate or be upset because he thought that the most important thing for us was to not only just not leave our house, but also not losing our humanity, because we were born peaceful and we shall remain so. And coming to the US post that experience, I came for the first time to attend the summit called Seeds of Peace in the state of Maine. That was my first time in the US, and there I decided that I wanted to come back to the US eventually in order to pursue my education and my career.

**JH:** The fulcrum of your story, aside from yourself, is this character of your father, whom you described with tremendous love, also a lot of rigor and depth. You've said that the takeaway that your father left you with is peace and coexistence. Can you represent your father's philosophy in a slightly fuller way that encapsulates his legacy to you?

**YB:** He believed that Palestinians and Israelis, the Jews and Arabs, lived in peace many times throughout history. And the reality that we have had, at least since 2000, and the realities that we have today, does not mean that we will never have peace again. He constantly believed that as natives of the Holy Land, we must do everything we can in order to give peaceful coexistence between Arabs and Jews in the Holy Land another chance and another chance and another chance because that's what a true Holy-Lander does. My family is a native of Gaza. We go back 300 years, if not more, so... And he took it upon himself to always try to do what he can in order to give the coming generations and give the cause of peace another chance, and another chance, and another chance, despite what the soldiers were doing in his house, despite how they were treating him, despite how they were disrespecting him, his wife, and his family, not to mention that they tried to kill members of his family, he always insisted on trying to speak to them as neighbors.

And if not current neighbors then eventual neighbors. He always tried to communicate with the settlers that, at least, let us try to have our children to play together so that when they are older, they don't have to worry with what we're dealing with today. And the answer, of course, comes back violent negative from the settlers or from the soldiers. They ended up destroying his entire farm, they shot at the house, they injured him, they injured my older brother, and they came very close to ending my life. So that was his philosophy that no matter what goes on, no matter what would continue to go on, you must never give up on the notion of living in peace or bringing peace between Jews and Arabs in the Holy Land.

**JH:** It's a very compelling story and one of the reasons it's compelling is because your father paid a very heavy price for his beliefs that you've outlined with respect to the Israelis. Did he also pay a heavy price with respect to other Palestinians?

**YB:** No, I wouldn't say that. Among Palestinians, there is a great deal of diversity. Some believe that peaceful talks is a romantic idea. We've tried it, it didn't work. Some believe that a little bit of this, a little bit of that. Some believe this is who we are and that we continue to try to do it in a peaceful way, it just says exactly who the Palestinians are. I've never seen my father being pressured or threatened from any Palestinian because of beliefs and in fact, it was quite the contrary because many Palestinians wanted him to stay in the house and many people also wanted the same thing for him as well. That sense of diversity that I just mentioned, is also exactly almost in the same way. There is this side, there are people who want settlements, there are people who think that the two state solution is the best way forward. That diversity existed just the same way on the Palestinian side, just the same way it exists on the Israeli side as well.

**JH:** Yeah. It's true that there are a wide variety of opinions in the Jewish community worldwide and in Israel, there's no question about that. I'm touched by... I think a problem that all of us who care about this feel, which is a little bit of a chicken and egg problem or a quandary. On the one end, I think we all feel that geopolitics can't move forward without people trusting each other and what have you, and it's very hard to build. And on the other hand, I think many people feel that when we do work on a one-to-one basis, that can be very human and very invigorating and very encouraging. It also feels very slow and very... It feels like sometimes it's hard to scale it up to make geopolitical progress. It seems like you are straddling both worlds. You've done legislative work, as we discussed in the introduction, and your story and your book is deeply personal. Can you talk a little bit about either the tension or the frustrations or the constant struggle to make the personal and the political go hand in hand?

**YB:** Let's say it's... I think calling it a struggle is an understatement. It can be quite complicated and quite frustrating to have spent 10 years now of my life talking about peace no matter what, saying that Israelis are going to be my future neighbors, and saying these things that I've learned from my father and from my family. And despite that over the span of the past 10 years, at least four wars happened in Gaza alone, not to mention more complications in the West Bank, not to mention all the conflict that erupted all across and around Israel, Palestine. And it becomes a question, "Does this make sense? Is this a good use of my time?" But it comes back to a very important idea that my father believed in and that is having faith in the cause of peace. It's the same way we read the Bible, and the Quran, and all other old ancient scriptures, and we read the stories and then, even though we weren't in there by any means, and even the persons who told us about the stories that we read in the Bible or the Quran weren't there themselves.

But yet we choose to have so much faith in the idea and the theme of the story that we learn. And so I'm doing the same thing, I pray five times a day. I pray for peace every single day, and I try to do my very best to give it a chance and to challenge people to do the same. But when I wake up, I see problems, I see that the war has not ended, I see that the divide is only deepening between the sons of Abraham, but I choose to place my faith in the idea that the sons of Abraham are meant to find a way to share the Holy Land in peace. We don't have to be the same, we don't have to agree on each other, but we as human beings, as sons of Abraham, children of Abraham, are obligated to find a way to live in a coexistent fashion in the Holy Land for the sake of, not only the

Jewish side, but also for the Palestinians, that's beneficial for both sides. And sooner or later, I believe that this idea that we... It's important for us to find a way, will become mainstream.

**JH:** When it comes to bringing to reality this vision, it seems to me that when there's a deep deep conflict as we all understand there is, that one of the most important things is for the other side, your interlocutor, if it's a good relationship, or your adversary, if it's a bad relationship, but that if you wanna make progress, that you have to feel like the other person understands your most important claims and concerns, even if they don't agree. And vice versa. So, I wanna ask you, A, what are the most important claims and concerns for you speaking as a concerned and active Palestinian for the sake of peace and co-existence on the one hand? But I also wanna ask you, people that are concerned with the Israeli side of this equation, what do you think that they most need the Palestinians to acknowledge, to hear?

**YB:** So that's an important question to raise. I very much believe that for anyone who is interested in promoting peace and co-existence between Arabs and Jews, and as well Palestine, have to be able to put themselves in the other side's shoes. It's just... It's important before moving forward with any idea or any talk or any effort to make peace more viable. To me as a Palestinian, for all my life, I've known nothing but occupation. I have known nothing but check points, and I've known nothing but... And lack of freedom, and when I look around, the only person responsible for this is the Israeli side.

And many other issues, if I go more broadly, the fact that I am despite all the agreements and the negotiations and all the efforts, I'm still stateless. My people half of them are still living in refugee camps, and even the parts that were purged by the war to become the future Palestinian state are engulfed with legal and illegal settlements. To Palestinians all of them are illegal since they exist in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, etcetera. So for many Palestinians, it's a question of freedom, and to... If I move over to the Israeli side, and I've presented before many Jewish audiences and people who are concerned with Israel, it is a question of security.

Are we going to be secure? Are we going to be secure? And for a Palestinian to hear that, I think is important. The issue is that many Palestinians get that point delivered to them by a soldier, not by an author such as Yossi Klein Halevi who wrote letters to my Palestinian neighbor. He is trying to explain to the Palestinians why he feels that he wants to live where he lives in East Jerusalem. Now, we don't have to agree with him, we don't have to disagree with him, that's not the point, the point is that he is trying to communicate his message and his beliefs in a human way to the Palestinians, many of whom ended up responding to his book.

But, doing it through prisons, many Palestinians are imprisoned without trial for more than a year regardless of their age. Many Palestinians are unemployed, directly affected by the occupation, the lack of freedom, the closure of borders, and when the Israeli leaders, the Jewish leaders stand up and speak of security, to many Palestinians that doesn't translate, because it's not being communicated to them in a human and dignified way, unlike what Yossi does. And there are quite frankly others who are doing but they're not getting enough attention in order to become mainstream on their side.

But for me, doing this over the last decade, I can tell you that it's a question of freedom for Palestinians, and I believe that it's also a question of security for the Israelis.

**JH:** I concur. I certainly think that what you're saying, it makes sense and is true. Speaking from the Jewish side certainly security is obviously paramount. And it makes sense to me perfectly well why from the Palestinian side freedom would be paramount. I guess I have a concern, which is, that as accurate and as reasonable as your mirror imaging of concerns is, and I appreciate it a lot, and I identify with both sides in this, just by the logic of it. I find myself concerned about the deeper streams and what feels like the unresolved nature of much deeper issues with respect to Israel and Palestine. And I wanna get your opinion on them. For example, the Zionist project itself, is a project that for the Palestinians, traditionally for a long time, they have labeled as colonial. And the Jews, even if they... No matter the language of use, for the Jews of course, it's a homecoming. And those two things seem to me to be more or less irreconcilable.

But that's just one example of the deeper streams. There are other issues such as territory for example, that are a big deal, and would seem to be also something that both the Israelis and the Palestinians need to feel heard about, with respect to claims. But it's really sticky and it tends to be very adversarial when you go in these directions. Is there a way to talk about these things that is self-revelatory, is honest and listens to the other side, even though they're also contentious?

**YB:** That's why part of the reason that compels me to do everything I can to write the book. I very much believe that because we have so many deep conflicting issues between both sides, because it's so complicated and so as you said, filled with tensions, it is important for the human touch to always be there. The importance of personal stories to be shared between Israelis and Palestinians is utterly important in such conflict because it paves the way and allows the way to explain and show the importance of the other side needs. And I think that this is crucial moving forward because today many Israelis they don't talk to Palestinians. May Palestinians do not get to speak to Israelis or interact with them, and somehow they are supposed to love each other and know about one another. And of course that doesn't happen. What I believe needs to be happening in order to bypass the complexities of the situation is to invest more in the personal story sharing between both sides. Many Israelis want peace, many Palestinians want peace but they are unable to share that feeling and that wish together. Some of them do it today on social media, in the past that was never an option.

And even today the amount of tensions are so mainstream, are so normal, are so, it's just the way of life to many Palestinians and many Israelis that talking and trying to reach out to an Israeli or trying to reach out to a Palestinian seems so pointless and so irrelevant. But I think the contrary, I think sooner or later, whether we like it or not, we have to live in that same space together equally, freely, respectfully and peacefully and without any fear of war or conflict or violence, etcetera.

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**JH:** Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at

large, check out the online courses at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu). For in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called, "Making prayer real." Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click sign up at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu). Oh and one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes, but whatever you do, do not give us five stars, unless we deserve it. Now back to our podcast.

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**JH:** So I have a question and I don't know if it's a fair question or not, but you'll tell me, are you a two-state, a two-stator as we say or a one stator as we say? Or is it... Or do you prefer not to wade into those policies?

**YB:** That's a fair question. My answer is that I'm a Holy-Lander. Whether it's two states, or one state, I just want to see this part of the world that is meant to be a beacon of hope, peace and equality to be that. For me if it's a two-state, two-state solution, okay, but it's a start. A start on the path of making peace between Israelis and Palestinians a normality. Because even when we're two states, we would still have to work together and cooperate together on many issues that go beyond security, cooperation. We'll have to do economy, energy, education, healthcare, so many things that any two countries would do. And we're not just two countries, we're neighbors and we have a lot of in common. If the two states is what's best then that's two states. But I think that eventually we have to be focused on making sure that the Holy Land enjoys the peace that it's meant to enjoy, and that can only be done if we make sure that that idea is done house to house, person-to-person, neighbor-to-neighbor. Because even with one state, if we truly do not know one another as natives of the Holy Land, it will never work. It'll just take us a year or two or three, four, five, before we go back and fight again and move 10 steps backwards as we've seen over the last 50 years or so.

**JH:** I am moved by your ambition for a mutual acknowledgement. And I think that that's important and I think it's extremely valuable. But I wonder, is there an important difference, and if there's a difference can we accept less than acknowledgement mutually and live with mere acceptance of each other? Or if we merely accept acceptance and don't strive for genuine mutual acknowledgment, do you fear that any solution will be too shallow?

**YB:** In this conflict, in this context, I will say yes. Because this isn't China versus the U.S.. It's hard to draw a red line between the two. We'll always... We go to the same places almost to worship. We are living in the same land despite everything that has happened between Israelis and Palestinians, that's only half an hour away or an hour away drive. Gaza to Tel Aviv. And so it has to focus on the human aspect of this.

**JH:** Is there an element, an irreducible element of the conflict that we just have to accept is forever going to be in conflict and the best we can do is work around it, or agree just to live with it, but that is just never ever going to be resolved?

**YB:** There would be no book, if I believe that. I believe that we will listen to it, this is our ultimate purpose in life. Ultimately, our message and our purpose should be to find a way for the Palestinians to live in the state freely and for the Israeli to live in the state freely but also peacefully and without fear of destruction and etcetera, etcetera. I think the expectations from life for both Israelis and Palestinians are in many ways very similar and that the ultimate solution, the ultimate answer is going to be peaceful coexistence between them. Are they going to fully ever accept one another? I don't know, I just know that they have so much in common that the idea of living in peace together is never going to be fully irrelevant between them.

**JH:** You spoke about prayer and your religious life. So I wanna ask you a religious question to send us off. Share with us a lesson from Islam that is a wellspring and a source of hope and encouragement for you, and then share with us something that you have encountered from the Jewish side, either Jewish religion or Jewish people whom you've encountered and worked with that has given you similar hope and encouragement.

**YB:** My favorite lesson from the Quran is god says that, "I could have made you into one nation and one tribe, instead I chose to make you into many nations and many tribes so that you get to know one another". And to me that tells me that I do need to tell my story to the other side, I do need to share my story to the people who don't know about Palestinians, whether it's in the US, Europe or elsewhere. That is the luxury and the beauty of life is that we are meant to share and exchange who we are with one another because otherwise it's more amount to a fulfilling life. Something I encountered from the Jewish traditions by the Torah, I like very, very much. There's a story, I don't want to quote directly so I don't mess things up, but the narrative of the story is that there are others, enter the land, but there are others. I promised it just like I promised it to you, I promise to Ishmael. And that means among other things that really just reaffirmed that Judaism, Islam are not really at arduous with one another.

**JH:** Just for the record, the story you're thinking of is Genesis Chapter 17, where God makes a blessing for Ishmael together with his covenant with Isaac. So...

**YB:** Thank you sir.

**JH:** It's clear that you find in that an opportunity for the kind of coexistence that you have worked so hard for and continue to work for daily as you share your book with audiences around the country. And as part of that, I wanna thank you, Yousef Bashir, for spending the time with us on the College Commons podcast and for the pleasure of getting to know you.

**YB:** Thank you so much.

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