The Role of Women in International Peace-building from a Jewish Perspective

by Sarah Bernstein

My work in the field of interreligious dialogue began with the visit of the Pope to Israel in the year 2000. Later that same year the second Intifada broke out and the Middle East descended once more into violence. Over the last eleven years I have worked in the field of peace-building, specializing in interreligious dialogue and in particular working with Israeli and Palestinian women in Jerusalem.

I should perhaps begin by clarifying that I do not believe that women are inherently, biologically programmed, to be more peaceful than men. I do believe, however, that the way women tend to be brought up, and the different roles that women often play in society, give them different skills and gifts that can be brought to the field of peace-building.

When I sat down to write this talk, I tried to think of a female figure from the Hebrew Bible that I could take as the model for the role of women in peace-building. You may not be surprised to hear that most of the female characters do not come out well—women’s relations in the Old Testament seem frequently to be more characterized by bitter rivalry than by good relations and harmony. Sarah and Hagar certainly offer no immediate inspiration. Rebecca plays off her sons one against the other. Miriam plays a leading role—but very much in support of her brothers. Dinah, Leah’s daughter comes to mind—after all, she goes out to meet the women of the land—but she comes to a cruel fate and is harshly punished for her openness.

What then, is the Jewish model I should take for talking about the role of women in peace-building? I would like to suggest a rather an unlikely text for my source, but one that captures many of the essential features of women’s roles in international peace-building. In Exodus Chapter 26 we read the detailed instructions for the construction of the ark and the tabernacle. I will admit, even though it all sounds very beautiful, my eyes do tend to glaze over as we read through the tiniest details of the measurements and the cloths and the gold and the jugs and the candelabra and so on and so forth. What on earth does this have to do with peace-building, you may well ask.

Women as Networkers

But if you look closely at the instructions for the curtains of the tabernacle, in Chapter 26 verse 3, you will find something intriguing. It turns out that we have here the instructions not only for building the tabernacle, but also a model for the role of women in nurturing peace. The English translation doesn’t seem very promising: “Five of
The phrase translated as “to one another” in most English translations, actually means “a woman to her sister–ה 행사 לא הרייא תועיריה שמח.” So, the instructions begin with ten beautiful curtains, blue and purple and scarlet. On one side five are joined to each other—“a woman to her sister,” on the other side the other five are also joined to each other—“a woman to her sister.” So making the admittedly long leap to the role of women in peace-building, I would like to suggest that one of women’s strengths and one of the things that makes women particularly gifted in peace-building is their networking skills, their ability to connect one to another, “a woman to her sister.” Carol Gilligan suggests that whereas men view society as a hierarchy, and want to be at the top, women view society as a web of relationships and want to be in the centre. They therefore spend time and energy on building their webs, or networks and these same networks create spheres of influence that women can utilize in their peace-nurturing work. Whether it’s their family and community ties, or their professional networks, women can spread their influence in a wide circle of impact, working in concentric circles rather than in a hierarchical manner.

In addition, these connections that women form to each other, give them the ability to sense the public mood in a way that men may not. Women are embedded in the social bedrock of society. Women can keep their fingers on society’s pulse–away from the newsrooms and the political maneuvering that may go on in public, to what ordinary people are really saying and really thinking behind the scenes.

The instructions tell us that on each side we need to join cloths of different colors together. In our context, this stresses the importance of working with women from different backgrounds. Thus, in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, on the Israeli side, we need to make sure that women from different backgrounds are involved in peace-building activities—not just left-wing, secular, committed feminists, but we must reach out to women of different ideological hues, and bring them into the conversation. I believe this is one of the strengths of dialogue—it makes it possible to draw a wide range of people into a transformative process of getting to know the Other, of seeing the face of God in the face of the Other, as Jacob says when he meets Esau once again after many years of bitter separation.

Equivalency

Let’s return to our original source. In Verses 4 and 5 we are instructed to make loops of blue wool on the edge of the outermost cloth of each set, fifty loops on each end cloth “the loops to be opposite one another,” or if we look again at the Hebrew, “התוחא לא השא תואלולה תוליבקמ– the loops should be “parallel or equivalent, each woman to her sister.” Returning to our theme, these instructions suggest the need for equivalence, or symmetry in our peace-building work. Women can build on their similar life experiences—as women, maybe as mothers, often in patriarchal societies. Women who come together in dialogue, for example, often discover that they share many life experiences. Marginalization is an experience that often cuts across ethnic, national and religious boundaries. Their maternal instincts and interests and experiences as mothers may be very similar. Motherhood can provide the powerful motivation needed to bring women together across national and ethnic divides, building on their desire to build a better world to protect their children. But women often share many experiences beyond motherhood—as wives, as daughters, as sisters.

In a dialogue context, these instructions tell us that we need to build equivalency into the group, and to maintain a certain degree of balance between the two sides. It can be problematic having one group made up of intellectuals and the other of women with no education–unless the purpose of the group is to focus on a skill that the seemingly less-well-educated women have to a greater degree. On some levels this can be obvious. In one women’s dialogue
group, we chose to make the language of dialogue English. That decision meant that only educated, professional women could participate in the group—which in turn guaranteed a certain balance in the group. Other groups work in a mixture of Hebrew and Arabic, ensuring that all the women can speak their own languages, and working with translators—which brings its own complications. But language balance is not the only relevant factor. As Allport (1954) suggests in his Contact Theory work, power relations need to be carefully considered. Often the Jewish side in a dialogue group in Israel can be significantly stronger than the Palestinian side—largely a reflection of the outside reality. There are some obvious things that can go wrong—such as when you end up with more Jews than Palestinians in a group. But equivalency can be a very delicate thing to achieve—it’s a combination of factors, some of which can be surprising, and it works at a variety of different levels. One way in which we endeavour to maintain a power balance is to use two co-facilitators, one from each side in the conflict, but even this needs careful work and self-reflection between the partners in the process.

Another way we can understand the text is to see that before we bring people to work together across the divide, we first need to work with each side separately—to do the groundwork that lays the foundation for joint activities or dialogue. Thus, we often need what are called “single-identity” or “uni-national” group work before we bring the different sides to a conflict together. One side may need some empowerment work in order to build the equivalency needed for equal interaction. Or the different sides may need to discuss their own priorities as a community or clarify their own identities before they attempt to come together with the Other. So far, then, we have seen that women can bring to peace-building work their networking skills and that it is important to maintain balance or equivalency between the groups of women who are working together. Let’s return to the text.

**Relationship Building**

The next instruction is to make fifty gold clasps and couple the cloths to one another with the clasps. And again, we have the "התוחא לא השיא" instruction—“each woman to her sister.” But this time, the cloths from the two groups are connected to each other. In our peace-building context, I would like to suggest that this is a reference to women’s skills and interest in building relationships. Shortly after I started work at ICCI, I came to feel that women might be looking for a different dialogue experience, that they were not finding in the gender-mixed forums we provided. I felt that where men seemed to be more interested in intellectual sparring, in making their point and being proven right, women were more interested in developing relationships. Women can use the skills of nurturing that they have developed in their personal lives, to nurture relationships across the divide, to nurture peace. Peace needs nurturing—it may need structures put in place, and agreements to be signed, and borders to be created—but it also needs nurturing— and women have often developed much greater skill as nurturers: skills of listening and empathy, skills of paying attention to the small details that are woven together to make up everyday life.

One of the things that women often bring to the negotiation table is an emphasis on just these small details of everyday life. The men who on the whole run the negotiations seem to concentrate on the big picture—the borders, the rights of each side, their own status and the make-up of the governments that will run the post-war society. Women, on the other hand, want to know about the small details: how will children get to school if the border runs through the middle of their neighborhood? Where are the hospitals? Who’s going to educate their children? How are we to provide employment? How will people access their lands? Without nurturing, peace agreements tear apart and violence flairs up over issues that the men didn’t take into account. One of the factors that is often cited as responsible for the breakdown of the Oslo accords is the fact that for Palestinians, life didn’t get any better— in fact, in many cases, everyday life became harder with checkpoints and borders dividing the regions under Israeli and Palestinian control. Women are used to organizing the practicalities of everyday life—and these are all essential aspects of any peace agreement.
So now we have the two groups of women coming together, and using a myriad of different connections and avenues—fifty clasps—to explore their commonalities as well as their differences. Each of the clasps—or connections—joins two of the loops made on the cloths. Each of the women finds things she has in common with one or more of the other women—and being women, they have many things in common, as well as the things that divide them. There are many ways of fashioning the clasps. One of our dialogue groups used personal narratives as the clasps—each woman shared her life story with the group, allowing us all to explore history, culture, religion, but through the personal lens of each woman’s own life. The clasps could be cookery classes, could be courses for small entrepreneurs, could be football clubs, could be support groups for women with cancer—what’s important is to fashion a myriad of clasps, each with the condition of equivalency, that bring people together and allow them to develop relationships with each other, that re-humanize the Other and that motivate them to work for social change.

Dialogue of the kind I’ve described here, is unfortunately, rare. It’s not easy for women of such different backgrounds to reach out beyond the boundaries of their own national, cultural, religious and social affiliations, and become bound to each other. Indeed, this phrase of a woman with her sister only appears in the Torah in this specific setting, and only here: not the tent, not the outer area, but only in the mishkan, that holy place where the shekhina, the Holy Presence described in feminine language, is said to dwell.

I don’t think it’s coincidental that there’s a connection between these instructions for creating the Mishkan, each women bound to her sister, and Jerusalem. When I bring women together to discuss the future of Jerusalem, the vision they consistently voice is one of sharing Jerusalem. They don’t want Jerusalem for themselves, but they also don’t want Jerusalem to be divided. The division of Jerusalem, they say, would be blasphemous, would be sacrilegious. They understand, as women, that only by bringing women together, each with her sister, can we make the tabernacle whole. When sisters come together—first in separate groups, then in search of symmetry, and eventually finding connections across the divide—then perhaps the mishkan can be completed, and God will abide once again in Jerusalem.