

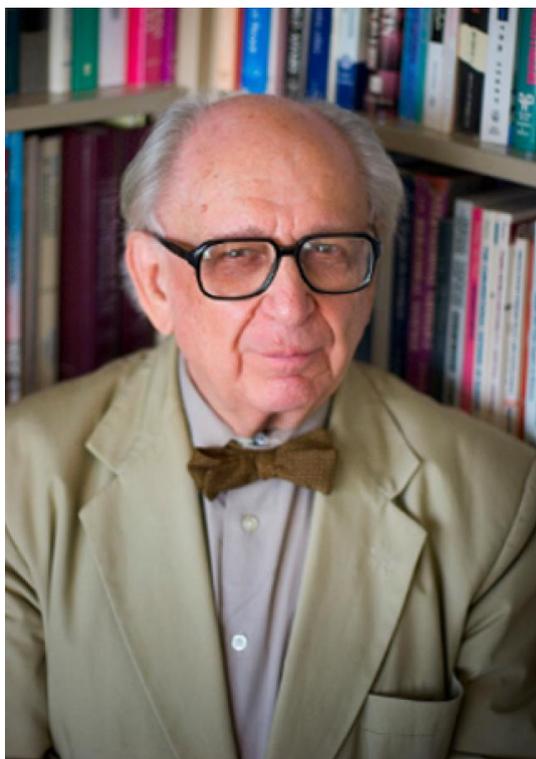
Holding on to the Possibility of Israeli-Palestinian Peace: Tips From a Conflict Resolution Expert

Herbert Kelman has been bringing together Israelis and Palestinians for decades in hope of finding and compromise. 'I've never believed any of this is easy, but you've got to keep a sense of possibility, otherwise what's the use of trying.'

Amir Tibon (Washington) | Mar 27, 2017 12:47 PM

WASHINGTON - A famous proverb, sometimes attributed to Albert Einstein, explains that insanity is trying to do the same thing over and over again, expecting different results. According to that definition, Harvard professor Herbert Kelman, an expert in social psychology and conflict resolution, is somewhat insane: For more than four decades, he has been trying to promote dialogue and understanding between Israelis and Palestinians, in hope of improving the chances to solve the conflict between the two nations.

Last weekend, Harvard University held a special weekend seminar to celebrate Prof. Kelman's 90th birthday. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli opposition leader Isaac Herzog both sent Kelman congratulatory remarks and thanked him for his decades-long effort to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace, which was mostly conducted behind the scenes with very little public and media attention. Former South African President F. W. De Klerk, famous for ending the country's apartheid rule, also sent a videotaped speech saluting Kelman for his work.



Kelman has been holding workshops that bring together Israelis and Palestinians to discuss the conflict in a neutral environment, in hope of finding common language and compromise, ever since 1971. In an interview with Haaretz shortly after the event in his honor at Harvard, he estimated that approximately 400 Israelis and Palestinians participated in his workshops over the years.

He also tried to offer advice, based on his years of experience in the field of dialogue, to the Trump administration, which he says has been "pleasantly surprising" so far when it comes to its policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - "They didn't go all the way with the hard-liners, which is what many people feared they'd do."

*Prof. Herbert Kelman.
Harvard University*

In diplomatic and academic spheres, Kelman's work is called "track II diplomacy." It's a term that refers to meetings and dialogues between influential figures from different countries or societies who are not official representatives of their governments. They can be academics, former officials, journalists, businesspeople, activists, union leaders, artists, even university students – basically, anyone considered influential or with the potential to become influential one day, but not part of the official political and governmental system.

Over the years, track II diplomacy has provided important contributions to many official ("track I") diplomatic efforts around the world. The most famous example in the Israeli context is the Oslo Accords, which were born out of meetings between Israeli academics and PLO activists before being "adopted" by the political leadership on both sides and turning into an official agreement.

Kelman's track II work, which has included more than 60 workshops and meetings over the last four decades, never reached the level of official acceptance that the Oslo negotiations did, he told Haaretz.

"My work was always independent." Still, many of those who passed through his workshops were either influential public figures at the time they participated, or rose to be such figures in Israeli and Palestinian societies later on. His first Israeli-Palestinian dialogue workshop in 1971 involved a small group of students in Boston, one of which later was elected to the Knesset (Daniel Ben-Simon, a former Labor Party member who also wrote for Haaretz for many years.) One of the Palestinian participants in that early dialogue later became the manager of the national archives of Jordan, Kelman recalls.

Kelman says he was interested in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ever since he was a child. He grew up in a "proud Zionist family" in Austria, and was involved in Zionist youth activities.

"My older sister wrote a diary, in German, during that period, and she tells in it that one day she came home and said that a number of Jewish boys in her school found a solution to the Arab problem in Palestine – they will make the Arabs leave and go to another country. According to her diary, I immediately said that it was impossible, and explained that you can't force the Arabs out. I was 11 years old at the time, and that was the first time I spoke about the need to find a compromise so both people can share their historic homeland."

Seventy-nine years later, Kelman still holds that belief. But his track II work over the years has taught him that it's not easy, to say the least, to find compromises.

"I look back at my work, and I can't point out to any dramatic impact it had on the conflict. Yes, influential people took place in my workshops, and I think some ideas that later came up in the official negotiations were first discussed in my track II discussions. But if you ask me what's truly been the importance of my work, I'd say it is creating and preserving a sense of possibility."

Kelman was first exposed to the concept of track II diplomacy as a young student and researcher in the 1960s, when the method was used to try and promote dialogue to solve

the conflict in Cyprus. "I immediately had a thought, 'why not try to apply this approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict.'"

Still, when in 1971 he and another professor, Steven Cohen, finally decided to hold their first track II workshop, they decided not to devote it to Israel and its neighbors, "because we were both Jewish and we didn't think we could truly present ourselves as a third party." Their students, he says, convinced them to do it anyway. "They said it was clear that this issue was important to us, and we allowed ourselves to be persuaded."

You've been doing this for decades – how can one not lose hope, when you see that any solution to the conflict looks more distant today than perhaps at any point since Oslo?

"I'm an optimist. Not a naive optimist, but a strategic optimist. I'm realistic about the obstacles and challenges, I'm well aware of them. I'm not saying that the world is wonderful and everything will be fine. But I think that over the decades, there has also been a tremendous amount of change when it comes to ideas, formulas and possibilities.

"There is a lot of creative thinking on how to improve the reality, and there are things that happen on the ground, on the level of people's daily lives, that justify some optimism."

As someone who has been dealing with this issue since the 1970s, what advice can you offer to President Donald Trump and his special envoy, who are just now beginning to dive into it?

"That's a tough one," Kelman says, and asks for a minute to think about it quietly.

"One important thing is to listen. To be willing to listen and, in a sense, to put yourself in the shoes of the other. It doesn't mean to sympathize with them, but to try to understand them and their perspective, rather than to only look from your own perspective, that's the kind of thing we try to facilitate in our workshops. I think it can be very helpful to someone who wants to make the two sides reach common ground.

"The other is not giving up the sense of possibility, that it can be done. If you go into it with a view that it's impossible to reach any kind of agreement, then it's really not helpful, and there's no reason for you to go into it in the first place. I think it's constructive to say – 'this is very, very difficult, but it's possible, if we work hard and do things smartly.' I've never believed any of this is easy, but you've got to keep a sense of possibility, otherwise what's the use of trying."

Trump, it seems, has already adopted parts of that approach. On a number of occasions, before and after the election, Trump said that "many people" have told him it was impossible to reach an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal, but he still believed he could get it. His reasoning has mostly been that his own skills as a "deal-maker" will be the factor that makes the difference, allowing him to reach "the ultimate deal."

Some would characterize such a belief as insanity – after all, every U.S. president before him has tried to solve the conflict, and they all failed. Kelman, however, would probably say that this belief, strange as it may sound, at least preserves "a sense of possibility."