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'We do not want to assimilate!': Rethinking the role of group boundaries in peace initiatives between Muslims and Jews in Israel and in the West Bank

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ABSTRACT
This article considers the cultural meaning of religious and community boundaries when attempting to mediate the Jewish-Palestinian conflict. Here we compare two sites, one religious, the other secular, of peace-building encounters between Palestinians and Jews in Israel and in the West Bank. Through extensive ethnographic work, the study draws attention to the divergent meanings of community boundaries in liberal and non-liberal cosmologies. Whereas secular liberals view religious boundaries as barriers to the autonomous individual's free choice, itself considered necessary for co-existence, for these Jewish and Muslim religious groups, those same boundaries safeguard a peaceful and respectful shared space. Our ethnographic insights call for a broader discussion of the meaning and use of social and symbolic boundaries beyond the liberal vision for social and moral order. Such a discussion is theoretically timely and politically pressing in view of the challenge of living together with difference in the global reality of deep diversity.

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Setting the scene

11 June 2015, a crowded hall located in one of the larger Mizrahi ultra-Orthodox yeshivot (religious schools) operating in the city of Elad,[1] Israel. Taking part in the event are high-profile civic leaders and politicians – ultra-Orthodox Mizrahim (Jews of Middle Eastern and North African origin) associated with Shas, the Sephardic Jewish ultra-Orthodox socio-political movement, and their counterparts from the Palestinian Muslim community in Israel belonging to the Islamic Movement. On this sunny June day, members of these two conservative and orthodox religious groups have gathered to talk about 'peace'. This event attracted our attention because a meeting between these two groups is almost

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inconceivable to the broader public. First of all, the two are not the 'usual suspects' in the regional peace talks scene as it has evolved over three decades (Hermann, 2009). Normally, most forums working for peace on all levels involve Jewish secular left-wing liberals and predominantly secular liberal Palestinians, active in NGOs and social movements. From within the local liberal vision, the religious groups participating in the Elad meeting are both considered 'enemies of peace'.

Space at the meeting has been allocated by gender rather than ethnic identity, with a small area dedicated to female participants, Muslim women wearing hijabs and their Jewish counterparts donning wigs and hair-concealing scarfs. The microphone, placed in the middle of the main space, occupied by the male participants, is used by the participating rabbis, sheikhs and officials while making their welcoming remarks, which are saturated with piety while praising peace, brotherhood and coexistence.

The atmosphere starts to prickle once Rabbi Aryeh Deri, the controversial and charismatic leader of the ultra-Orthodox Shas Movement and a former Minister of the Interior, bursts into the room, together with his entourage. As Deri enters, the speakers immediately vacate the dais for him. After describing his many endeavours as a government minister, hghlighting the mobilisation of resources for projects aimed at reducing institutional discrimination against Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel, he animatedly rattles off the similarities between the two communities while reminding the audience of their deep common roots in a highly religious, traditionalist Middle Eastern culture that respects its elders. He employs their shared linguistic heritage to support the creation, if only momentarily, of a shared warm and comfortable milieu.

One theme resounds above all others: 'We do not want to assimilate!' Deri's proclamation earns loud, across-the-board applause. By 'we' he means Jews and Muslims alike. Deri's partiality for clear, stable social boundaries powerfully resonates with the audience in their use as foundations for a shared peaceful and respectful political space.

In any typical peace forum convened by leftist secular liberals, Deri's statement declaring the necessity of walls would be considered offensive, implying as it might ethnic prejudice, racism, or fractured intergroup relations. So why did Deri say what he did in the midst of this open, warm and friendly setting? Why would he suggest reinforcing the walls between Arabs and Jews? And why would anyone celebrate separation precisely at a moment of bonding?

This stark ethnographic moment encapsulates the conundrum at the heart of this article. Our reading of the field site, a peace-making forum

involving ultra-Orthodox Mizrahi Jewish and Muslim groups, will help us explore the meaning of group boundaries in the liberal political vision but also unravel the meaning of those boundaries in non-liberal worlds of meaning.

Background and methodology

This research is part of a broader project on living together with difference in Israel. The data presented were collected during participant observation in the activities and behind-the-scenes management of four secular (2007–2009, 2012–2014) and three religious peace initiatives (2014-present), including a series of encounters between ultra-Orthodox Mizrahi Jews and Muslim Palestinians from the Islamic Movement that took place in Israel and the United States. We joined these activities as full participants with the consent of the group members, while also recording field notes. We also conducted semi-structured and informal interviews with these organisations' activists, meeting participants, and organisers. Primary data collection was based on ethnographic research conducted by Nissim Mizrachi, a sociologist, and Erica Weiss, an anthropologist. The insights in this article are further based on Mizrachi's comprehensive research on ordinary people's perceptions of liberal justice and human rights, as well as on Weiss's extensive research among secular liberal peace activists in Israel.

We should note here that in the Israeli public mind, peace initiatives and dialogues with Palestinians are typically associated with liberal-left NGOs on the Jewish side and, often, with their counterparts on the Palestinian side (Hermann, 2009). However, in broadening our field of research, we have focused in recent years on a new space emerging in civil society where non-liberal groups on both sides negotiate, collaborate and conduct dialogues in many forms.[2]

The conclusions in this article are therefore based on extensive comparative research between secular liberal and religious non-liberal populations in Israeli and Palestinian society. In order to describe the context and events more thickly, we have selected three ethnographic sites that illustrate the deep and consistent differences we found between these groups. These sites include the opening scene observed in a peace event held in the ultra-Orthodox city of Elad, a secular mainstream grassroots event that took place in the South Hebron hills of the West Bank, and a four-day dialogue between Israeli ultra-Orthodox Jews and Palestinians belonging to the Islamic Movement held in Dayton, Ohio.

Social and political context: Liberals, religious Mizrahi Jews and religious Muslims in Israeli society

Before we return to the cases, we should clarify the broader social and political context within which the events took place. The main factors at stake are, first, cultural proximity; second, socio-economic status; and third, political power. All these parameters characterise the three groups involved: religious Mizrahi Jews, religious Muslim Palestinian-Israelis, and secular liberal Israeli Jews. Israeli liberal Jews are today still concentrated among the intellectual and literal offspring of the secular Ashkenazi founders of the state, whose aspirations for a progressive and enlightened modernity live on in their political homes among the Zionist parties, especially Meretz and Labor. They are also those who have been most dominant in envisioning and organising the peace process until now. That is, the liberal left in Israel continues to be demographically homogeneous (Hermann, 2009; Mizrachi, 2016) while simultaneously failing to reach the hearts and minds of working-class, traditionalist Mizrahim as well as other religious and Orthodox groups (Mizrachi, 2016). Hence, the liberal camp remains distant from both religious groups observed (Shas and the Islamic Movement) culturally and socio-economically. Furthermore, we argue, cultural proximity appears to cross the political lines separating Shas from the Islamic Movement.

As far as the cultural dimension is concerned, both groups participating in the event opening this article share some cultural roots and habitus. Our Shas informants are primarily the second-generation offspring of migrants from Arab-speaking Muslim countries. Hence, they are intimately familiar with the Arabic language, habitus, music, and cuisine. Like their Muslim counterparts, they are also very religiously observant and share monotheistic beliefs having historical and theological affinity. Furthermore, both groups face the challenges raised by the moral narrative of modernity as well as the cultural and bureaucratic demands coming from the modern state in which they live, and from the secular public with whom they interact on a daily basis. Regarding their socio-economic status, both groups are positioned at the margin with respect to the secular Jewish mainstream (although to different degrees) and placed relatively low in the stratification structure, as well as by stigmatisation and discrimination (Lamont et al., 2016; Lamont & Mizrachi, 2012; Mizrachi & Herzog, 2012).[3]

We should note that Zionism, as a nation-building project, was also an identity project sponsoring the creation of the 'new Jew', secular, modern,

liberal, and fit for the global economic order (Mizrachi, 2004). In this context, Orthodox Mizrahi Jews were the quintessential 'unfit', a group requiring secularisation and modernisation, whereas the Arab Muslims were the quintessential 'other'. That is, whereas religious Jews in general were regarded as unfit for the Zionist enterprise of establishing a modern Jewish state, the Mizrahi ultra-Orthodox working class were (and still are among many liberal secular Jews) regarded as needing cultural adaptation to modernity (op. cit.). Muslim Palestinians, however, were inherently positioned outside the project from the very first. As such, both Ultra-Orthodox Mizrahi Jews and religious Muslim Palestinian-Israelis serve as a foil or as 'spoilers' (Dalsheim, 2014) to the Zionist project.

However, in terms of inclusion in the political polity, Shas and the Islamic Movement are very differently situated. On a broader political scale, in Israel, unlike the situation in many liberal democracies where citizenship is universal and the state is assumed to be neutral, the polity is formally[4] and culturally Jewish, with the vast majority of Jewish Israelis viewing the state as the manifestation of the Jewish national entity.[5] In Sammy Smooha's words, Israel is an *ethnic democracy*, which

> combines the extension of civil and political rights to individuals and some collective rights to minorities, with institutionalization of majority control over the state. Driven by ethnic nationalism, the state is identified with a 'core ethnic nation', not with its citizens (Smooha, 1997, p.199).[6]

Hence, Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel live under conditions of deep geographic segregation (residing, for the most part, in separate towns and villages), linguistically (by speaking Arabic, their native tongue), and institutionally (not least, they maintain a separate education system[7]) while, most crucially, maintaining a separate national identity, associated by Jews with the active external enemy (the Arab world and Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip). Social boundaries between Jews and Arabs are impermeable in some spheres of life, such as family and politics; for example, mixed marriage is almost inconceivable by both sides. Such a socially entrenched fault line is not simply a matter of one side's racism but, rather, a result of strong religious and national boundaries, equally secured by both sides. In these respects, Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel are different from other minority groups in liberal democracies; they effectively remain an unassimilated minority (Lamont et al., 2016; Mizrachi & Herzog, 2012).

To add to the contrast between Shas and the Islamic Movement in terms of political position, we should note that contrary to the absence

of a Palestinian party in any government coalition,[8] Shas also functions as a political party, included in ruling right-wing government coalitions for decades. Since its inception, the vision of Shas' leaders was to return to the past glories of Sephardi[9] Judaism, not only in the Jewish Orthodox world where they have suffered from exclusion and discrimination by their Ashkenazi counterparts, but more broadly, in all of Israeli society (see also Peled, 2001). But in the eyes of many liberal secular Jews Shas is associated with decadence and Jewish fundamentalism. It has since been regarded by large segments of Jewish society, particularly the secular liberal left, as 'a highly unsettling intruder in Israel's cultural firmament and in the Israeli political system . . . , sharpening the tense interaction between ethnic and religious forces in Israeli society' (Lehmann & Siebzehner, 2006, p. 1). The revulsion of the secular-liberal left from Shas was given dramatic visible expression when Ehud Barak, representing the centre-left, won the 1999 election. During his victory speech, a vast crowd shouted 'Just not Shas',[10] that is, 'By no means do we want Shas in the coalition.' In their eyes, Shas poses a serious threat to the future identity of the State of Israel.

In sum, both Shas and the Islamic Movement, although positioned on opposite sides of the Jewish polity, share a similar position vis-a-vis the liberal moral and cognitive vision of the social order. Both groups must cope with the demands of liberalism's moral order in the context of their life in a modern state. Although the socio-economic dimension is significant in the analysis of the broader context, the political and cultural/cosmological dimensions are most relevant in our sites, as we will show.

Political and cosmological fault lines

One can consider both ultra-Orthodox Mizrahi Jews (in our case Shas) and ultra-Orthodox Muslims (in our case the Islamic Movement) to be minority groups in Israel's multicultural makeup. However, the liberal notion of 'multiculturalism' is too thin to capture these groups' positions with respect to the liberal order. In order to dig deeper into the roots of the divide between such groups and the others found under the multicultural umbrella, we draw on William Galston's (1995) notion of 'deep diversity'.

According to Galston, liberal thinking fails to embrace deep, cultural divides even in its moral communitarian forms, which clearly recognise minority cultures as an essential sphere for any adequate normative theory of justice. A good example is the notion of multiculturalism that

is strongly associated with the work of Will Kymlicka (1995). Whereas multiculturalism is clearly based on the recognition of cultural difference (see also Taylor, 1994), it fails, according to Galston, to recognise the deeper roots of some of the social ruptures we are facing in contemporary liberal democracies. This failure is rooted in multiculturalism's liberal grammar per se and its core component, the autonomous individual. As Galston notes, in common understanding of liberal multiculturalism, individual autonomy and social diversity ' … go together and complement one another: the exercise of autonomy yields diversity, while the fact of diversity protects and nourishes autonomy' (1995, p. 552). He continues by referring to Kymlicka's argument that the protection of minorities' cultures is essential for the autonomous individual in order for her to make meaningful choices in the world in which she lives (Galston, 1995, p. 521).

But what about groups that value external sources of authority (textual or community) over individual autonomy, or assign it a different meaning? For them, issues such as food 'preferences', or gender roles, are not matters of individual choice but, rather, religious imperatives (see Galston, 1995, pp. 521–522). Diversity in its deeper meaning, according to Galston, reflects 'differences among individuals and groups over such matters as the nature of the good life and the sources of moral authority, reason versus faith, and the like' (1995, p. 521). Drawing on Galston, we refer to 'deep diversity' as a social reality where groups are divided by their underlying justifications and sources of legitimacy for the social order yet share the same political space.

When we turn to our case, the notion of 'deep diversity' helps us discern the significance of the divisions between the groups that cannot be captured with the concept of multiculturalism. On a cosmological level, the difference appears to lie in a fundamental division between the three core dimensions: the individual, society, and the cosmos. In liberalism's cultural grammar, deeply rooted in the Enlightenment, the individual is distinct from the society in which she lives, both of which are divorced from the cosmos and the supernatural (Mizrachi, 2014; Taylor, 1999). The social and moral order, as well as the relationship between the individual and society, result from human reason. Similarly, the cosmos is also an object for reason and scientific inquiry but clearly detached from social and moral life. This cosmological divide provides the underlying justification and source of legitimacy for both liberal and non-liberal worlds of meaning in various matters, including, for example, eating habits, gender roles, family structure, as well as group boundaries. Hence, in a traditionalist world, the individual's moral

experience (Kleinman, 2006) relies more on her moral duties than on her individual rights (Mizrachi, 2014), with the latter intimately tied to the liberal grammar.

At the core of the liberal grammar lies the autonomous, equal individual. In the liberal vision, the autonomous individual is imbued with an absolute human value – that of dignity (Mizrachi, 2016). With dignity comes the politics of universalism that seeks to transcend religious boundaries and national borders in the rescue of a shared humanity. Autonomous and equal individuals, on both sides of the fence, are often perceived to be victims of the tyranny of those borders. For religious, traditionalist and other opponents of human rights, whose core identity and sense of belonging are deeply ingrained in such collective boundaries, demands coming from human rights activists to downplay those boundaries are viewed as an existential threat. Hence, they vehemently object to the removal of any collective boundaries in the name of the autonomous individual and the politics of universalism, as we saw in the opening vignette. In the case considered between Shas and the Islamic Movement we see a shared religious cultural belief system. By contrast, in a following case, between liberal secular Jews and Palestinian villagers, we see a cosmological divide despite the political alliance between them.

The two cases we about to discuss are different in nature. The first, from which our opening scene was taken, belongs to a civil initiative aimed at gathering two groups of Israeli citizens to talk about coexistence. We will return to this arena, but not before we discuss the second example, concerning Jewish peace activists (Israeli citizens) meeting with non-Israeli Palestinians living just outside the border of Israel in a controversial area known alternatively as the Occupied Palestinian Territories or Judea and Samaria, depending on your national identity and political allegiance. We do not mean to suggest that a non-liberal dialogical space is a sufficient condition for achieving peace or even coexistence but, rather, that it should be recognised as an often-essential dimension for reaching a respectful and productive dialogical space between certain groups who do not embody or ascribe to liberal norms and values.

We wish to stress once more that when we refer to 'liberals', we are fully aware of the line between liberalism as a political theory, elaborated in the rich and diversified literature in political philosophy, and liberalism as a social, cultural, and historical phenomenon, reflected in the mindsets of social actors in the field. Liberalism in political philosophy is a 'family name'[11] covering many 'liberalisms' rather than a monolithic analytic body of thought. And yet, as a socio-cultural phenomenon, we can identify

several prevailing 'taken-for-granted' cultural beliefs. The liberalism we examine here is liberalism as a lived phenomenon, meant to describe the everyday moral experience and organising political assumptions of ordinary people (see Kleinman, 2006). As such it is not bound to any one philosophical political tradition, but is based on a colloquial sense, supported within a liberal moral community, of what is good, right, just, and fair. It is less an intellectual position than an applied and embodied sensibility.

We are about to meet our liberals in the field in the South Hebron hills.

Deepening group divides while breaking down walls

The following observations were made in the late summer of 2008, during a solidarity mission to the Palestinian village of Susiya, in the South Hebron hills, an area of ongoing clashes between Palestinian residents, Jewish settlers, and Israeli military and security forces. The participating peace activists boarded a chartered bus at Tel Aviv's Arlozorov train station early on a Friday morning. About 50 Jewish Israelis boarded the bus which had been arranged for by the organisation Combatants for Peace; the bus then continued on to Jerusalem to pick up five more passengers. The group, mirroring the demographic makeup of Combatants for Peace, was composed mostly of men in their 30s, with the addition of a few women and international visitors. Most were dressed in typical weekend attire for the Ashkenazi young professional class: casual shorts and tee shirts in muted colours with open-toed sandals. The bus then made its way through the West Bank to a very hot, unshaded tract of land dotted with small makeshift houses, derelict not as the result of apathy but, rather, because of ongoing Israeli military demolitions and severe poverty. Despite the violence in the region, the goals of the encounter were similar to such grassroots meetings held elsewhere and throughout Israel: to create a meaningful, deep, and primarily humanising encounter between would-be enemies, Jewish Israelis and Muslim Palestinians.

When we got off the bus, a cross-section of Palestinian villagers awaited us: elderly men on plastic chairs, groups of young men who initiated most of the contact with the visitors, and women in groups, with children in various states of shyness and courage regarding the visiting strangers. Adults from the village wore long-sleeved robes in black and white, the women's adorned with embroidered patterns. The women also wore tightly fitting hijabs while the local men covered their heads with white

keffiyehs to protect them from the sun. We heard opening remarks from the head of the organisation as well as from village leaders, giving some information about the organisation and the community's ongoing struggles with settlers and the Israeli military. Most people were generally more occupied with how to make tentative and informal first contact between locals and visitors, often through children serving as intermediaries. In contrast to the meeting of Jewish Israelis and Palestinian Israelis, this encounter did not happen on the basis of shared citizenship but across differences in civil status. Whereas the participating Jews belonged to the group exercising sovereign power and control, the Palestinians belonged to the group controlled.

We then moved onto the main event. As in most encounters of this sort, it focused on breakout sessions that would allow people to engage each other on a much more intimate and personal level than would be possible in a larger group. We were broken into small groups in order to facilitate the main encounter and promote dialogue. This was done very carefully. Each group was engineered to include representatives of each group and demographic: Jewish and Palestinian, old and young, male and female. Each group met in different parts of the open territory, sitting in a circle on the ground, with a bottle of water and plastic cups provided. This proved a very messy task and, based on body language and their later comments, frustrated the organisers greatly.

The local Palestinians were the source of resistance to this task. Only the young men, members of the organisation and not all local, willingly divided themselves between the groups. The elderly men of the area declared such an encounter outside their purview and chose to exclude themselves by creating their own group, in the shade. The Palestinian women also disappeared at this point. When sought out and asked to join the groups, they at first refused politely; then, when pressured, they said that they were uncomfortable with the language. The organisers promised them that the discussion would be translated at every stage. The women were nevertheless resistant to participating. One woman offered that they were needed to take care of the children while another argued that they didn't intend to really join the activities that day, they just came to see what was going on. Each excuse was summarily rebuffed by the organisers. When told they were desperately needed, a few relented, and one joined our group. Before coming over, she took the opportunity to grab one of the plastic chairs which she sat on in the circle, awkwardly two feet higher than the rest sitting on the ground, and violating the ethos of equality and the Israeli sabra version of humility

and connection to the land. We were, nevertheless, lucky to have her, as her presence resulted in one of the most balanced groups.

After about 45 minutes trying to sort out these groups, with the sun growing hotter by the minute, we were given our collective task. We were asked to engage in discussion and, despite our differences, find at least one thing that we all had in common. The dialogue began awkwardly, very quietly with few volunteers. Some ideas were thrown out and rejected by others, as the more-political topics, such as Zionism and the Israeli military, proved not to be quite within the consensus. After about 20 minutes, someone jokingly suggested that we all like hummus, and everyone laughed, recognising that it was a trivial suggestion. Surely, we would be able to come up with something more substantial. But after another few rounds hummus reemerged as a more serious contribution; much mental and linguistic labour was self-consciously invested in making this seem like a more profound point of commonality. When the group leaders came around to our group, our spokesman, a young Jewish man, sold our hummus contribution as well as he could. The group leader smiled politely and thanked us for our work. At this point the Palestinians retreated back to their respective cohorts. We were then all served a lunch of chicken and rice, but not before it was explained to us that nearly every culture in the world has a version of chicken and rice. This sentiment was intended to reassure the group about human universals and commonalities, that is, to further demonstrate that the boundaries between the groups are mere cultural constructs. We should note that this message of human solidarity was made without concern for the naturalised liberal boundary between humans and animals, that is, the use of chickens as food did not disrupt the condemnation of boundaries in this context.

There are a number of features about this encounter that allude to the tacit assumptions regarding the relationship between boundaries and peace. To understand the above interaction, it is important to recognise the lack of parity between the two demographics described. While these Jewish Israelis were meant to represent all Jewish Israelis and these Muslim Palestinians were meant to stand for all Muslim Palestinians, in fact there are significant differences between the groups. The Jewish Israelis present are in fact all liberal and upper class; they reflected certain cultural assumptions and aesthetics that were hegemonic in the structure of the encounter and which became sticking-points for their Palestinian counterparts, such as the division into mixed gender and age groups as well as sitting on the ground in the hot sun. Breakout groups are intended

to be microcosms of the ideal liberal society, wherein we are fully integrated according to all these groups' parameters, with no place for segregation on the basis of gender, age, and ethnicity. As such, it is an assimilation exercise, reflecting the liberal vision. By contrast, the Palestinian group they encounter does not come from among the upper-class liberals of Palestinian society (secular liberals do have counterparts in urban Ramallah). Rather, this group is far more traditional, hierarchical, and observant of greater degrees of gender segregation.

This gap contributes to the palpable resistance and discomfort on the part of the Palestinians. The exercise itself is based on a model of human sociability that expects people to appear and represent themselves as individuals, that accords them worth based on their humanity and breaks down all other boundaries. The exercise summons the autonomous and self-determining subject, but the non-liberal participants are reluctant to answer this call, to the great frustration of the organisers who are perplexed by their resistance. The non-liberal participants practise a different form of sociality, one that embeds them in networks of thick kinship and imposes religious and culturally informed boundaries that segregate them according to several parameters. The non-liberal participants are uncomfortable with this 'assimilation' exercise, some refusing to participate and others, pressured into participating, rushing back into their segregated space as soon as excused from the exercise.

Furthermore, the content of the assignment signals the common liberal beliefs regarding boundaries, specifically, that they need to be broken down or minimised. We were asked to focus on our commonalities rather than our differences. Though this logic is likely sensible to the Western reader, it is worth spelling out its implicit assumptions and expectations. It is thought that finding commonalities will bridge differences between communities, and that it will further humanise individuals, make them relatable, which will have the function of reducing prejudice and improving interactions between the groups in conflict. This assumption is based on a number of psychological processes known collectively as the contact hypothesis: contact will reduce fear and anxiety while increasing empathy between the groups (Allport, 1979). The implication is that the limited encounter in such peace initiatives will serve as a metonym for the process that both societies must undergo to arrive at peace. A group would not invest such an effort in building a connection between these particular individuals alone, but, rather, their experience of breaking boundaries is meant to serve as a consciousness-raising encounter that will

carry broader political implications, wherein one is able to imagine the boundaries between Israeli and Palestinian society similarly broken.

Finding exercises that push individuals to cross ethnic and religious boundaries, physically or symbolically, as an effort to ultimately undermine and break down these boundaries is very typical of grassroots and person-to-person peace-building initiatives in Israel and Palestine. Among the many organisations that employ such methods are kids4peace, the Alliance for Middle East Peace, the Israeli Palestinian Bereaved Families Forum, Combatants for Peace, initiatives that employ sports for peace-building, and many other initiatives supported by the US and European countries. Often, the idea of breaking down boundaries is even more explicit in such initiatives. Cracking or breaking the wall between the two groups is often used as a metaphor for such activities, or even as direct symbolism. Recently, at a meeting of Israeli and Palestinian women held at Beit Jalla, a mock wall dividing Israelis and Palestinians was constructed from cartons. The women were asked to first cover the wall in graffiti and then symbolically break it down with toy plastic hammers (Chen, 2017). The wall and the signs carried by the women read 'Breaking the wall between us' (in three languages). It is noteworthy that despite the rhetoric of smashing boundaries, the organising vision of co-existence for these initiatives is still one of ethno-national self-determination and separation into two states for two peoples, further demonstrating the transparency of the boundaries considered legitimate within liberalism.

Rethinking boundaries

We now return to our opening case. Based on our observations in the field, we here provide an ethnographic reading of the way in which the affirmation of group boundaries facilitates negotiation between the respective two non-liberal groups. We show how our scene remains free from universalistic pretensions, a fact that generates a different field for peace negotiations. We first entered the field in 2014, after being invited by the Citizens' Accord Forum to join its efforts in building a shared and sustainable democratic society in Israel. The CAF views the conflict between its Jewish and Arab citizens as providing that society with its most burning challenge to a pluralist and healthy democracy. The CAF has taken advantage of its credibility in all sectors of Israeli society, from government ministries to religious leaders, including many ultra-Orthodox rabbis as well

as leading Islamists, civil society organisations, municipalities, and politicians, to initiate efforts to face this challenge.

We academics occupied a dual role, as scholars invited to give informal lectures and talks, and as participant observers, sharing our reflections with the participants. We attended a number of meetings in Israel in addition to a four-day workshop held in Dayton, Ohio, sponsored by the Kettering Foundation.

The Dayton workshop's 11 invited participants included six Muslims (five males and one female): a lawyer and CEO of an NGO (the Centre for Violence prevention); a high school principal; a high school principal and imam; the founder of the Centre for Violence Prevention; an organisational counsellor specialising in bridging and negotiation; and a woman who is the director of a municipal department for human services. The five Jews, four men and one woman, included a judge in the rabbinical court, the chief rabbi of a town in the centre of Israel, with the remaining rabbis active in the educational field. The one woman was a rabbanit (a rabbi's wife) who is an educator holding an M.Ed.

These groups are not often associated with peace initiatives. In fact, they are often specifically called out and blamed if not scapegoated by liberal elites (domestic and international) for the failure of the peace process, in the words of Joyce Dalsheim (2014). These demographics are widely assumed to characterise the enemies of peace, though we hope to offer a more nuanced analysis.

In contrast to the great majority of peace initiatives inaugurated in the last three decades, the CAF initiative was located outside the secular box.[12] Non-liberal peace initiatives work according to a very different logic. From the beginning, separation was an essential necessity of the encounters. All participants, including the ethnographers, dressed modestly but formally. Despite the July heat, everyone wore long sleeves and long pants or skirts. The Haredi delegation stayed in a hotel farther away from the meeting venue due to their religious requirements, including the need for proximity to an orthodox synagogue for daily prayers. The groups ate meals separately due to different dietary requirements. When we entered the meeting room assigned to our group, formal name-tags marked the seating arrangement. The seating was not random, but a carefully worked-out piece of social engineering following several formal restrictions and cultural sensitivities. Women were separated from men, with the table's structural elements as well as the secular organisers used as buffers between zones of contact. The Jews and Palestinians were not segregated by any requirement but seated in separated groups to facilitate the

desired dynamic of two separate groups engaging one another, not a collection of representative individuals. This arrangement does not indicate a coldness or hostility between the ultra-Orthodox Jews and the Orthodox Muslims. Whereas the mainstream encounter involved meeting across awkward smiles and the occasional handshake, the CAF group entered to shouts of joy and affection, excessive hugging and kissing, blessings and excitement.

This level of warmth and comfort can be contrasted with the palpable discomfort of the mainstream boundary-breaking exercise described above. We do not want to overstate the significance of this disparity but we believe it does demonstrate the fact that the model that respects religious boundaries is more concrete and culturally grounded with the local population. While both Jewish Israeli and Muslim Palestinian liberal elites exist, they are a minority on both sides (except as participants in peace initiatives, where they are the majority). The respect for religious boundaries sets acceptable 'ground rules' that then open a space for discussing coexistence without having to first fight a battle for communal integrity. People who were cast as the 'enemies of peace' are enabled under these conditions to reveal their genuine affection for one another. Though the secular liberal approach of breaking down such boundaries is far more in line with 'best practices' in the peace-building community, in this case it shows itself to be abstract, top down, and lacking resonance with the worldviews of the people on the ground.

These meetings also featured breakout sessions. However, the logic was quite the opposite of the secular liberal model. The breakout sessions allowed the Haredi group and the Palestinian group to discuss issues separately before they met together to share their perspectives. As with the mainstream initiative, let us consider the implicit assumptions of this structure for a moment. This arrangement reflects a belief that these groups are delegates of their communities; they are not only speaking for themselves as individuals. This resonates with the consistent emphasis of the organisation's administrators that these are community leaders, people with social authority, who can speak in the name of a wider group. Thus it is essential that these groups be able to discuss the proper collective response to the issues on the table. They must consult privately to consider issues in relation to higher sources of authority than the personal, such as deliberations regarding whether the issues discussed are acceptable religiously, traditionally, socially, and politically. In contrast with the mainstream group, the dialogue is assumed to be between groups, not individuals. Again, these breakout groups are

similarly ideal types for society; here they do not embody a vision of complete assimilation and breakdown of gender, religious, and hierarchical boundaries.

Similarly, the content of the activities speaks to the assumed relationship between boundaries and the potential for peaceful co-existence. On the first day, the groups were tasked with separately deciding on a central issue or topic that they wanted to address during these meetings. What issues would they like to address to advance the goal of a shared society? There was no requirement for overlap or resonance between the issues. Separately, both groups raised issues concerning the youth of their individual communities, the loss of youth to outside forces, as well as the breakdown of traditional authority. But, asks our imaginary liberal peace activist, what does this have to do with peace between Israelis and Palestinians? The answer, which emerged throughout the week in ongoing discussions, is that these groups feel that the seepage of young people away from their communities and the attacks on against traditional forms of authority (secular influences like pornography, as well as the breakdown of parental authority and the power of the extended family), are a threat to their ability to create ethical and respectful interactions between their group and others. In other words, their ability to negotiate conditions of co-existence depends on the internal strength of these communities and their ability to maintain authoritative internal and external boundaries. As a result, it was mutually decided between the groups, that currently, the key to pursuing peace is the task of building up the internal integrity of these communities separately, in order that they might in the future be able to meet each other on the basis of mutual respect. The contrast with the mainstream approach could not be greater on the function of boundaries. Instead of breaking them down to achieve peace, they must be secured and made stable and effective before peace can take place between the communities. This approach of securing and respecting boundaries typically seen as obstacles by the mainstream peacebuilding community is practised by a number of (mostly) new organisations including the Citizens' Accord Forum, Shaharit, Tikun, Talking Peace, the Abrahamic Reunion, the Religious Peace Initiative and others.

Zooming out: Discussion

As it became clear from our visits to both sites, contrasting meanings can be bestowed on group boundaries. And yet, 'liberals' and 'non-liberals' do not precisely adhere to their own 'ideal type' as presented above. As we

saw, the non-liberal religious groups at the Dayton site were deeply engaged with liberal ideas; in the same vein, the liberal peace activists in Susiya, in view of the visible chasm between the two groups at the site, did not appear ready to break down national boundaries. In Susiya, as in other peace initiatives we noted, the liberal rhetoric of smashing boundaries coincides with the notion of ethno-national division, captured in the vision of a two-state solution. In this sense, both 'liberals' and 'non-liberals' are inconsistent and contradictory in their daily efforts to organise the world and manage their social interactions (Swidler, 1986), as people tend to be in real life as opposed to in theory.

In a broader sense, liberals are inclined to downplay and even pathologize group boundaries, such as religion and nationality, in favour of the equal, autonomous and free individual. Yet, despite this rhetorical focus they still seem to reify and naturalise some of those boundaries. For example, one of these naturalised boundaries is the *domestic*. Liberals recognise that their immediate family, children, spouse, and so on, can and should be treated differently, with demands for loyalty and responsibility diverging from those required toward acquaintances and strangers. Liberal norms thus recognise the boundary between the domestic and the public sphere as legitimate. Parents have more legal and social rights and responsibilities regarding their own children than they do regarding other people's children; reciprocally, children hold legal and social claims on their own parents rather than on other adults. This boundary is considered natural, taken for granted. Political philosophers, to be distinguished from 'ordinary liberal actors', have termed this moral conundrum 'associative duties' (Seglow, 2013), in reference to the common justifications and broad legitimation attached to a preference for and commitment to one's own children, their safety and welfare, rather than others' children, even among liberals.

Another naturalised boundary is the *national*, which is captured in our context in the liberal-left vision of the two-state solution, with national boundaries demarcating moral accountability, wherein liberals recognise their responsibilities (health care, welfare, services) to fellow citizens but not to non-citizens. National boundaries have received visible expression during Arab-Jewish conciliatory encounters. As other studies have indicated, liberals have sought to reaffirm national boundaries during these encounters (see Bekerman, 2009; Helman, 2002).

The nation is also taken for granted as the inevitable political arrangement in liberalism, as almost universally recognised in law. Although the modern nation-state is only about 400 years old, it has been thoroughly

naturalised in liberal political theory (Habermas, 1989; Rawls, 2005), modern political science and most other disciplines (Fukuyama, 1989; Greenhouse, 2011), as well as the political assumptions of liberal citizens themselves (Abrams, 1977/2006; Ferguson & Gupta, 2002). The division between humans and animals is another naturalised boundary among liberals, wherein humans are more accountable to each other than other living things. We saw this in the above example at the Susiya site. This is despite the scientific and philosophical (post-humanist) advances that are currently chipping away at this boundary.

Though boundaries are ideologically problematic for liberalism, statehood is deeply engrained within the liberal understanding of justice. In liberal democracies, collective identities (ethnicity, religion, gender, and so forth) are regarded as secondary to citizenship in determining the individual's equal participation in the state. As a result, any other group boundary, notably religion, may potentially undermine the individual's autonomy, free choice, and equal status while citizenship is generally perceived as less threatening to liberal values. That is not to say that national boundaries have not been politically contested in various forms, such as the above-mentioned human rights discourse in its pursuit of the politics of universalism while seeking to transcend state boundaries (see Mizrachi, 2016; Moyn, 2010, 2014). Nevertheless, these contested forms are still contained within the boundaries of the liberal democratic nation-state, while borders themselves preserve a stable meaning.

Liberals in Israel have never launched attacks against the traditional model of the nuclear family or the nation-state. In contrast, other boundaries are rejected or vilified in the liberal imagination; their violence is highlighted when their social function is denied. In other words, the tendency of communitarian and traditionalist groups to draw a strict line between 'us' and 'them' in many social spheres is often deplored and labelled as racism, xenophobia, and so forth (see Mizrachi, 2016). For example, gender segregation, such as during prayers at the Western Wall, is understood as inherently sexist; enforcing these boundaries is seen as discriminatory (Johnson, 2013). Boundaries on the basis of religion, seen for example in mutual pressures against intermarriage between Jews, Muslims, Christians, and Druze in Israel, are frowned upon and seen as archaic and not modern. Boundaries based on ethnicity or cultural difference, such as segregated education between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis, are seen with similar negativity, branded as racist, and as violations of the political belief that no cultural difference is too large to be accommodated by a proper liberal democracy (Greenhouse, 2011; Povinelli, 2002).

From inside the liberal worldview, evidence of separation, or a failure to assimilate, is often viewed as an anomaly, unacceptable and suspicious at the least.

The liberal grammar of negotiation

Realisation of the liberal political vision has been ensconced as the ultimate remedy for any kind of sectoral conflict dividing religious groups within the liberal democratic state. Within this modernist liberal vision, religious boundaries, often considered vestiges from the past, tend to be viewed in many contexts as part of an oppressive tradition (as seen in embedded gender structures, caste systems, and so forth). Such non-liberal forms and practices, as we will show, are replaced by liberal alternatives through practices such as equal representation and divisions into groups by gender, ethnicity and so forth, aimed at securing the universal, autonomous, equal, and free individual who exercises her own choice and individual rights. Those forms and practices represent an amplified model of the universal and equal citizen that occupies the liberal vision as the only respectful dialogical space in inter-group political negotiation. Alternatively, in non-liberal forms and practices of negotiation, reinforcement of group boundaries is necessary for creating a safe and respectful dialogic space. We illustrated this contrast through two ethnographic examples that typify the approach of mainstream secular peace initiatives and their non-liberal alternatives as they relate to boundary work (see Gieryn, 1999; Lamont & Molnar, 2002; Mizrachi, Shuval, & Gross, 2005).

The liberal emancipatory spirit of freeing the autonomous individual from the tyranny of religious and national boundaries is shared by academic and grassroots peace activists. Endless activities (such as cooking or kite-flying (Kuriansky, 2007), weight loss (Luttwak, 2007), or soccer (Peres Center Twinned Peace Sport Schools)) have been invented and deployed to help accomplish this goal of breaking down community boundaries in order to rescue our shared humanity (Albeck, Adwan, & Bar-On, 2002). Hence, our ethnographic study invites both academics and peace activists to re-consider the role of boundaries.

Conclusions

The two sites observed here different in nature. The encounter between peace activists and Palestinians in Susiya, organised by the Jewish Israeli peace movement, was aimed at setting the groundwork for advancing a

resolution to the deep-seated political conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, to be accomplished by ending Israel's control over Palestinians in the occupied territories. The Jews and Palestinians in this encounter differ not only by socio-economic and cultural background, but also in terms of the political structure in which the parties are embedded as well as their civil status: the Jews are citizens of Israel whereas their Palestinian counterparts from Susiya are not Israeli citizens and lack any clear civil status in terms of their political affiliation to a recognised state. In the second site, the encounter is directed toward initiating a dialogue between two groups of Israeli citizens belonging to diverse observant communities; their direct aim is to create a shared respectful public space for living together with difference (see Seligman, Wasserfall, & Montgomery, 2016) and to serve as a bridge between Palestinians and Jews on the road to peace. (We should not lose sight of the irony that the liberal group seeks to break down boundaries while pursuing the ultimate goal of separation, while the non-liberal group seeks to strengthen the integrity of such boundaries towards the ultimate goal of co-existence.)

While not losing sight of the broader political context shaping the nature of both encounters, we focus here on the forms and practices employed and the meaning of social boundaries expressed in the separate sites. Our summary view of the two sites reveals contrasting relations toward cosmological and political boundaries. Whereas in the Shas-Islamic Movement site the cosmological similarities between the two orthodoxies led to a celebration of separation, in the Susiya site, the Jewish peace activists sought to remove collective boundaries, an act met by some participants with profound discomfort. As observed, this act, an outcome of their liberal grammar, aroused significant opposition among the Palestinian counterparts.

We can now can try to shed further light on this linkage between cosmology and boundary work (Gieryn, 1999; Lamont & Molnar, 2002) as observed in our two sites. We begin with the blatant dimension observed in the Shas/Islamic Movement site: the similarities between the two communities despite the above-mentioned structural and political differences. As we observed, these two groups vocally shared their similar theological insights, knowledge and experiences, as well as norms, values and overall mores as shown in the opening vignette. The site's participants did not act as autonomous individuals but, rather, as representatives of their broader communities, situated outside the room, in which their sense of belonging and identity were embedded. Their social boundaries during the encounters, such as gender divisions, practices during prayer, and so forth, were

maintained and respected. Their practices were scripted by an external order, by higher authorities located in their broader imagined community, to which they were deeply loyal. Within these restricted boundaries, they felt free to express their individual empathy toward their counterparts; in the friendly atmosphere created, they could communicate their religious sentiments and daily experiences. Collective boundaries – 'We do not want to assimilate!' – therefore acted as safeguards to their core identities, allowing them to celebrate and enjoy, as individuals, their shared humanity.

However, in the Susiya site, attempts by the Jewish peace activists to remove those safeguards appeared to arouse frustration and even resentment among the Palestinian villagers. Here, the encounter began with a cosmological rift between the two groups, the secular liberal Jewish peace activists and the religious traditionalist Muslim Palestinians. Hence, contrary to the previous site, the road taken by the peace activists on their way to grasping their shared humanity appeared alien if not threatening within the traditionalist Muslim Palestinians' world of meaning.

We can thus conclude that while the peace activists consider collective boundaries to be *barriers* to realising our shared humanity, the ultra-Orthodox view these same boundaries as *safeguards*. This insight resonates with previous works (Bronstein, 2015; Fischer, 2015; Mizrachi, 2016; Weiss and Mizrachi, 2019) indicating a similar cosmological rift between secular liberals and observant traditionalists, with the former finding the latter's behaviour enigmatic. For example, human rights activists rarely comprehend how Mizrahi contractors can express care and empathy for Palestinian workers yet remain right-wing in their politics (Mizrachi, 2016). More generally, many non-liberal groups demarcate their relationships with individuals who belong to different religious and national groups by sphere of life: family, workplace, politics, nationality, religion, and so forth. That is, celebrations of shared humanity and closeness in one sphere does not prophesy removal of all collective boundaries in other spheres.

In the studies cited previously, their authors noted the liberal activists' amazement at the concurrence of empathy toward individual Arabs in the workplace with the right-wing political attitudes expressed by traditionalist working-class Mizrahi Jews. Liberal activists believe that this behaviour is fuelled by hatred and intense emotions; they thus hope that face-to-face encounters will alter these negative emotions and bring about a shift of their political attitudes to the liberal left (Mizrachi, 2016). That is, the observed liberal activists misrecognise the reason and internal logic

driving the alternative non-liberal cosmology. In fact, as we have witnessed in our ultra-Orthodox site, individuals of both parties would not deny the warm feelings they may have towards individuals belonging to the other group. And yet, they firmly restrict the realisation of those feelings to that setting and social sphere. Similarly to other cases, friendship in the workplace does not imply extending the relationship across boundaries towards other social spheres, such as the familial or the political.

Liberals may come to understand the non-liberals' need for clear boundaries better if they recall the wide range of situations where they, too, abide by boundaries prohibiting them from 'acting on their emotions'; we need only mention forbidden forms of sexual conduct in the workplace during the #MeToo era**.** In this context, liberals are able to recognise the potentially positive social function of boundaries for the social order.

Turning the direction of inquiry toward the grammar of the liberal vision itself may further illuminate the cosmological divides between parties. A central component in the liberal grammar is the autonomous, equal individual (Taylor, 1991), free to traverse all social spheres of social life, a notion that nurtures an all-encompassing liberal vision (Eisenstadt, 2002; Fischer, 2015). It seeks to free the autonomous individual from the chains of any collective boundaries, to realise the individual's free choice. When such communities exhibit 'inconsistencies' in their boundary construction, such as openings in one sphere (such as the workplace) and closure in others (such as the family), liberals often regard those inconsistencies as anomalies, as problems or riddles to be resolved (Mizrachi, 2016). This reaction attests to the liberal expectation that the primary status of the autonomous individual should transcend all group boundaries in any social sphere. However, as we have shown, this all-encompassing liberal vision remains blind to its own boundaries, as indicated by the discussion over 'associative duties', in reference to the liberals' taken-for-granted preference for family members over strangers.

Again, turning the spotlight on liberal boundaries may reveal their historical contingency and cultural exclusion. The domestic boundary has historically excluded queer familial and many non-traditional domestic arrangements (Weston, 2005) as well as creating norms that fail to match many forms of family and intimacy within non-liberal cultures (Povinelli, 2006). The violent exclusions introduced by national boundaries are readily apparent in the modern era, most recently observed in the refusal of states to respond to refugee crises (Ostrand, 2015), as well as human rights campaigns addressing global inequalities.

By comparing the two divergent practices of encounter and negotiation in two ethnographic sites, this study sought to 'estrange' the accepted liberal view of social boundaries as inherently anachronistic and problematic for co-existence in conditions of diversity. This exercise, we suggest, is warranted in view of the global challenge of living together with difference in the growing reality of 'deep diversity' (Galston, 1995).

The two sites observed were different in nature. We by no means suggest that the cosmological similarities between the religious groups guarantees a long-term peaceful existence. However, our analysis does call attention to the limitations of the liberal grammar in providing an exclusive, universal, and neutral model for overcoming the growing resistance to liberalism as a moral and cognitive vision for global order. This reality calls for rethinking the constitutive role of groups boundaries in response to the challenge of living together with difference.

Notes

1. Elad, a town recently established in the centre of Israel, boasts an almost completely ultra-Orthodox population.
2. At the conference 'Different Voices, Different Visions: Broadening the Ways to Imagine Peace', held at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute on 14 March 2019, where many of these groups, including participants from the Citizens Accord Forum, gathered to share their experiences. See: https://www.vanleer.org.il/en/event/different-voices-different-visions-broadening-ways-imagine-peace.
3. As those studies indicate, working-class Mizrahi Jews and Arab Palestinians, to say nothing of the ultra-Orthodox members of those same groups, suffer from stigmatisation, although to very different degrees. They are viewed as the ultimate 'unfit' for the liberal democratic order and are often portrayed in the liberal secular discourse as extremist 'fundamentalists'.
4. As expressed in the *Law of Return* (1950) as well as in the more-recently legislated *Nation State Law* (2018).
5. Consider Smooha's term 'ethnic democracy' (see Smooha, 'Ethnic Democracy', *Israel Studies*, 2(2), 1997).
6. For a debate over the notion of ethnic democracy see Ghanem, Rouhana, and Yiftachel (1998), 'Questioning "ethnic democracy": A response to Sammy Smooha', *Israel Studies*, *3*(2), *Law and the Transformation of Israeli Society*, pp. 253–267.
7. Historically, Arabs and Jews were educated in separate systems. This setup, existing before establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, was continued after the State's establishment. Preservation of educational segregation was also related to geographic separation. In general, most Jews and Arabs lived in distinct towns and villages. Whereas the Arab public did not demand integration of Jewish and Arab education, it did request expansion of the Arab

system's autonomy (see Agabria, 2015). At the same time, structural separation between the systems allowed the ruling establishment to exert its control over Arab education and to discriminate against it (see Al-Haj, 1995).

8. We should note that the Arab Palestinian participants in our study all belonged to the Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement, to be differentiated from the Northern Branch of the Movement, which has been outlawed by the Israeli Knesset, based on claims about their extremist positions.
9. The term 'Sephardi' originally referred to the Jewish Diaspora in Spain but today it is often used as a euphemism for Mizrahi Jews who have adopted a Sephardic liturgical style.
10. See https://www.haaretz.com/1.5189871
11. A term suggested by Prof. Menachem Mautner, personal communication.
12. Another major attempt in this direction was initiated by Rabbi Menachem Froman; see S. Magid (2015).

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