



Difficult Dialogues
Symposium "Bridging
the Impossible?" with
Julia Chaitin (far right)

Bridging the Impossible?

Chaitin resumed her examination of the psycho-social dynamic of conflict in a panel discussion sponsored by the Strassler Center and the Clark University Difficult Dialogues program. The Difficult Dialogue series fosters discussion of controversial topics. Professor Thomas Kühne organized the program, "Bridging the Impossible? Confronting Barriers to Dialogue between Germans, Jews, and Palestinians," and introduced Chaitin, who served as the main discussant, to a packed hall at Dana Commons.

Chaitin drew upon the German-Jewish philosopher Martin Buber for her understanding of the dialogic process.

According to Buber, silence and speech are the basis for human communication. In order to become fully attentive to the I-thou relation, in Buber's terms, one must silence inner arguments and emotions in order to allow a flow of peace and trust. Chaitin noted with appreciation that Buber, who came to Palestine in 1938 from Nazi Germany, worked for a bi-national state and Jewish-Arab understanding.

Chaitin described the reconciliation process between Jewish Israelis, Germans, and Palestinians as complicated, fragile, and fraught. First, she addressed the psychological issues that create difficulties for Jewish Israelis to explore and embrace reflective and open dialogue with their Palestinian neighbors. Reluctance to engage in dialogue is grounded in such matters as collective identity rooted in victimhood, defense mechanisms, a strategy of scapegoating, and family patterns. Chaitin illustrated her theoretical finding with examples from her field work as a discussion facilitator between Jewish Israeli, German, and Palestinian youth.

Obstacles to reconciliation abound, but Chaitin offered strategies to overcome these difficulties. She advocated for a joint dialogue through storytelling that includes self- and joint reflection not only on the inter-personal level but, more importantly, on the inter-group level. According to Chaitin, storytelling can build a bridge of dialogue between Jewish Israelis, Germans, and Palestinians. Sharing personal narratives in a safe setting with sensitive listeners allows conflict to come into the open and enables participants to address issues of victims and victimizers. The process may be long and arduous but holds the tantalizing promise of genuine understanding and reconciliation.

The four members of the distinguished panel of discussants responded to Chaitin's lecture from their distinct disciplinary perspectives. An extremely lively question and answer session followed. The audience, made up of Clark faculty, students, and community members, discussed reconciliation, possible solutions to the current conflict, and the viability of such solutions.

The success of Chaitin's visit, building upon discussions opened by Dan Bar-On two years earlier, highlighted the value of an ongoing collaboration with Israeli colleagues. Kühne sustained the now growing link by visiting Chaitin at Sapir College and at Ben-Gurion University in March. He gave a talk at Ben-Gurion University to Chaitin's graduate student class on Conflict Resolution and sparked discussion on the relation between peace research and genocide studies. Happily, the possibility of a more formal relationship with an Israeli partner institution has emerged from these visits.

□ Adara Goldberg and Stefan Ionescu

"Julia Chaitin's solution represents a step forward on the path toward mutual understanding between Jews and Palestinians, and perhaps toward solving the conflict."

— Eugen Miculeț '10

"This was an extremely interesting lecture, addressing the psychological aspects of Palestinian-Israeli relations."

— Oana Chimina '11

"Dr. Chaitin's lecture was thought-provoking. Her comments concerning the biological basis for PTSD were especially interesting. I am inspired to learn more about this complicated subject."

— Emily Dabney, Center graduate student and Richard P. Cohen Fellow