

*Recovering From Violence:*

# Reconciliation in Practice

How Rituals, Rites and Ceremonies Can  
Help with Social Healing, Reintegration and  
Rehabilitation After Violence

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# Introduction

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict stands as one of the most enduring and widely recognized struggles of our modern era. Spanning over a century, it originated from an experience of collective trauma when Jews sought a homeland to escape the antisemitic violence and discrimination prevalent in Europe. Claiming historical and religious ties to Palestine, the land became an enticing choice. Accordingly, in the 1930s, a massive influx of Jewish migrants arrived in Palestine, creating tension and violence in the region.

To alleviate the conflict between the indigenous Palestinian/Arab population and the newly migrating Jewish population, the UN partitioned the land between the two peoples in 1947. Unfortunately, this plan overlooked the deep historical and tribal connections of the indigenous people to the land and was significantly driven by the international community's guilt over one of humanity's greatest atrocities – the Jewish Holocaust of the Second World War.

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 led to a war with its Arab neighbors in which Israel was victorious. Throughout this period, Jewish groups also committed atrocities against local Palestinians, leading to over 70% of the population to become refugees and the destruction of more than 400 Palestinian villages and towns. This catastrophic event, known as the Nakba, profoundly affected Palestinians and resulted in the Palestinian community experiencing deep collective trauma and loss.

Several wars have taken place since 1948, of which the 1967 war was the most significant as Israel's victory allowed it to take control of the remaining territories that had not been captured in 1948. Palestinians residing in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza (the 1967 territories) became subjects under an Israeli military occupation that exerted control over every aspect of Palestinian life, denying basic freedoms and civil rights. In 1988, Palestinians led a popular uprising known as the Intifada in which Palestinians engaged in predominantly nonviolent protests the occupation, calling for its end and demanding self-determination. After five years of conflict, a peace process was initiated between Palestinians and Israelis in 1993 that aimed to end the occupation, resolve the conflict, and establish peace between the two peoples.



Jerusalem and the Dome of the Rock

The Oslo peace process, as it became known, advocated for a two-state solution, envisioning two peoples coexisting in separate states side by side in peace. The peace process failed in 1999, however, plunging the Holy Land into repeated cycles of violence, unsuccessful attempts to revive the peace process, and



widespread despair and hopelessness. At the time of this writing, we are witnessing the absolute failure of the peace process in the unprecedented violence we are seeing in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

A crucial aspect that has largely been overlooked in understanding the failure of the peace process is the impact of collective inherited trauma experienced by both Israelis and Palestinians. This trauma engenders fear of the other and a constant perception of threat to the survival of one's community, which becomes a significant motivating factor, consciously or unconsciously, not only to resist engaging in, but also to fight against, a genuine process of peace with the other. In the Oslo peace process, both sides were negotiating from a place of trauma and fear, primarily seeking the best "security" arrangements for themselves in the name of "peace." Thus, the legacies and lived experiences of collective trauma for Israelis and Palestinians was a significant factor in the peace process's failure.

## Collective Intergenerational Trauma

Collective historical and intergenerational trauma deeply shapes people's collective identity and the narratives that underlie societal, cultural, and political practices and norms. Notably, the legacies of collective trauma experiences frequently translate into narratives of perpetual existential threat and a victim identity. These dynamics manifest in personal and collective relationships at both micro and macro levels of society. The historical trauma of the Holocaust for Israelis and that of the Nakba and displacement from their homeland for Palestinians are key causes and consequences of the conflict, which have persisted across generations.

In many ways, the Holocaust has come to shape the collective contemporary identity of Jews. Great intention is placed in how the experience is remembered and conveyed across generations, leading to the transmission of trauma narratives over time. For instance, within Israeli Jewish schools, educators emphasize to young students that the Holocaust is not merely a past event, but an ongoing part of the Jewish experience that extends into the present and future. Israeli Jews are taught that the only way to address this historical trauma is to surpass the previous generation's power and retain control at any cost. Children are warned that they could face a similar destiny to their ancestors in Europe unless they maintain military strength and control, fostering a sense of distrust towards others. This narrative, combined with Israel's significant military, political, and economic power, has led the Israeli state to gain the upper hand in and shape the prevailing discourse about the conflict.

On the Palestinian side, intergenerational trauma presents itself in the form of existential threat coupled with the loss of honor and dignity. Culturally and relationally, this led to suppression in the expression of feelings of shame, guilt, or grief, which were replaced with a sense of victimization, toxic pride, and denial of reality. The deep victimization Palestinians experience is a consequence not only of their physical displacement during the Nakba but also the sense of being uprooted from their land. Palestinians argue that the Nakba is not over and continues to this day, a narrative fueled by the fear of losing what little remains — the violence currently unfolding in Gaza is an example of this experience. This adds to a sense of ongoing despair and victimization. On a cultural level, the land and the feminine are symbolically intertwined with fertility and life, representing the bonds that hold the community together and create continuation. The violation of either is viewed as an assault on the honor of the "masculine" figure who was unable to "protect" Palestinians as a people and thus protect their identity. In other words, in local culture, Palestinians' displacement is symbolized as a form of rape. The trauma linked to the perceived failure to safeguard the land has also contributed to a deterioration of trust within the Palestinian community that has led to internal power struggles, blame against each other for what happened, and competition as to who can restore what was lost. Parallel to the Jewish experience, Palestinians' existential fear has been a key motivation for some to engage in the peace process (preserve what is left) and others to completely reject it, choosing death with honor over life without their land.

## About Holy Land Trust

Holy Land Trust (HLT) is a Palestinian organization established in 1998 by a group of Palestinian activists that observed the failures of the peace process and questioned the nature of peace that was being pursued. Instead of fostering unity and freedom for Palestinians, they observed that the Oslo peace process seemed to create more divisions and constraints. In this context, the group founded the organization with an aim to strengthen communities in the Holy Land to build a peaceful and just future.

Holy Land Trust engages with all communities in the land through three core domains. Firstly, the organization is committed to nonviolence as a means to resist oppression, occupation, and injustice. HLT believes that nonviolence can effectively challenge existing power dynamics and bring about positive change. Secondly, HLT focuses on building awareness and understanding of how inherited collective trauma shapes personal, political, and social decisions. Recognizing that fear is incompatible with true peace, justice, and equality, its programs invite people to explore the impact of fear on their perceptions of their own identity and the identity of others. Thirdly, the organization emphasizes the importance of personal transformation as a tool to build a vision for the future that respects and learns from the past, without being solely motivated by it. This transformative approach, known as nonlinear thinking, guides personal development and fosters new perspectives about oneself, others, and the conflict as a whole.

By combining these three approaches, Holy Land Trust believes that a framework can be established for effective engagement in just peacemaking. For instance, individuals undergo a healing journey to understand how collective trauma influences their perception of identity and the "other." This process liberates individuals from fear and enables them to view the other as a partner rather than a threat. Moreover, addressing the sense of victimization associated with collective trauma is a key part of the healing process whereby individuals can come to (re)claim agency in their relationship to the past and present – a shift that can encourage or affirm their participation efforts to build a more just and peaceful future. The nonlinear transformative approach empowers individuals and leaders to focus on the future they want to create and work towards achieving it. Nonviolence can then be employed as a proactive strategy to overcome inevitable obstacles and bring about desired outcomes.

## About the Spiritual Questionnaire

Holy Land Trust partnered with the Rossing Center and the Hebrew Union College's Jewish Institute of Religion to develop the Spiritual Questionnaire, a framework and practice to help address the deep trauma experienced by Israelis and Palestinians because of living in an ongoing situation of violent conflict. The Spiritual Questionnaire guides a process of collective pastoral care based on an understanding of religious, social, and political components of healing. Building on years of working in the field of interreligious and community dialogue, bringing together Israelis, Palestinians, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and working with religious leaders, educators, women, youth and young adults, the partners became aware of the need for a deeper level of dialogue and a healing on a more spiritual plane for individuals and society. After several initial pilot programs that began to address that need, over the last few years they have brought together hundreds of people for courses and weekend retreats. Participants have included Palestinian and Israeli social workers, facilitators, religious leaders, activists, and youth workers from all over Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

The feedback from participants and evaluators has been extremely positive, and the lessons learned have come together in a new model for dialogue in a region of political conflict. This model carries the overall goal to heal trauma and reduce fear and hatred amongst Israelis and Palestinians, thereby fostering genuine engagement in a process towards a just and lasting peace.



There are four main differences between the model that informs the Spiritual Questionnaire and other dialogue practices:

1. This model is designed to address the core beliefs that must be confronted if dialogue is to have a significant impact. Whereas many dialogue programs and other peace education projects skirt around the edges of the key issues, this program concentrates on examining the most important convictions individuals hold about themselves and their society. These convictions include an overwhelming sense of moral superiority, a perception of victimhood, the justification of violence as defense against enemies single-mindedly intent on the destruction of one's people, and the fear for survival, both as individuals and as a people.
2. Whereas standard dialogue groups place emphasis on listening to the other to understand their point of view and to create empathy for their situation, in this model the emphasis is on self-examination. The process revolves around the use of a questionnaire that asks each participant to share with the group their own dilemma concerning the conflict so as to promote their own personal growth. Over the course of the group process, and unlike other forms of dialogue, the group learns to listen deeply as it hears many different stories from many different perspectives.
3. The collective dynamic created through this process differs from most existing dialogue models insofar as the group listens deeply to the individual, however the reflections they offer are crafted to assist the reflection and growth of that individual. The dynamics of competitive suffering, arguing, or each side becoming entrenched in their stance in opposition to the "other" are avoided. Instead, the dynamic created is one of honest sharing, empathy, understanding, and healing.
4. Rituals and/or meditative practices are internationally incorporated throughout the process to open the space, invite presence, and cultivate a heart-centered atmosphere of love and compassion.

## Purpose of the Questionnaire

The purpose of this program is to foster mutual accompaniment in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In a multicultural group in which the participants come from different national, cultural, and religious backgrounds, the process enables the group to come to know the spiritual language of each individual and to learn something of the spiritual world (i.e., the most influential aspects of one's life) from which s/he comes. Through the personal accompaniment, each participant receives different reflections that allow them to view their understanding of the conflict from different perspectives. The Spiritual Questionnaire process is not judgmental, neither seeking to evaluate the spiritual world of the presenter nor provide suggestions for change. The primary intention is to provide space for each participant to present the questionnaire to the group and for the group to accompany each person as a partner, counterpoint, midwife, facilitator, and enabler through a practice of empathic active listening and serving as a responsive witness.

Everyone is given up to an hour and a half to present the questionnaire. They start by sharing the issue that is alive in them on a very personal level when it comes to the conflict. This is not a macro picture of the conflict – it is what keeps them worried and in tension, what keeps them awake at night. After sharing this issue and giving some background information on it, the individual is invited to answer a series of questions that are not directly related to the conflict itself or their point of pain. These questions elicit responses that allow the listeners to create a more expansive view of the speaker and the world from which they come (see Appendix A for the full questionnaire). When the presenter has finished answering the questions, listeners then share their reflections and observations to what was said in what is called a mirroring session. This takes place in the presenter's presence, though reflections are not spoken to them directly. In their reflections, listeners begin to connect the dots in terms of how the presenter views and understands the context of their conflict based on the different factors that have shaped them and their life journey. Finally, the speaker is invited to share their own understanding of their conflict and if it has shifted through the spiritual questionnaire and engagement as a whole.

## On Personal and Collective Transformation

The Spiritual Questionnaire's approach is rooted in the belief that personal transformation and healing can be achieved through the creation of greater awareness of self and surroundings. Participants are guided to develop an understanding of how their individual experiences and perceptions are shaped by a larger collective consciousness and how the personal landscape is connected to the collective. By moving beyond a narrow, polarized view of conflict, individuals gain access to multi-layered awareness, enabling them to engage with their personal struggles in a more conscious, expansive, and intentional manner.

A unique aspect of the Spiritual Questionnaire is that it does not involve teaching or the provision of specific tools or methodologies. Instead, it is guided by inquiry, creating a space for honest and vulnerable reflection from those presenting and those listening. Importantly, in the mirroring process wherein listeners reflect on the presenters' share, listeners are encouraged to not provide suggestions or solutions nor to share personal stories. The focus rests purely on individual and collective reflection, accompaniment, and healing.

Creating a safe and held space is essential for this process to unfold. Trust is built among participants as they allow themselves to be vulnerable, and the facilitator plays a crucial role in nurturing this trust and openness amongst the group. The facilitator not only establishes agreements, such as confidentiality, but also sets an example by sharing a deeply intimate experience, which helps build trust and encourages deeper sharing. In addition to creating a safe container for the process, the facilitator incorporates rituals and/or meditative practices at the beginning and end of each round of sharing to hold the space safely and respectfully for each person and their experience. These practices are varied and can include connecting to breath, being in silence, creating awareness of what is moving in one's internal landscape, gift giving among participants in the form of a statement of encouragement or a song, or physically holding one another.

Like any program, the Spiritual Questionnaire process has its limitations. Firstly, the facilitator's presence and attentiveness throughout the process is determinative of the quality of the space and the depth of sharing people are willing to offer. Facilitators must carry deep awareness to what is shared, including in the words that are spoken, the body language expressed by the presenter and listeners, and the subtle expressions of the group - factors that significantly influence the group dynamics and process. A second limitation is driven primarily due to funding and capacity constraints, whereby there is limited capacity to organize follow-up and integration opportunities after the sessions. Some ongoing accompaniment is offered to participants despite these constraints, including opportunities for them to remain connected with one another virtually and in person. More robust accompaniment to sustain connection among group members, however, cannot be provided. A third limitation is that the Spiritual Questionnaire experience often remains confined to the individuals directly involved without necessarily extending to influence others. In a conflict context that is so deeply contested, this is understandable that to return to one's community and attempt to effect change there cannot only be challenging, but sometimes even risky. Even so, many participants nominate friends, family, or colleagues to join future sessions of the Spiritual Questionnaire, demonstrating both the value participants find in the process as well as a desire to expand its impact.

## On Learnings and Impact

Throughout the years since the Spiritual Questionnaire was first implemented, the context and process have remained largely unchanged, although slight adaptations may be made based on factors such as the number of participants and time available. The duration of each participant's sharing is flexible but typically lasts at least one hour. In specific circumstances, additional questions may be incorporated to address context-relevant themes. For example, when facilitating in a professional environment, questions may be added to evoke reflection around work patterns and habits.



One consistent surprise in the Spiritual Questionnaire process has been the remarkable depth of sharing and vulnerability most participants display. This depth emerges from the deep sense of safety and trust cultivated within the held container of the space, a dynamic that is directly related to participants opening their hearts and sharing directly from their own individual experiences (as opposed to the collective narrative rooted in victimization and blame). Through the emphasis on personal stories rather than finger-pointing, an atmosphere is created wherein participants can authentically share without fear of judgement or retribution. It becomes a space where individuals receive care and empathy for their life journeys and are able to offer the same in return. It is powerful to witness how willing participants are to delve into and share deeply personal stories and experiences. Many express with appreciation that through the Spiritual Questionnaire, they shared parts of their life journey they had never shared before or perhaps only to a few close confidants. Emerging from the depth of this shared and transformative experience, strong relationships built on mutual trust and respect often form among participants that extend long beyond the gathering.

An illustrative example is the journey of an elderly Israeli woman with right-wing nationalist views who had been involved in the Israeli government prior to her retirement. Initially, the group dynamics were challenging as her very identity was problematic and challenging for Palestinians in the space. During her sharing, however, she recounted her upbringing as the only girl among seven brothers in which she endured teasing, mockery, and rejection. To gain acceptance, she had to prove her strength, suppress her emotions, and fight with her brothers. As she shared her personal journey, the walls of others in the circle began to crumble. One powerful mirror she received came from a Palestinian participant who saw a parallel between her story and the journey of the Jewish people. They recognized how her ideological right-wing stance stemmed from her personal experiences of mistrust, a desire to prove her "legitimacy," and a need to fight the "other" to survive. The realization of this connection not only transformed the Israeli woman, but it also brought about healing for the entire circle. The group has since maintained contact and collaborated on multiple projects, and the Israeli woman now mobilizes as an advocate for peace in a variety of ways, including visiting and supporting Palestinians in the West Bank.



Such transformative experiences demonstrate the potential for personal growth, mutual understanding, and reconciliation that the Spiritual Questionnaire offers.



# Conclusion

The Spiritual Questionnaire provides a powerful pathway to personal transformation and healing. By recognizing the impact of collective consciousness and dynamics on their lives, individuals gain profound insights into their own perspectives and reactions. The container, held by a skilled facilitator, fosters an environment of safety and trust, enabling participants to open up and share deeply. By cultivating awareness, fostering vulnerability, and building trust within a safe space, individuals can transcend limited perspectives and engage with their personal challenges in a conscious and transformative manner.

Through this process, individuals experience a sense of collective care and empathy (rare in such a conflicted and contested context), which leads to strong connections and lasting relationships. The absence of teaching or prescribed tools allows participants to delve into their own experiences and stories, free from the limitations of external methodologies. By embracing a multi-layered perception of conflict, individuals move beyond polarization and automatic reactions, paving the way for personal growth and new possibilities of engaging with self and other. The Spiritual Questionnaire encourages such change at an individual and interpersonal level with the possibility for broader community influence and thus serves as a deeply valuable tool to foster intergenerational and inter-community healing and peace.



# Appendix A



## Spiritual Counseling Questionnaire

**Purpose of the Questionnaire:** In this program our purpose is to know/understand the spiritual world and language of the person presenting the questionnaire for the purpose of spiritual accompaniment in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In a multicultural group in which the participants come from different national, cultural and religious backgrounds, we can not only come to know the spiritual language of the individual, but also learn via the individual something of the spiritual world from which he/she comes. By listening to the presentation of the questionnaire, the group participants can offer different perspectives on his/her spiritual world and enrich the awareness and understanding of that world. Thus, we will be able to uncover together the strengths that the spiritual world s/he has developed can offer, as well as the challenges it suggests. The purpose of the questionnaire is not judgmental. The point is not to evaluate the client's spiritual world or place it on a scale, or indeed to suggest changes.

The group assist in the process as a partner, a counterpoint, a midwife, a facilitator, an enabler, through serving particularly as an active listener with empathy, and as an active witness.

The question I bring here – the thing which is most troubling and frightening to me, my spiritual conflict in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict\*:

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1. Religious Definitions: Try to formulate how you define yourself religiously (religious, Orthodox, observant, secular, atheist, heretic, ex-Orthodox, newly-believing, believer-who-doesn't-belong-to-a-particular-religious-group, belong-to-a-particular-religious-group, other).

2. Each person has a name: Many people find meaningful connections to their names as well as to the nicknames given to them by people who are close to them during their lives. Sometimes, the name reminds them of someone else. Sometimes the sound of the name, or its meaning raise thoughts and reflections. What is the significance of your name/s in your eyes? Over the course of your life and today.

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\*At this stage, the answer can be temporary, so that it can be sharpened / adapted following completing the questionnaire.

3. Figure from the past: Who is a character from your past (recent or distant) who is especially significant for you, with whom your connection has significantly influenced you and shaped you as an adult?
4. A founding event: Relate to an event in your life that has affected the way you perceive the purpose of your life, or that influenced the way you live your life and the choices you have made.
5. Belonging: Do you see yourself as belonging (part of your identity) to a group with a heritage (people, ethnic group, religion, denomination, gender, nation, family, other). What are the elements that you mark as characteristic of that heritage and which connect you to it? How do you feel about that heritage? Do you feel the belonging is a matter of choice or coercion? How has the past of the group affected you?
6. Family Journey: How did the life journey of your parents/grandparents influence you? (Journey may be a life event, a way of life, migration or other displacement.)
7. Texts and Rituals: Try to think of a text or ritual that has or has had special significance for you (it can be a saying or a quote). What does the text or ritual mean to you and what makes it significant?
8. Social or Political Activism: Do you participate in such activities? Would you like to? What does such activity mean to you?
9. Who/what are the angels who accompany you / what brings you strength? At which moments, activities, or experiences do you feel love, full of life, satisfied, full of joy, unaware of difficulties, without anxiety? (It is preferable to focus on one or two examples.)
10. Who/what are your demons/what empties you? What are those moments, activities, or experiences that make you feel drained of energy, unable to find satisfaction and enjoyment, acting without enthusiasm or desire? (It is best to focus on one or two examples.)
11. Dealing with difficulties: Remember a time you suffered (physical, mental, or spiritual). When did this happen? Describe the experience. Which thoughts, actions, and people helped you to cope? What hindered you?
12. Passivity: In what ways are you passive in your life? What have you failed to do?
13. Fear of the future: When you think about the future, what is your biggest fear? How does this impact on the way you understand your life and the purpose of your life?
14. Hope: What gives you hope for the future?
15. Spiritual gift: What would you like to give yourself as a 'spiritual' gift? What would such a gift mean to you?
16. Attitude towards death: Consider whether you want to relate to the subject of death, whether your own or that of a loved one. Try to understand your concept of death, your fears and the ways in which they impact on the choices you make in your life. What are the images you hold of your death or of the death of a loved one? What do you believe happens after death? "If these days are my last days, what would I want to happen in them?"

Finally – return to the question with which you began the questionnaire regarding the conflict. Would you like to re-phrase it? What have you understood about it?