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New Jewish Thought Policy Paper 2:

An Experiment in Dialogue

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The problem

For a community of under 300,000 people, British Jewry is highly diverse. British Jews are secular and religious; they are reform, liberal, masorti, orthodox and ultra-orthodox; they are sephardi, mizrachi and ashkenazi; they are left wing and right wing; they live in London and across the country. While some of these differences are lived with harmoniously, others are sources of tension and confrontation. The progressive-orthodox split, for example, has often caused intra-communal conflict. At the heart of such conflicts is a burning question: where should the boundaries of Jewish community be drawn?

In some respects, the British Jewish community has in recent decades come to find ways of living with difference. In the 1998 'Stanmore Accords' the main synagogue movements pledged to avoid public disputes and accusations over the validity of other movements. Limmud has proved a fantastic success in building a framework in which different kinds of Jews can come to together within a community of learning.

Yet there is another set of differences that can create tension and disharmony as no other can - differences over Israel. British Jews holding different opinions about Israel often become involved in disputes that are angry and bitter. For some, the existence of Jews holding certain kinds of opinions on Israel is intolerable. Disputes over Israel are frequently conducted using the most immoderate kind of language, abusing other Jews with no quarter given.

Those who are most critical of Israel, particularly those who are critical of Zionism, are often accused of being treacherous, self-hating and uncaring about the Jewish community. Members of organisations such as Independent Jewish Voices and Jews for Justice for Palestinians are sometimes treated as pariahs, as illegitimate members of British Jewry. On the other side, Jews who are supportive of Israel and Zionism are also regularly abused for their allegedly uncaring attitudes to Palestinians. Pro-Israel events and institutions are picketed and the subject of vitriolic attacks.

1

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What results is hurt on all sides. Jewish critics of Israel often complain of being victimised by and alienated from, a mainstream Jewish community that doesn't want them. Jewish supporters of Israel often complain of being embattled, the subject of antisemitism that Jewish critics of Israel help to legitimise.

One solution to this divide would be for both sides to part company completely. If critics and supporters of Israel were to see themselves and each other as completely different kinds of Jews, part of completely different communities, then perhaps they could get on with being enemies without all the bitter wrangling. Yet this isn't really what most people want. The mutual recriminations that Jews with different opinions on Israel subject each other to are a function of the fact that they see each other (and are seen by non-Jews) as part of the same community. Just as disputes within families are often more angry than any other kind of dispute, so disputes over Israel within the UK Jewish community are deeply felt battles over the soul of that community.

This paper is based on the premise that, while disagreements within communities are inevitable, they should not cause community members undue pain and should not cause them to hate each other. From the enormous emotion expended in fighting them, it is clear disputes on Israel within the British Jewish community *do* cause enormous pain and *do* result in mutual hatred. The task is how to deal with these disputes so that they evoke less bitterness and anger. This paper reports on an experiment intended to do just that.

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A possible response to the problem

Since 911, divisions *between* communities have come under increasing attention as a problem that needs to be addressed. Inter faith dialogue, once the preserve of a small number of dedicated activists, has attracted considerable interest from the British government amongst others as a method of developing understanding and respect between communities. Although inter-faith dialogue has its limitations -it is more developed among leaders than 'grassroots'; it often ignores people who do not describe themselves as having a faith - there is no doubt that a substantial cohort of leaders and community activists from different faiths have emerged who are dedicated to developing better relations with each other.

Can this practice be applied to divisions *within* community? There seems no reason to think not. The ideal of dialogue as being preferable to anger and hatred would seem to be universally valid (if perhaps not universally achievable). Dialogue as an ideal, as a value, is based on the premise that language is both the cause of conflict and its solution. The ability to communicate is near-universal among human beings - in talking we attest to our shared humanity. But importantly dialogue is also about *listening* to the other. Through talking and being heard we encounter other individuals as rounded human beings rather than stereotypes. While disagreements are an inevitable part of human life, dialogue provides a way of seeing the human being behind the argument. Of course, putting the ideal into practice is not easy, but there are precedents. Conflict resolution specialists have long worked within even quite homogeneous groups such as families and neighbourhoods.

Most importantly for this paper, the Philadelphia-based Jewish Dialogue Group (http://www.jewishdialogue.org) has pioneered the practice of dialogue within the US Jewish community. Founded in 2001, the group has developed resources for respectful and constructive dialogue about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As well as running their own dialogue sessions, they have produced a guide in conjunction with the Public Conversations Project (http://www.publicconversations.org) entitled *Constructive Conversations About the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A Guide for Convening and Facilitating Dialogue in Jewish Communities in the US. The guide* allows people with no expertise to run dialogue sessions in their own communities.

I first became aware of the Jewish Dialogue Group and its methodology in 2007. In that year I had been part of the group that formed New Jewish Thought (http://www.newjewishthought.org). From its inception, New Jewish Thought was intended to address the divisions in the British Jewish community. It was felt that, while pluralist organisations such as Limmud had helped British Jews to live together more easily, there was still a lack of serious conversation between different streams of Jewishness. The

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difficulties is stimulating this conversation were highlighted when an early initiative planned by New Jewish Thought fell apart due to one of the organisers's refusal to work with me due to my views on Israel[1]. This experience, together with my discovering the Jewish Dialogue Group shortly afterwards, led me to decide to convene a Jewish dialogue group in the UK.

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[1]   The story of this is recounted at http://newjewishthought.org/the_problem_with_dialogue.php

New**Jewish**Thought

The experiment

Inspired by the Jewish Dialogue Group's guide, I set out in 2007 to recruit and run a group using the framework it sets out in its guide. The UK and US Jewish communities are different in many respects, particularly in the broader-based support for Israel in America, but I was encouraged by the news that the guide had been used in the UK once before[2]. I intended the group to be a space in which British Jews with very different views on Israel would meet on a number of occasions to participate in dialogue with each other. Although I believed (and still believe) that dialogue groups of this kind can make an important contribution to better relations within the UK Jewish community, I tried not to pre-judge how this particular group would work in practice. I certainly set out with the hope that the group might provide a model that would inspire other groups to be formed, I was also aware that to put too much pressure on the group would be unfair on its participants. In short the group was an *experiment*.

My aim was to recruit 8 members (8 is often seen as the optimal number for this exercise) preferably an equal mix of men and women, whose views would encompass the spectrum of opinion on Israel within the Jewish community. Obviously there are more than 8 shades of opinion on Israel and in any case, within the group members were to represent no one other than themselves, but I did think it was possible to ensure that both 'ends' of the spectrum were represented. I wanted at least one member who was critical of Zionism (and not just of Israeli policy) and at least one member who was broadly supportive of the settlements. I also wanted members who saw themselves as 'defenders' of Israel as well as those who saw themselves as critical of Israeli policies but supportive of Zionism.

In general I was wary of recruiting people into the group who had a senior lay or professional leadership role within the community. This was in part because I did not want group members to see themselves as representatives of an organisation, in part because I thought it best that as little pressure as possible be put on the group to be influential or high-powered and in part because I had the idea that I might like to run a group of this kind but at a later stage. However I was keen to recruit people who had some involvement in Jewish communal practice and in particular those who had been an activist on some Israel-related cause. In this way the group would still have some kind of link to the actual business of Jewish communal activity.

Recruiting the group proved a lengthy and difficult process. I wrote about the project on the New Jewish Thought website and in an article for the Jewish Chronicle. I produced a flyer

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[2]   See Lisa Saffron 'Developing Constructive Conversations'
http://www.newjewishthought.org/Developing_constructive_conversations.php

asking for people interested to get in touch and circulated it widely. I chaired a well-attended session on dialogue at Limmud 2007 featuring Brian Klug and Clive Lawton at which I mentioned the group. I drew on contacts across the community asking them to suggest people who might be interested.

Despite these considerable efforts, it took about 8 months to assemble the group. I had few responses to my enquiries and though I had hoped to be able to choose from a pool of applicants, in the end I was obliged to accept all 11 people that expressed an interest, of which 4 were in the end unable to commit to the group for practical reasons and 1 was recruited after the first meeting, leading to a group of 7 (not including myself). This difficulty in finding applicants was in itself an interesting first 'finding' for the experiment: there appears to be little demand for a group of this kind. That emphatically does not mean that dialogue groups are not needed, but that the concept is unfamiliar and the development of intra-communal dialogue in the British Jewish community cannot be demand-led. Visionary attempts to respond to a need do not necessarily stem from a widespread perception of that need.

Even if assembling the group took considerable time, the end result was a fascinating group that came reasonably close to filling my criteria. All 7 were or had been activists of some kind to a greater or lesser degree. All were passionately committed to their views. Group members views on Israel ranged from supporting a boycott of Israeli goods to believing Jews had a right to settle anywhere in the West Bank and in between these positions were a variety of opinions. Three members of the group were female and four male.

I had initially been prepared to facilitate the group according to the guidelines set out by the Jewish Dialogue Group. However, a couple of months before the group began a chance encounter led me to contact Gabrielle Rifkind of the Oxford Research Group (http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/) for advice. Gabrielle is a group analyst by training who has wide experience of conducting dialogues and conflict resolution work in the Middle East. In the course of our conversation Gabrielle agreed to facilitate the dialogue group at her home. This left me free to act as the group 'rapporteur', recording its discussions, although in later sessions I began to actively participate in the group.

Six 2-hour group meetings were conducted between May and November 2008. While the Jewish Dialogue Group's methodology calls for highly structured sessions, Gabrielle chose to run the sessions in a more free-flowing way. She would pose questions for the group or suggest that we share our feelings about a particular issue, but she was not proscriptive about how we responded. On occasions she would make comments on how individuals had responded to something and how the group was working.

New**Jewish**Thought

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Details of the proceedings of the group (and indeed details of its members[3]) were and remain confidential. However, the issues that came up within the group can be reported and their wider implications discussed. In this way, the group provided a highly productive experiment whose 'results' are worthy of broader discussion.

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[3]   Individual members can make their membership of the group known publicly if they wish.

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The results

These 'results' should be read as one person's reading of the group. Although I have tried to ensure that group members' concerns and feelings are reflected in this account (and I have shared the paper with them prior to publication), a group is experienced by its individual members in different ways.

Membership

My primary consideration in assembling the group was to ensure a spectrum of opinions on Israel were represented. Yet as the group begun to meet it became apparent that there were differing expectations of what the group should be and differing understandings of what dialogue is or should be. Some group members saw themselves as being in the group primarily to listen and to investigate group dynamics, whereas others were more concerned to ensure that their own points of views were put across within the group. Neither attitude was necessarily 'wrong' but the lack of consensus as to the purpose of the group did lead to tensions and difficulties in developing a productive dialogue.

At the heart of the issue lies a difficult conundrum: should a dialogue group restrict membership to those who 'buy into' a shared purpose? Given that the dialogue group was set up specifically to explore intra-communal tensions it is hard to envisage such unanimity of purpose. People who disagree on so much else are unlikely to agree on the purpose and value of dialogue. Those who are most 'ready' for dialogue may not be those who are most heavily implicated in the perpetration of a community's divisions.

Another problem is deciding on who is an appropriate person to facilitate a dialogue group. A facilitator needs to be able to inspire the trust of group members and this would seem to preclude anyone who is closely identified with a particular position. I had thought that Gabrielle Rifkind was ideal for the task due to her experience of Middle East conflict resolution. However, her willingness to facilitate dialogue with Hamas and other Islamist groups created a reaction for some group members , but it was never fully addressed and resulted in some members of the group having feelings about this. This was a missed opportunity as it would have been powerful material to work with and would have been very revealing about peoples own projections.

Such conundrums cannot ever be completely 'solved' . Perhaps the best way to navigate it is to see dialogue as something to be nurtured as the group runs its course - to be a goal rather than a starting point. Repeatedly in the group, Gabrielle would encourage members to develop a different kind of perspective on interaction, to experiment with different ways of being heard and relating to others. The group therefore provided an opportunity for its members to do things differently.

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Listening

The most important and difficult skill in dialogue is that of listening. In fact, in the Jewish Dialogue Group's model, listening to others is *the* purpose of a dialogue group. In public controversies over Israel within the Jewish community, the dominant mode of address is hectoring, attempting to overwhelm the others' arguments. This leaves little space to hear the complexities of and the feelings behind the arguments of the other.

The kind of deep listening that a dialogue group requires can only be achieved through a commitment to not interrupt, to not jump in immediately with criticisms and to not make unwarranted judgements about what the other 'really' thinks. Members should not be treated as representatives of anything other than themselves.

It proved extremely difficult to institute these listening practices within the group. Although the first and last 2 sessions were conducted in a relatively polite atmosphere, sessions 2-4 were fraught affairs. Some group members found it difficult not to interrupt and to talk when others were speaking. When some issues were raised the group would collapse into angry accusations and counter-accusations. The group never fully achieved a mutually agreeable mode of communication that allowed for serious listening.

There were periods though when group members did listen more seriously and intently. These tended to be when discussion was focused on personal stories and experiences. Although some group members were more willing than others to share deeper emotions, hopes and fears, when members took ownership of their opinions it allowed others to listen to them with more respect. Dialogue was most likely to break down when we focused on issues of policy such as the nature of antisemitism or the future status of the West Bank settlements. Broadly speaking, the more 'impersonal' the topic was, the more members saw each other as disembodied viewpoints rather than complex human beings.

Perhaps the most striking finding in the group was how close to each other members were in their ultimate vision for Israel-Palestine. Almost all were sympathetic to the idea of a two state solution. Although Zionism was criticised by some, it was never completely rejected and no one objected in principle to the presence of Jews in the region. It was when discussion turned to questions of strategy, tactics and politics that bitter divisions arose that were difficult to hear.

Facts

One issue that recurred repeatedly throughout the sessions was the issue of facts and the status of truth more broadly. The various positions taken in the Israel-Palestinian conflict are marked by strikingly different narratives explaining the conflict and its history. These

narratives structure what is seen as being factual and truthful. It is common therefore to justify one's position in terms of having the facts on one's side and to see those who disagree as being not just wrong but also consciously or unwittingly being untruthful.

Some group members took this absolutist position on the facts of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. This led to some passionate confrontations on issues such as the definition of antisemitism, the responsibility for the Palestinian refugee problem and the status of the settlements under international law. These confrontations would frequently degenerate into a series of assertions and counter-assertions as to who had the facts on one's side. Larger issues would be cast aside in favour of struggles over minute questions over individual incidents or over what one individual had said or done.

One member of the group argued forcefully on a number of occasions that it was impossible to conduct dialogue unless one agreed on a basic set of facts. This point will be returned to later in the paper but it was certainly the case that other group members were less bothered by this issue. Although they might completely disagree with how another group member might understand a particular issue, they understood the existence of different narratives as an inevitability, rather than as evidence of mendacity.

Boundaries

All prospective group members were told that the group would contain people with whom they would vehemently disagree. No one made their joining the group conditional on certain people not joining the group. No one refused to attend further sessions when they discovered who else was joining the group and no one stopped attending after difficult sessions took place. The group should be seen as a success then in repeatedly managing to bring together people who would not normally associate with each other.

Of course the group was set up with higher aspirations than simply putting people together in a room. Attempts to encourage people to engage in dialogue often came up against peoples' 'boundaries', the points beyond which members could no longer dialogue respectfully and effectively. While no one ever walked out of the room, when boundaries were crossed the tone could become heated and angry.

Different group members had different boundaries. For some it was the use of a certain term, the quoting of a certain source or the making of a certain point. One member found another member's use of the term 'Israel lobby' as being tantamount to antisemitism. For another, one member's question to the group of whether Israel should exist (which he himself believed it should) was unacceptable.

Other group members were happy to discuss almost anything in the group and had a very high level of tolerance for any kind of argument being made. However, some of them took issue with *how* other members argued rather than *what* they argued. In one particularly heated exchange, one member was accused of alienating some other members (who agreed with him on many issues) because of the way in which he argued his case.

Almost all the group were at times confronted with arguments and ways of arguing that they found hard to tolerate. To a certain extent examining and testing boundaries was one of the aims of the group. However, it may be useful to distinguish between those boundaries that define *what* arguments one may tolerate and those boundaries that define *how* arguments should be made. Whereas raising one's tolerance level for the former can be a legitimate goal, 'how' boundaries may be more worth preserving as they are likely to preserve the dialogic aims of the group.

It is also worth noting that even if the boundaries of group members created difficult tensions, members were able to reach agreement on other matters. In the penultimate session, 'alliances' between members were made over non-Israel related issues, such as conspicuous consumption in the Jewish community. The divisions between group members over Israel were never so impenetrable as to prevent communication on all other matters.

Content

One might think that Israel was the preeminent issue dividing the group. However in the course of the sessions it became clear that the situation was rather more complex than might be imagined. For one thing, as I argued earlier, the differences between long-term visions for Israel were not completely irreconcilable in most cases. But perhaps the most striking feature of the group was how *little* Israel was actually discussed. In an early session, when each member was invited to describe what Israel meant for them, there was surprisingly little detailed discussion of the country and individuals' relationships to it. Throughout the sessions, there was little engagement in questions of, for example, Israeli arts, Israeli society, Hebrew language, Israeli political culture and personal stories of visits to Israel. For most of the time, this was even true of those who had spent extensive periods of time in the country. Even when discussing the politics of the Israel-Palestinian conflict many aspects of it were little discussed, such as terrorism, the status of Jerusalem or the possible return of Palestinian refugees.

So in the 12 hours for which the group ran, what *did* we talk about? What appears to have been of most concern to the group was how to relate to the Israel-Palestinian conflict within Britain and in particular within the British Jewish community. It is here that the most intractable differences within the group were revealed. Whether and how Israel should be publicly criticised, how Jewish organisations should support Israel (or not), the

11

responsibilities of Jews towards each other, what antisemitism is and how it should be combated - these were the issues that most engaged the group. While all of them do impact on the Israel-Palestine conflict in some way, they have most direct relevance to *questions of Jewish community* - what it is and what it should be. Dialogue about Israel was in fact dialogue about Jewish community.

The divisions in how community was seen were profound. For some members, all those who wish to be part of the British Jewish community have an obligation to publicly defend Israel, for others the obligation was precisely the reverse. Some were willing to define people as outside the community (even, for one member as 'traitors') whereas others were content to see the community as a more diverse space. These are incredibly difficult and important issues. Community is tied up in very personal feelings of belonging and can inspire great emotion.

It is perhaps the fact that community is discussed through Israel that makes for such intractable divisions. On reflection, it might have been better to encourage a separation of the two issues within the group. If community were discussed more abstractly, it might have been easier to engage in dialogue about it. If Israel were discussed more directly, it might have been possible to engage with the issues more dispassionately.

Structure

The Jewish Dialogue Group's method of conducting dialogue groups is to provide a strong structure designed to allow those who are not specialists in this work to convene and facilitate groups. This structure includes 'communication agreements' that members have to adhere to, detailed time-limited session plans and carefully designed stimulus material. In her own work in conducting dialogues in the Middle East, Gabrielle Rifkind also ensures that sessions are clearly structured. Group analysts and dialogue specialists refer to such structures as 'containers' for the group, intended to ensure that difficult issues can be raised without the group breaking apart.

Although I had acquainted group members with the Jewish Dialogue Group methodology and some of their literature prior to the start of the group, we did not follow such a structured methodology. This relative lack of structure had the advantage of giving the group the opportunity to set its own agenda. However, productive periods of dialogue were frequently interspersed with intense exchanges that sometimes spilled over into full-blown arguments. Gabrielle's subtle comments sometimes managed to diffuse such situations and she provided some challenging insights into the workings of the group and how members related to it.

In retrospect, while there were advantages in eschewing a tight structure for the group, it would have been preferable to have a more prescriptive framework. Communication agreements and structures that make members commit to pursuing respectful dialogue and hard listening would not have been foolproof, but would certainly have helped the group. Deciding on these agreements and structures collectively, at the start of the series, would have allowed members to 'buy in' to the process.

It would also have been helpful to have a stated goal for the group. Although I explicitly set out for the group to be an open-ended experiment, some sense of what was expected could have added some discipline. That goal need not have been the achievement of a consensus view on any issue, but it could have been to define a framework that would be useful to others in the Jewish community. The production of a set of guidelines to assist British Jews in talking about contentious issues would be a worthy goal for a future group.

Relationship to the wider community

A dialogue group is an artificial environment, unlike situations that occur in everyday life. In stepping outside normal contexts of interaction, group members have an opportunity to reflect on and to experiment with how interaction takes place. Yet the illusion of the group as a space outside the community cannot always be maintained.

Given the relatively small size of the British community, it was inevitable that a number of the members of the group had had dealings with each other previously. Here the difference between inter-faith and intra-faith dialogue becomes clearest. Dialogue within a community can involve people that may have long histories with each other and even if they don't know each other may feel they know them from their backgrounds, friends and family.

Most problematically, two of the group members had in the past exchanged confrontational e-mails with each other. While the group offered them the opportunity to develop a different kind of relationship, in practice this never happened and they clashed repeatedly during the course of the sessions. Although I had said that members should not e-mail each other during the lifetime of the group, in a moment of poor judgement I relaxed this rule after the penultimate session. Subsequently, following a communal controversy in which both members were involved, the e-mail conflict erupted again, drawing in other group members. Following the last session of the group (which one of the parties could not attend) the war of words became more intense and spilled over into other online and offline forums.

While the group failed to prevent this conflict, it does not necessarily invalidate the group. In some respects, the presence of a 'real life' communal conflict within the group provided a fascinating opportunity to learn how such conflicts are perpetuated. A group can provide a kind of microcosm in which community dynamics can be played out and analysed in

13

miniature. In this way the group provided an invaluable *sociological* resource even if its success in achieving constructive dialogue was more erratic. This sociological perspective is not just of use to sociologists (of which, I concede, I am one) but to anyone who seeks to understand how the Jewish community works. Any attempt to change or lead the Jewish community requires an understanding of the community works.

This perspective helps in clarifying the role that dialogue groups might be able to play in the wider Jewish community. Whatever happens when a group is run - and however 'successful' members are in listening to and dialoguing with each other - a group is only a handful of people in a much bigger community, talking to each other in private and in confidence. Its value lies not so much in the specificities of what happens inside the group (although this is clearly important), but in the new perspectives and skills it offers members in their interactions within the wider community. Although it is preferable that groups conduct constructive respectful dialogues, even more troubled groups have a value in the light they shed on community dynamics. In this respect, there are no 'unsuccessful' dialogue groups.

Dialogue and debate

The Jewish Dialogue Group model clearly distinguishes between dialogue and debate. Whereas debate attempts to persuade or overwhelm the other through force of argument, dialogue focuses on listening and one being heard. Debate is not inherently bad, but it tends to dominate the public sphere, creating a cacophony of voices but little real communication between people. The case for dialogue rests on the lack of space for dialogue within communities.

Dialogue can also lead to communication problems. If listening is over-emphasised then there is a danger that dialogue will become simply a procession of monologues. The Jewish Dialogue Group's model seems to imply that group members should not be directly challenged in their views, but that members should respond to each other through explaining how their own position differs. While this has the virtue of being a very different way of communicating than usually occurs in the wider community, it has the potential to encourage solipsism.

One group member argued that debate can be preferable to dialogue in that it does people the honour of taking their views seriously and worthy of challenge. Another went further and argued that they would be prepared to engage in debate with almost anyone, but would only do dialogue with those who shared certain common assumptions.

In practice, the group tended to veer between dialogue and debate, sometimes listening and sometimes not, sometimes challenging and sometimes not. Perhaps an ideal mode of communication for a group of this kind would involve some kind of combination of dialogue

and debate; a mode of communication that encouraged listening without putting anyone beyond reproach; that encouraged rigorous questioning without competitive point-scoring. This is a difficult goal, made harder because we don't really have a word for this kind of communication, but it is a goal that future groups could pursue.

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Lessons for future groups

There can be no 'one size fits all' approach to convening and facilitating dialogue groups. Nevertheless, our experiment with dialogue has suggested some lessons that future groups and group convenors would do well to heed:

1. *Be clear about aims*

Even if a group is not set up with the purpose of achieving a concrete outcome, it still pays to be clear about the aims of the group, even if they are very general.

2. *Brief prospective members*

Prospective dialogue group members need to be adequately briefed before they join as to the purpose of the group, particularly who else will be joining and what dialogue means.

3. *Work on communication agreements early on*

A group needs to establish and agree on how it will be run and in particular what kind of communication is expected of the group. Ideally the group should work collectively on a communication agreement in the first session.

4. *Establish a clear structure*

The structure of group meetings should be established in advance, with appropriate time limits for particular tasks.

5. *Distinguish the personal and the political*

Even if personal and political issues are in practice inextricably linked, it nonetheless pays to temporarily separate them in the group. The sharing of personal stories and feelings should be encouraged as should the sharing of political perspectives, but it pays to talk about them in different ways and at different times. This distinction is similar to the distinction between dialogue and debate.

6. *Avoid communication between members outside the group*

Members should try and avoid communication outside the group for the life of the group.

7. *Encourage an experimental attitude*

The group should be treated as an opportunity to experiment with different ways of communication and different ways of understanding people and their views.

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Conclusion: What do dialogue groups offer to the British Jewish community?

Communities can be fraught and fractious spaces. How to balance the human need for fellowship with the endless diversity of human beings is an insoluble problem that all communities grapple with. But it is reasonable to hope that divisions within communities do not cause inordinate hurt to their members and to do this, communities need to develop mechanisms through which disputes can be negotiated in ways that diffuse some of the resulting tension. Here dialogue groups can play a role.

 The experiment discussed in this paper did not produce a dialogue group model that could be easily and instantly replicated across the community. It raised - as all good experiments should - a wide variety of complex issues that running a dialogue group entails. There are important lessons here about how effective dialogue groups should be run.

What the experiment *did* produce was incontrovertible evidence that being part of a dialogue group can be *interesting*. It can force members to encounter people and views they would otherwise never encounter. It can shed light on the ways in which communication within communities work. Above all, dialogue groups offer an *opportunity* to communicate differently, to experiment with interaction with fellow Jews.

The Israel-Palestine conflict is likely to cast a long shadow over the British Jewish community for a long while to come. While they are no panacea, dialogue groups can help to show community members that there are alternatives to the fixed positions and angry exchanges that polarise the community. In short, they have the potential to demonstrate that another kind of community is possible.

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