Towards empathy

By Manthan Gadhia

We had the opportunity to listen to a powerful duo: an Israeli who stands firmly against his government's Zionist agenda, alongside a Palestinian who is a scholar of the holocaust, Hebrew, and the history of the Jewish struggle. Both have shared the experience of a deep loss—the loss of a daughter—as a result of this ongoing conflict. Together they provided a refreshing perspective, through their words and through their efforts to work together as brothers, promoting a sense of shared humanity and compassion in the face of direct atrocities felt and perpetrated by Israelis and Palestinians alike.

The take-away messages of the hour we spent with Bassam and Rami were first and foremost that we ought collectively to challenge our one-dimensional narratives about the people around us, especially when we use these narratives to define fellow humans as "other." This is the easiest way to justify hatred and conflict between individuals as well as communities. They strongly embodied, through the story of their meeting (through the "Combatants for Peace" organisation) and their shared work ever since, the difficulty of this task —to meet those we think of as "others," and to push ourselves to build a sense of shared compassion for one another. The conflict between Israel and Palestine has now been a long-standing one, but not long enough for us to forget to see each other as people, and not long enough for us to forget that violent conflict can only escalate the pain and hatred we experience, not overcome it.

If what we all desire for tomorrow is a world more peaceful than the one we live in today, the most effective way to do this is to collectively imagine the peace we want, and to work with one another to achieve it. We must acknowledge and empathise with the past traumas of those directly involved, but cannot remain solely arguing over injustices of the past, especially if it hinders our ability to ensure they are never repeated by and to the generations to follow.