

Peter Beinart Community Discussion

December 11, 2024; 7-9 pm

Objectives: To use Beinart's talks as a jumping off point to take a first step in connecting with others around the conflict in Israel/Palestine and potential pathways forward in the Middle East and among us, here in Victoria, BC. To increase capacity for coexistence, joint action, and dialogue, with awareness that building capacity takes time. To awaken wisdom and surface humanity outside this space.

- Please enter with openness and without expectation that you will agree with others or persuade them of your views.
- Let's keep our expectations modest for this first event, so that we might potentially build on success in the longer term.
- We hope you will consider this event successful if you hear a few things that make you think, can speak even just slightly more openly than you have in a public forum, and connect to one or two other people.

Agenda

7-8	-General introduction -"What brought you here this evening?" (groups of 3) -Circle guidelines -What has stuck with you from the content of Beinart's talks? (small-group circles; emphasis on collectively recalling the content of the talks)
8-9	-Two rounds of small-group topics -Closing words

Circle Ground Rules

- Speak when you have the talking piece, and then pass.
- Pass if you wish.
- About 60 seconds per turn (use your iphone if you choose)
- Speak in sequence, without cross talk.
- Speak your truth, without debating the truth of others.
- Hold space for others to speak. Listen with the ears of the heart.
- Refrain from verbal or non-verbal signals approval/disapproval after someone speaks
- When expressing your viewpoints, try to link back to Beinart's talks, for instance, by expressing agreement/disagreement with what was said in the talks
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- Trust the circle; allow for what emerges
- Facilitators will facilitate AND participate; take collective responsibility for ground rules

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Small-Group Topics for Peter Beinart Discussion

- [1. How have you changed personally and in terms of your community identity, since October 7, 2023?](#)
- [2. How might we have different, less polarized conversations here in North America?](#)
- [3. What is the Palestinian story \(firsthand Palestinian story of the Nakba\)?](#)
- [4. What is your personal history as it relates to the current conflict?](#)
- [5. What is your perspective on Beinart's support for a democratic binational state for all people in the territory?](#)
- [6. What is your perspective on the work that needs to be done, so that you can make a difference?](#)
- [7. What gives you hope?](#)
- [8. How, in a polarized world filled with trauma might we navigate complex truths and split loyalties?](#)

1. How have you changed personally and in terms of your community identity, since October 7, 2023?

Beinart shared his own story of change and transformation in the past years. Many of us have changed as well.

This small-group discussion will be a space for telling and listening to each other's stories of change.

2. How might we have different, less polarized conversations here in North America?

Beinart spoke about the contentiousness surrounding Israel/Palestine both within communities and across communities and stressed the importance of engaging with the people with whom one disagrees:

Nothing makes me happier than when I give a talk and people who fervently disagree with me come to listen, because we so often live in worlds where people only go to listen to those that they agree with. One of my favorite lines from the mishna is from Pirkei Avot, which says "Who is wise? The one who learns from all people." And it seems to me that if you're the person who goes the furthest ideological distance to listen to someone they disagree with, if you're the person in the room who disagrees with me the most strongly, then you are actually showing the greatest degree of wisdom and kind of offering a model for all of us for what we all should try to do.

Some of us believe that we, in Victoria, BC, who are not in imminent life-threatening danger, have a responsibility to model the navigation of challenging conversations. If we can't achieve that here, how can we ever expect peace to happen in Israel/Palestine?

This small-group discussion will explore ways to advance a commitment to a civil society that strives to avoid polarization here in Canada.

3. What is the Palestinian story (firsthand Palestinian story of the Nakba)?

Beinart said:

To me one of the most tragic things in organized Jewish life is that it is so rare that in Jewish institutions Palestinians are given any space to talk about their experiences So rarely in synagogues or Jewish day schools or Jewish camps or Jewish community centers do you ever have the opportunity for Palestinians simply to tell you what happened to their family in 1948, what actually happened and where was their family forced to go. What was that like for their parents and grandparents...and what did that mean for the family? What is the intergenerational trauma that has been left for them?

I think many Jews, if they hear those stories—and not just Jews—can start to really identify. That is actually something that Jews and Palestinians share—a lot of intergenerational trauma, the sense of being expelled from where you live, having to flee to another place, not really feeling at home, always feeling like your situation is precarious. That's something that Jews should be able to understand and yet our Jewish leaders rarely create environments where they give Jews the opportunity let alone encourage Jews [to listen to these stories]

This small group discussion will be led by a local Palestinian refugee who will tell his family's story, and lead discussion around the questions that emerge from this telling. While one story cannot represent all Palestinian experience, it can serve as a starting point for non-Palestinians to begin to understand the general Palestinian narrative.

4. What is your personal history as it relates to the current conflict?

Beinart advised that one way to navigate the persistent impasses we experience in seeking to discuss Israel/Palestine is to begin with our personal stories as they relate to that part of the world – whether or not we are Jewish or Palestinian.

Palestinians and Jews both have stories of intergenerational trauma. Beinart emphasized the need to listen to Palestinian stories (see the comments for Topic #3) and, referring to the Jewish experience, he said, “The Jewish desire for a Jewish state does not come from some kind of desire to be a brutalizing settler colonial oppressive population. It comes out of an interpretation of the betrayal of Europe's promise of equality to Jews, which was betrayed in the most horrifying of ways.”

This small-group discussion will be a space for listening to each others' stories, no matter what our backgrounds might be. While doing so, we ask that you, as Beinart said (quoting Naomi Klein), “be hard on ideology and soft on people”.

5. What is your perspective on Beinart's support for a democratic binational state for all people in the territory?

Beinart makes several arguments for this proposed solution, including:

- Fundamental morality and a belief in equity. A Jewish state intrinsically creates second-class citizens whose living conditions and dignity are compromised
- "I really ultimately believe that Israelis will be safer and will flourish more under conditions of legal equality than under conditions of a very brutal state ... The harsh reality is that when you inflict tremendous amounts of violence on people, ... that violence imperils everybody."
- "I feel safe in America because I believe this is a country that is at least trying to treat people equally through a legal basis under the law ... If I believe in that principle so importantly for my Jewish family here, why do I believe it could not work for Jews in Israel?"
- Based on the South African experience, questioning of the Jewish fear that such a state would lead to violence against Jews.
- Questioning of what a narrative that positions Jews as powerless without a state. "Jews are not powerless in the USA."
- Political science literature that suggests that "divided societies are more peaceful for everybody when everyone has a voice in government and are more violent when one group is locked out politically."
- Flaws in the two-state solution including preventing the return of Palestinians to their homes and the need to maintain a Jewish majority. "There is something absurd about us (Jews), of all people, who cherish the desire of return and have kept alive this flame for 2,000 years...We are going to tell Palestinians who were forced from Ramallah or Lod or Haifa or Safed 75 years ago that they're supposed to abandon their desire to return to these places? We are the last people on Earth who should be telling another group of people to do that."

This small-group discussion will focus on exploring your perspectives on Beinart's chosen democratic binational state solution.

6. What is your perspective on the work that needs to be done, so that you can make a difference?

When asked what work we should do to make a difference, Beinart advised, “I think to have the energy to sustain this kind of work you have to be doing work that really feels right to you. I think the truth is it's hard to gauge how successful a movement is. History takes so many unpredictable turns. You never know who's watching and you never know who might be influenced by the work that you're doing.”

At the same time, Beinart acknowledged that certain actions, which he frames as a “militant nonviolent resistance” are needed in order to promote change. He advocates for there being economic, cultural and social costs to Israel for maintaining the status quo, because “I don't want those costs to be in blood and I desperately don't want those costs to come to be in Israeli lives.”

In terms of dialogue and education, he suggested that work within our own communities and work that speaks “more explicitly to a universalistic kind of discourse” are both important.

This small-group discussion will explore that sweet spot between the work you believe can make a difference and the work you perceive you are well suited to pursue.

7. What gives you hope?

Beinart provided some hopeful words when he said to those who are engaged in activism, “You already are part of a cohort of people that is producing huge shifts in public opinion and in public discourse.”

He drew a parallel to the US Abolitionist movement in the 1800s, reminding us that the work done in the 1820s was essential to the eventual abolition of slavery in 1865: “Even if you don't have the good fortune, the *cavod*, to be in the generation that actually witnesses the liberation of Palestinians—and I believe the mutual liberation of Jews, because I believe that actually Palestinian liberation is also our (Jewish) liberation—you can actually keep something alive, you keep a flame alive for some future moment that you can't that you can't predict.”

This small-group discussion will explore what *you* perceive as sources of hope. It will include consideration of what personally feeds you and keeps you going.

8.. How, in a polarized world filled with trauma might we navigate complex truths and split loyalties?

Beinart has been accused – including during question period at UVIC – of underplaying the trauma of October 7 and the need for Jews to protect themselves against violence. On the second night at UVIC, Beinart was asked about antisemitism, and he stated that, in his view, it is definitively on the rise.

Beinart views Jewish and Palestinian fates as intertwined and considers that, ultimately Jews will be safer through ensuring Palestinian safety and self-determination. He takes a stance which condemns *all* violence against civilians.

He also acknowledged his own struggles in navigating moral complexity (e.g. going beyond saying “both sides are right and wrong” and, instead, taking a moral stance) as well as a division of loyalties (e.g. feeling unable to speak out of fear of alienating those we care about). He spoke of how he has the names of the hostages on his refrigerator and also how slow and frightening his journey was towards taking his current positions, in part due to fear of repercussions from many people he cares about and institutions that are precious to him.

This small-group discussion will explore how to navigate the complexity of the current situation.