

Teaching the *Promises* Role Play

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My 11th grade students at Portland's Franklin High School were captivated by the young people in *Promises*. The film entered them into the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians with greater intimacy than other parts of my Israel-Palestine curriculum. I wanted to take advantage of how well students felt that they knew Moishe, Faraj, Daniel & Yarko, Shlomo, Mahmoud, and Sanabel, the youngsters whose families they had spent time with while watching *Promises*.

The premise of this role play is that the youngsters in *Promises* have grown up. In small groups, students attempt to take on the personas of the *Promises* young people and to wrestle with some of the actual questions that confront anyone hoping to achieve a lasting peace in Palestine-Israel.

Here are some brief instructions for the role play.

Materials Needed:

- A class set of "A Roadmap to Peace?"
- Sufficient copies of the *Promises* roles so that each student within a particular group has a copy
- Six Placards that students can label with the name of the individual(s) they'll be portraying
- Markers

Suggested Procedure

1. All students should have watched *Promises* as background to the role play. Students might write interior monologues from the standpoint of one of the characters in the film, or they might write a dialogue poem from the standpoint of two of the individuals in the film. (See "*Promises* Writing" for additional writing approaches students might take. Also see the *Promises* teaching guide for an example from a Franklin High School student.)
2. Tell students to imagine that the young people they met in *Promises* are going to come together to attempt to develop a "peace plan" to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Each of them will portray an individual they met in the film, and through negotiation and conversation will propose ways to deal with issues that thus far have been obstacles to peace and justice.

3. Count students off into six groups and have students form small circles around the room.
4. Distribute one set of roles to each group—i.e., all students in a group receive the same role.
5. Ask students to read these aloud or to themselves. Ask them to underline anything that might suggest possible “solutions” to the conflicts there. After students finish reading, they should discuss any these.
6. Distribute a copy of “A Roadmap to Peace?” to every student. Working in their small groups, students should read each question and discuss possible answers. As an alternative, it might be helpful to go over the questions as a full class, especially if students do not have a good grasp of the history. Remind them that they should attempt to remain in their role as they answer these questions. Tell students: “Make sure that each of you writes down each proposal. Try to make it as specific as possible. Remember, you’re trying to come up with a route to peace – and to justice. Don’t abandon your role, but on the other hand, remember that you want to try to reach some kind of agreement, if at all possible.”
7. As students discuss these in their small groups, circulate throughout the class and help students brainstorm ideas and clarify any historical points they might have.
8. Give students the opportunity to hold an informal negotiation session. Ask students to choose half their group as “traveling negotiators” and to move either individually or as a team to other groups to see if they might “build alliances”—work through differences or imagine new proposals. Note that it is important that travelers not meet with other travelers, that they circulate only to other students who remain seated with their groups. This is to prevent travelers from huddling together throughout the classroom and leaving remaining students in small groups with no one to speak with. A different, more sedate way to handle the negotiation session is to have travelers rotate from group to group for a specified period of time. After three sessions, members of every group will have met and discussed issues.
9. My preference for the large group assembly is to not overly script it. I simply take the issues one by one and ask for proposals and discussion, and after discussion we bring these to a vote. I tell students that whichever group makes a proposal should be prepared to speak about why they think that proposal is fair and will lead to peace. If you have introduced students to a modified version of parliamentary procedure, this is an opportunity to practice that, but the assembly works fine if it’s run more informally by the teacher. Display any agreements as they are reached.

10. Follow the assembly by asking students to write on whether the agreements reached in class could be implemented and how hopeful they are that these would, in fact, lead to a lasting peace. Encourage students to offer not just conclusions, but to explain what their opinions are based on—e.g., what they saw in *Promises* and other aspects of their Palestine-Israel curriculum, what they know from the media, what they know from their own personal experiences trying to work through conflicts, etc. Use this writing as the basis for a class discussion.
11. In the discussion, ask students to evaluate the *Promises* Peace Conference decisions—and/or lack of decisions. Do any of these offer hope for the future? If no decisions were reached in the Peace Conference, why was it so difficult to reach agreement? Who might resist any of the agreements that you reached? Would the United States government support or oppose any of the agreements reached in class?

A Road Map to Peace?

Recently, the President of the United States once again announced that soon the administration would turn its attention to creating a “road map to peace” between Israelis and Palestinians. But what could such a road map look like?

Imagine that the youngsters from *Promises*, today in their 20s, tried to fashion such a road map. In your small group, representing one of these young people, come up with a “Peace Plan” that you would support. Afterwards, you will have a chance to meet with members of the other groups to build alliances toward a peace conference of all the *Promises* young people. Come up with proposals to deal with the following difficult issues. Be as imaginative and as audacious as you like.

1. What rights should the Palestinian refugees have? Currently, Israel allows none of the Palestinian refugees to return to Israel. They are not allowed to claim the land that was once theirs, even if it is unoccupied. Israel has not compensated refugees for the loss of their homes, the possessions and the lands they lost in 1948. Some people maintain that this is all in the past, that there was a war between Zionists (people who wanted to create Israel for Jews) and Palestinian Arabs and the Zionists won. These people believe that Palestinian refugees left on their own and are not entitled to anything. Others believe that Palestinian refugees are still refugees who are entitled to return; in many cases they still have the deeds to their land and the keys to their homes. They say that according to UN Resolution 194, refugees should be allowed to return to their lands and/or offered compensation for their expropriation by Israel. In fact, Israel’s admission to the United Nations was conditioned on Israel’s acceptance of Resolution 194. They also point out that to say that the refugees left of their own free will is misleading, that clearly Israeli armed forces were attempting to drive them out of their homes and off their land. About 750,000 people were turned into refugees, and they and their children and grandchildren still consider themselves homeless. Currently, there are about 4.9 million Palestinian refugees.

2. What should be the status of Jerusalem? Israelis say that after the 1967 war, Jerusalem was “united.” All of Jerusalem – Israeli west Jerusalem and Arab east Jerusalem – came under the control of Israel. (East Jerusalem had been administered by the Arab country of Jordan before the 1967 war.) Israel established Jerusalem as its capital. Palestinians consider east Jerusalem as their capital city. East Jerusalem also contains the “old city of Jerusalem,” including the Jewish Quarter and the Western (or Wailing) Wall (the sacred site where we saw Jews praying and inserting written prayers in *Promises*.) The old city of Jerusalem also contains the Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, sites sacred to all Muslims; and it contains the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, a site sacred to all Christians. At the present time, Israel controls checkpoints between the rest of the West Bank and Jerusalem, and for what it calls

security reasons has more and more frequently not allowed Palestinians to travel the short distance between the Occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem. Israel has also surrounded Arab east Jerusalem with Jewish-only Israeli settlements, cutting east Jerusalem off from the West Bank.

3. What should be the status of the West Bank and Gaza, currently occupied by Israel? The West Bank and Gaza were and are overwhelmingly Palestinian, and represent 22 percent of what was originally Palestine. They were seized by Israel during the 1967 war. The West Bank had been administered by Jordan, and Gaza had been administered by Egypt. (Israel also seized the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt and the Golan Heights from Syria during this war.) The UN Security Council in Resolution 242 emphasized “the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war and the need to work for a just and lasting peace in which every State in the area can live in security...” The resolution called for a “just and lasting peace,” based on “Withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict,” and that all parties should recognize the political independence “of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force.”

More than 40 years later, the West Bank and Gaza are still occupied by Israel. Israel has also encouraged tens of thousands of Jewish settlers to build homes on land conquered in the 1967 war. About 500,000 Israelis live in the West Bank and east Jerusalem. A number of these settlers are there for religious reasons, like Moishe and his family, but many more are there simply because the Israeli government offers housing subsidies and other benefits to settlers. In the 1990s, polls of West Bank Jewish settlers indicated that they would be willing to give up their homes if they were properly compensated. In 2005, Israel evacuated the last of more than 8,000 settlers from Gaza; they were given money and resettled within Israel. However, Israel continues to expand settlements in the West Bank. These settlers live in Jewish-only towns, travel on Jewish-only roads, and are subject to Israeli laws (Palestinians have harsher military occupation laws applied to them). Moreover, Israel is building a high wall deep inside the West Bank that seems to separate most of the settlers from most of the Palestinians.

4. Should the United States give aid to either the Israelis or Palestinians—or to both of them? If so, what kind of aid? The United States currently provides enormous amounts of aid to Israel — as it has for years; Israel is the largest total recipient of U.S. aid since 1945. About \$1.8 billion of military aid and \$1.2 billion of economic aid go to Israel every year. This is more than 20 percent of the total of all the foreign aid that the United States gives throughout the world. The U.S. provides everything from F-16s to attack helicopters, to tanks, to tear gas to armored bulldozers. Many Israelis feel that this aid is legitimate because Israel is threatened by its neighbors and also by Palestinian violence. Israel argues that it has always been a staunch ally of the United States and is the only vital, functioning democracy in the Middle East. Meanwhile, the United States sometimes gives Palestinians \$200 million a year. Many Palestinians argue that the United States is not an “honest broker” in this conflict, and that it is blatantly in favor of Israel. Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, illegally

occupies the West Bank, Gaza, east Jerusalem, the Golan Heights – and kills and terrorizes civilians with home demolitions, poison gas attacks, firing live ammunition without warning, deportations, detention without trial, and torture. Palestinians point out that despite all these human rights abuses by Israel, the United States still lavishes aid on the country and hardly ever even criticizes the Israeli government.

Could U.S. money go to anything that would support a peaceful and just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Think creatively.

5. What additional ideas or proposals can you make to bring about a peace and just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis?

Roles:

Moishe – West Bank Jewish Settlers

Peace. Sure, you'd like to have peace between Israel and the Palestinians. But this is not your biggest objective in life. What you care most about is "Eretz Israel" – the security of greater Israel, the land given to you by God.

You live in Beit El settlement in Judea and Samaria, the area that some people call the West Bank. There is nothing secure about this place. When you were younger your best friend, Ephraim, was killed in a terrorist attack. He was minding his own business, driving on the road from Jerusalem to the settlement and he was shot by Palestinians. Killed. Just like that. Ephraim's death was perhaps the most important event in your life. If you weren't convinced before then, his murder convinced you that true security could only be found when the Palestinians were gone. "Transfer" is the polite term that is used in political discussions. Whatever it's called doesn't matter to you. What matters is that they are gotten rid of. Look, there are something like 22 Arab countries – Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, etc. – why can't any of these Arab countries accept the Palestinians? They all speak Arabic, they are all Islamic countries. Jews have only one country: Israel. Only one country with Hebrew as the official language.

Palestinians say that this is their land, that they were pushed out of Israel in 1948 and forced to live in refugee camps. They say that Israel is illegally occupying Gaza and the West Bank, that this land was stolen during the 1967 war. In the movie *Promises*, Faraj and his grandmother are sitting down going over all the deeds to their home in their village – from the 1930s and the 1940s. Look, none of that makes any difference. How can a deed, written by men, compare with the word of God? It's right there in the Torah, as you showed BZ in the movie: And God said, "I will give this land to you and your descendants." God wasn't talking to Faraj's ancestors, he was talking to yours. That one line establishes your entitlement to the land of Israel.

You know that in 2005, all 8,500 Jewish settlers in Gaza were evacuated from there by Israeli soldiers. You know that they were compensated with money and that they found other places in Israel to live. But you will never allow the army to move you. You are glad that the Israeli government seems to be continuing to encourage building of settlements in the West Bank.

Is there room for compromise? Can Jews and Palestinians live together? You don't know, but you doubt it. First thing, the Palestinians would have to stop the violence, get rid of terrorists as their leaders. You could imagine a situation where the Palestinians could continue to live in their villages in the West Bank and Gaza, peacefully, but only if they accepted the right of the settlers to also live in peace in Eretz Israel. They'd have to agree to allow the army to stay in the West Bank – because anywhere there are Jews in Israel, the army has a right to be there, too. They'd have to agree that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, and not *their* capital. They can continue to pray at the mosques, but Jerusalem is the Jewish capital and is not to be shared.

Really, it would be so much easier if the Palestinians were not in Israel at all. The best thing would be if someone could convince them that they would lead happier, more secure, more peaceful lives if they were somewhere else. Maybe there will never be peace.

Faraj – Deheisheh Refugee Camp, West Bank

Can there be peace between Arabs and Israelis? Only if first there is justice. In 1948 your family was driven out of your home in the village of Ras Abu Ammar. Your family was forced into a crowded refugee camp in the West Bank. Israel then proceeded to demolish your village. Why? Because they wanted to send several messages to the Palestinian people: 1. You will never return to your land. 2. We now own your land; forget that you ever lived here. 3. We Israelis are powerful, you Palestinians are weak. Get used to it.

There are some who say that Palestinians should settle for the West Bank and Gaza as a new Palestinian state. But, for you, this leaves the most important question unresolved: What about the refugees? What's to become of you? You grew up hearing your grandmother talk about every detail of Ras Abu Ammar – about the olive trees, the almond trees, the valleys and rolling hills. This is where the family had lived for generations. Like so many other Palestinians, your grandmother kept the enormous key to her home. It's a treasure that will be passed from generation to generation until Palestinians have won the right to return. By contrast, your grandmother curses the day Deheisheh refugee camp was established. She has lived there more than 50 years – yes, more than 50 years – but she still feels like a foreigner, a stranger in a strange land. Another important fact to remember about the refugee situation: UN Resolution 194 states that “refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return.” International law is on your side.

Hearing your grandmother's stories about Ras Abu Ammar, you feel like you were born there. However, in reality, the first time you visited Ras Abu Ammar was when BZ sneaked you and your grandmother into Israel and you got to drive to the village. As crowded as it is, as dirty as it is, as dangerous as it is, Deheisheh refugee camp is your home. The part of you that is not convinced you'll ever be allowed to move back to Ras Abu Ammar is also the part that wants an independent and free West Bank, with no Jewish settlers and their special roads, with no Israeli soldiers, no bulldozers, no curfews, no arrests in the middle of the night, and no one stealing your water.

Yes, water – a commodity more valuable than oil, at least as far as you're concerned. Look at the statistics. Israeli settlers on the West Bank use enormous amounts of water. And whose water is it? All resources on the West Bank belong to the Palestinians. The settlers are just colonists, stealing your land and resources.

Daniel and Yarko, West Jerusalem

You are Israeli Jews living in West Jerusalem. You long for the day when you can simply ride the bus and not worry about a terrorist bomb exploding. You want to live without fear. You want to lead a normal life.

Palestinians tell Jews: Go back to where you came from. But this *is* where you came from; you were born here in West Jerusalem. You are not like those fanatics who move to the West Bank to claim Palestinian lands for a greater “Eretz Israel.” In fact, you’re not particularly religious at all. When you were a youngster, you remember telling BZ in the film *Promises* that you were more afraid of a lot of the religious Jews who prayed at the Wailing Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem than you were of Palestinians. You get tired of Jews from places like Brooklyn who move to Israel and go to the West Bank settlements for ideological reasons. They just try to stir things up and fight with Palestinians.

Jews like you ended up in Israel because of the Holocaust. The Nazis put your grandfather in a concentration camp. After the war, it was hard for Jews to get into the United States or Great Britain, but easy to get into Palestine, what became Israel. This became the only country in the world where it would be forever safe for Jews – no more pogroms, no more extermination camps, no more discrimination of any kind. The right-wingers in Israel are forever saying that the Arabs have 22 countries they can go to, the Jews have just one; so why don’t the Palestinians go to one of those 22 Arab countries? You don’t take that kind of hardline position. You believe that some kind of agreement could be worked out. But whatever agreement is negotiated, would have to guarantee that you would still have your own country. The Palestinian demand that Jerusalem should be the capital of an Arab Palestine could threaten your home.

Shlomo, Jewish Quarter, Old City of Jerusalem

You were not born in Israel. You were born in the United States, son of a prominent rabbi. Your father decided to relocate to Israel, the only Jewish homeland in the world. He didn't do this to oppress Palestinians, to occupy their land, or to knock down their homes. He did it because this is where he could truly come home to his people, to your people. Because of the Law of Return, all Jews anywhere are automatically Israeli citizens when they come to live in Israel, so it was easy for your family to come and take up residence.

You live in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, which is in what was formerly Jordanian-controlled east Jerusalem. When the Arabs controlled this part of Jerusalem, no Jews in Israel could get in to pray at the Wailing Wall. This is a holy site to all Jews and this is why your family has come to live in this particular place in the world. Palestinians say that east Jerusalem ought to be their capital. But where would that leave you? A Jewish enclave surrounded by Palestinian soldiers in a Palestinian state? No thank you.

The Old City of Jerusalem is occupied by the Israeli army. You are a yeshiva student preparing to be a rabbi – so you will not be required to serve in the army. However, you are thankful that the army is in the Old City. If not for them you would be even more tormented by the Palestinian children who resent Jews and try to pick fights if they have a chance. It's true, Jews pick fights too, but it's the Palestinians you fear.

Judaism is a religion that emphasizes justice. You have no desire to oppress anyone and you would like to see a just resolution to this conflict between Jews and Arabs. Now, oddly, you feel relatively safe. Because you live surrounded by Arabs, no other Arab country will shoot a missile into your neighborhood. But you are also surrounded by the Israeli army, one of the most powerful in the world, and the soldiers are here to make sure that you are safe. So this is what you would like to see: Justice – but with security.

You learned in school that the Arabs have 22 countries for themselves – places like Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. The Jews have only one: Israel. It's true that unlike you, the Palestinians were born here. But sometimes you think that it would just be easier for everyone if a rich country like the United States could just pay for the Palestinians to go to other Arab countries.

Mahmoud, East Jerusalem

Every day your heart hurts. Foreigners are controlling your country. Before 1948 when the Jews conquered most of Israel and drove Palestinians off their land and into refugee camps, this was all Arab land. There was no Israel, only Palestine – a Palestine that had been colonized and bullied by the British. A Palestine where Muslims, Christians, and Jews all lived in relative peace as neighbors. All you want is to live in your own independent country.

In your eyes, the entire state of Israel is illegal and illegitimate. Originally, in 1947 the UN established the state of Israel on about half the land it has now. What gave the UN any right to take land away from Palestinian Arabs and give it to Israeli Jews? But the Israelis went beyond what the UN had granted them, and used terror and military force to push 750,000 people out of their homes, and stole that land for an expanded Israel. As far as you're concerned, the whole of Israel belongs to Palestinians.

You live in predominantly Arab east Jerusalem. From 1948 until 1967, east Jerusalem was administered by Jordan. Then Israel conquered the whole of your city. You are now cut off from other Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza by a system of checkpoints and by the 26-foot high Israeli Wall that cuts through the West Bank. In order to travel to visit with other Palestinians, you need to wait in line for hours to get through checkpoints. You can't go to Gaza. You can't meet with Faraj in the Deheisheh refugee camp (and he needs a hard-to-get permit from the Israelis to visit you) or go to cultural events in Ramallah in the West Bank. In east Jerusalem, the Israelis regularly shut down Palestinian organizations and raid the homes of activists. In some ways, you are "privileged," because you can go to places in Israel that other Palestinians can't get to. But even these privileges make you feel cut off from your own people. You do not want privileges that are not shared by other Palestinians.

In *Promises*, there is a scene that shows jubilant Israelis dancing down the street, celebrating the theft of your country. It makes you feel so bitter to see this. You're not sure what is politically possible, and perhaps it is only a dream to wish that the state of Israel would just disappear and that all of Palestine would once again be for the Palestinians. But at the least you demand an independent Palestinian state, where all Palestinians are able to travel freely and meet with each other.

Sanabel, Jabalya Refugee Camp, Gaza*

Can there be peace between Arabs and Jews? Only if first there is justice. In 1948 your family was driven out of your home in the village of Mayroon, near the Lebanese border. Your family was forced into a crowded refugee camp in Gaza. Israel then proceeded to demolish your village. Why? Because they wanted to send several messages to the Palestinian people: 1. You will never return to your land. 2. We now own your land; forget that you ever lived here. 3. We Israelis are powerful, you Palestinians are weak. Get used to it.

Well, it has been very hard to get used to Gaza – one of the most crowded places on earth, especially in the refugee camps. You have never been to the village of your family, although you have grown up hearing so many stories that by now you can close your eyes and vividly picture every house, every tree. But the only time you are allowed into what is now Israel is to visit your father, who is imprisoned by the Israelis, even though he has never been convicted of a crime. On visiting days, you ride a Red Cross bus with all the other prisoners' families for several hours, wait several more in the hot sun with no bathrooms available, yell to your father through a wire mesh fence for 30 minutes, and then get on the bus to travel back to Jabalya refugee camp in Gaza.

Ever since the Israeli government evacuated the 8,500 Jewish Israeli settlers in 2005, Israel has seemed to feel especially free to attack Gaza whenever it wants to. The winter of 2008-09, and November of 2012 saw particularly large offensives, but almost every week, it seems that Israeli soldiers invade Gaza and shoot someone. The United Nations says that Israel has used chemical weapons illegally and you yourself saw the white phosphorus burns on several of your neighbors. Some people call Palestinians “terrorists”, but Israel is terrorizing you.

In some families, they have as many as 20 or more people sleeping on mats in one room. Your family is a little more well-off, so you are not so crowded where you live, but conditions even for the “middle class” in Gaza are getting increasingly difficult. It used to be that people – the “lucky” people – could get jobs in Israel, mostly as laborers of one kind or another. Now, almost no one is allowed into Israel, supposedly because of fears of “terrorism.” Israel complains that the militant political party Hamas is in control of Gaza, but you elected Hamas democratically. Hamas has promised to fight the Israeli occupation. When Israel refuses to let in shipments from Europe or Egypt of food or goods, you wonder whether or not the Israelis are intentionally trying to starve the Palestinians, hoping that Palestinians will be reduced to such poverty and misery that they will accept any “peace plan” that the Israelis foist on them. According to the World Bank, unemployment in the Occupied Territories is about 50 percent, even higher in Gaza. According to the U.S. Agency for International Development, Palestinian children now suffer rates of malnutrition that are higher than in Bangladesh and Somalia. Life here has never been so bad.

***Note:** As you will remember, Sanabel actually lives in the West Bank refugee camp of Deheisheh. For the purposes of the role play, I've taken the liberty of moving her to a refugee camp in Gaza.

***Promises* Writing**

Assignment: Try to engage with the issues that are raised in *Promises* in a way that is creative and leads to greater insight.

There are many possible ways to come at this assignment:

- **Dialogue Poem.** Write a dialogue poem between two of the kids in the video, between you and one of the kids in the video, between the same kid at different points in their life, between BZ (the filmmaker) and one of the kids, between someone we've studied this year and one of the kids, etc. This is wide open. Use your imagination.
- **Conversation.** Write a conversation between two people. Think of the same situations as in the dialogue poem choices above. In the conversation, you would have the individuals actually responding to one another. Perhaps write the conversation between two of the kids after they finish watching *Promises*. Or imagine Yarko and Daniel as 18 year olds; write their conversation about whether or not to resist military service in the Occupied Territories. Write a conversation between you and another student after watching the video. Write a conversation between one of the Israelis and one of the Palestinians about a recent suicide bombing or about the killing of Rachel Corrie by the Israeli army bulldozer driver.
- **Letter.** Write a letter from you to one of the kids in the video. Write a letter from one of the kids to another of the kids in the video, or between one of the kids and his/her parent. Imagine you're a Palestinian filmmaker. Write a letter to BZ critiquing his film and telling him about the film that you would have made had you had his resources and access.
- **Interior Monologue.** Write an interior monologue from the standpoint of any character or object in the video. Try to think of some of the characters that were not central to the video — e.g., Moishe's sister, Faraj's grandmother, Daniel and Yarko's grandfather.
- **Critical Review.** Write a critical review of *Promises*.
- **Mix and match any of these ideas.** Come up with another way to approach this assignment that my teacher brain was not able to come up with.