Finding “Common Ground” in Israel/Palestine:  
Facilitating dialogue about the past, present and future of a land  
and its people through archaeological training and fieldwork

Statement of Intent

This initiative seeks to promote dialogue and understanding between Palestinian and Israeli youth through a collective exploration of shared cultural heritage. It stems from my work as a graduate student in U.C. Berkeley’s department of Near Eastern Studies and experience conducting field research in the region over the last decade. In 2010, I founded and currently direct the Society for Humanitarian Archaeological Research and Exploration (SHARE), a not-for-profit organization made up of students, professors, members of government, industry and everyday people who believe in the intrinsic value of archaeological research, its relevance to modern political discourse, and its potential as a transformative power in ethnic and territorial conflicts.

We believe the first steps towards a meaningful and lasting peace begin with dialogue and understanding at the most basic level. Our organization seeks to actively engage young people on all sides of a conflict by providing archaeological training in the field as well as an unbiased, neutral setting within which participants may engage with the past, the present and one another on their own terms.

Over the past year, I have developed and refined our field curriculum for use in Israel/Palestine in conjunction with our organization’s Israeli and Palestinian partner institutions. Resources provided by the University of Minnesota’s Center for Restorative Justice and Peace Making have been paired with Harvard University’s archaeological field school at Ashkelon, Israel to create a program that will provide structure and training for students while remaining explicitly non-partisan and participant-driven. After careful planning and consultation, we are now ready to put these ideas into practice, and seek the financial means to do so.

Why Archaeology?

Perhaps more than in any other country, the practice of archaeology in Israel/Palestine has strong ties to modern identity and cultural patrimony. In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, archaeology has frequently been politically employed by both sides in an effort to establish or refute ties to the past, consequently reinforcing the “legitimacy” of each side’s position in the present.¹ For these reasons, archaeology in the region continues to be a highly controversial practice, and often practitioners either avoid or dismiss the political ramifications of their work.²

Instead of downplaying these facts, this initiative maintains that archaeology can provide a unique opportunity for meaningful dialogue, precisely because of this privileged (and often contentious) position it occupies in the socio-political arena. What is more, the highly physical, complicated and goal-oriented nature of archaeological fieldwork requires cooperation and teamwork on a continual basis. These attributes foster camaraderie and the creation of meaningful, lasting relationships between individuals in the field.

Program participants will also take away an enriching, educational experience that in and of itself makes the initiative worthwhile. The program fulfills the field school requirement of many Israeli and Palestinian departments of archaeology, and university credit is available through Harvard University. Archaeology remains a viable career path in Israel/Palestine, giving the program an added dimension of vocational training and introduction to a number of career possibilities.

Project Goals

- Facilitate dialog between Israeli and Palestinian youth by conducting an intensive three-week archaeological field-school at Ashkelon, Israel in conjunction with Harvard, Birzeit and Hebrew Universities.
- Provide educational and vocational training opportunities for participants

¹ Abu el-Haj, 2001
² See Trigger, 1989; Kohl and Fawcett, 1995; Meskell, 1998; McGuire, 2008
• Give American field-school students the opportunity to benefit first-hand from Israeli and Palestinian perspectives
• Cultivate contacts and renewable sources of funding in the region, laying the foundation for future seasons

**Project Description**

Two Palestinian students from Birzeit University and two Israeli students from Hebrew University will be selected from a pool of applicants to participate in Harvard University’s 3-week archaeological field school at Ashkelon. Room, board and program fees will be covered by the program, and participants will live and work together for the duration, fulfilling all field school requirements. Among the archaeological field schools operating in Israel/Palestine, Harvard’s program at Ashkelon ranks among the highest, thanks to its use of cutting-edge methodology, its excellent evening lecture series, hotel accommodations, field trips and emphasis on teaching and instruction. Ashkelon, seaport of the biblical Philistines (who would later give their name to the region, “Palestine”) serves as the perfect geographic and cultural setting to implement the program. Participants will be encouraged to discuss the nature of Philistine identity through hands-on experience excavating and conserving material culture and by examining questions and problems arising from textual and cultural interpretations. Having worked as an excavation supervisor at Ashkelon for the past five years, I can personally attest to the quality of instruction, and I have longstanding relationships with Harvard, Birzeit and Hebrew universities, all of whom have enthusiastically agreed to participate.

A key element of the proposed curriculum is providing an unbiased, non-intrusive setting where participants will engage with the past and each other according to their own prerogatives. Instead of dictating the terms of their interaction, the daily framework of the field school will provide participants with both hands on archaeological training as well as a neutral setting for dialogue about the past and present. That said, the curriculum is also designed to provide a sound structure within which that dialogue may take place, through weekly discussions, fieldtrips and projects. Having a background in both excavation and facilitating intercultural dialogue, I will administer the program and its activities at each stage. What is more, while SHARE lacks the resources to underwrite this project in its entirety, it has pledged matching funds up to $6000, effectively doubling the number of Israeli and Palestinian students who will participate from four to eight.

**Expectations and Evaluation**

By achieving the concrete objectives above, this initiative has the potential to make an immediate deep and tangible difference in the lives of young Israelis and Palestinians. As with all opportunities for exchange and dialogue however, the full extent of the initiative’s effect lies in the long-term, and the benefits to participants as well as their American field school counterparts are incalculable. That said, entry and exit interviews with each student will be conducted, and with this feedback, we will continue to improve the program, incorporating new elements that will make the program that much more valuable for seasons to come. In this way, we seek to provide Israeli and Palestinian youth with the tools, training and opportunity to collectively seek out common ground—both figuratively and literally.