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'Sensitive and fragile' dynamics of peace
In Rutgers Arab-Israeli conflict class, students simulate Middle East negotiations

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Aware of the limitations of learning about conflict resolution from the pages of a textbook, Professor Muli Peleg decided to give the students in his "Arab-Israeli Conflict" class a taste of the real thing.

"Conflict resolution needs to be experimented, not just theoretical," Muli Peleg, the Schusterman Visiting Scholar in Israel Studies at the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life at Rutgers University, told The Jewish State.

So on April 26, the first day of their final assignment, the 72-student class divided into their assigned groups, each representing the conflict's relevant parties: Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Syria-Lebanon, Jordan, the United States, the United Nations, and the European community. In each subsequent class, the groups will split, convene with their counterparts, and try to hash out a resolution.

In the group representing the United States, the question of Jerusalem's status came up. One student, alluding to a "West Wing" episode he recently saw, suggested designating the Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem as a Palestinian "embassy." The group agreed that this loophole would resolve the stalemate between the two sides on the question Jerusalem's status. Another student, skeptical of this proposal, wondered who would be responsible for the area's security, the Israelis or the Palestinians.

"I haven't finished the season yet," the first student answered.

In another plenary session, the Syria-Lebanon group discussed their primary goals: possession of the Golan Heights and, more intangibly, their desire to be included in the process.

In the United Nations group, the question of a Palestinian "right of return" arose. The group, after a few minutes of debate, decided to opt for reparations instead.

For Peleg, the lesson of the assignment is found not in the result, but rather in the process.

"Actual success is not whether they reach an agreement," he said. "Success is whether they adhere to the principles they studied and whether they have a good rapport at the negotiating table."

Peleg, who has facilitated this same program at universities throughout the world, observed that the simulation differs depending on those students involved.

In Israel and Egypt, for example, the students are initially "more confrontational and rigid" before becoming open to alternative ideas. In the East Coast, by contrast, students tend to be more ready to compromise from the outset, he said.

Likening conflict resolution to a chess match, Peleg said that a negotiator needs to be three steps ahead -- know not only what your next move is, but what the other side's will be, and your reaction.

But conflict negotiation is not always a rational endeavor, devoid of emotion, Peleg noted.

"In negotiations, everything is so sensitive and fragile," said Peleg, who has previously worked on Israeli peace negotiating teams in which they would hold similar simulations in order to prepare.

What you hear on the radio on the way to a negotiating session can completely alter the dynamics of the day, he said; the day's news, whether a terrorist explosion or Jewish settler unrest, can effect the direction of negotiations.

"It's then an entirely different game," he added.

The challenge of negotiations is "to identify correctly what is the mood, and where we are heading in the group," Peleg explained. If a session's participants are hostile, one might have to be more aggressive, whereas if not, a more conciliatory approach might be more appropriate. A negotiator, he suggested, must be willing to constantly reassess his methods as well as "be flexible and resilient." "What will happen is not written in stone," Peleg said. "It's so volatile and so easy to breakdown in a minutes notice. That's why it is so frustrating."