



# Beyond peace: Media encounters between Israeli Jews and Palestinians as a new potential for connection in the face of violent conflict

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## Abstract

Peace is usually studied by looking at nation-states. Recently, peace scholars have become interested in peace found in the everyday lives of ordinary people. Focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I argue that media scholars can contribute to this effort because they are well-equipped to capture fleeting manifestations of everyday peace. However, the problematic legacy of peace in Israel/Palestine necessitates a different conceptual framework. I highlight encounters in and through media between Israeli Jews and Palestinians and contend that they present opportunities for constructive dialogue. I demonstrate this point by analyzing the Israeli television show *Arab Labor*, focusing on its production process, and the plight of Jewish and Palestinian characters on the show. By fusing text and context, I suggest that media do not persuade people to believe in peace; instead, media encounters, both on and off the screen, function as cultural forums for discussing complex issues undergirding violent conflicts.

## Keywords

cultural forum, everyday peace, industry studies, Israel/Palestine, media encounters, television studies

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## **The problem with state-centered approaches to peace in Israel/Palestine**

Peace is traditionally studied in international relations (IR), which cohered as a discipline in the US during the Cold War. In the bipolar international system, peace was conceived as an outcome of a balance of power (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1988); after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, new theories became more popular, describing peace as a derivative of democratic regimes (Deudney and Ikenberry, 1999; Russett, 1993). While disagreeing on how power works, how the nature of regimes shapes policy, or whether values matter in international politics, most IR theories devote their attention to states and their officials as the conceivers and executors of peace. The Eurocentric, state-centric bias of the discipline (Kayaoglu, 2010), coupled with an increase in civil or intrastate wars (Holsti, 2016), necessitates a theoretical reconsideration of peace.

The theorization of the intractable Israeli-Palestinian situation requires such intervention. After over a century of violent conflict (Morris, 1999), Israeli and Palestinian leaders signed the Oslo Accords in September 1993, which should have led to a two-state solution. The plan adhered to the logic of peace through nation-states – the physical separation of Jewish and Palestinian communities living in two distinct political entities. However, Israel, the powerful side in the negotiations, was reluctant to cede territory and authority to the Palestinians, insisting on an interim agreement that allowed it to undermine the possibility of an independent Palestine, mainly through the expansion of Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories (Anziska, 2018), which gradually led to the demise of a solution that was flawed from its conception (Lustick, 2019).

Even if Palestinians living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were divorced from Israel politically, their brothers and sisters who hold Israeli citizenship would still need to find a way to live in Israel as an ethnic minority. Israeli Palestinians live a paradoxical life: while carving independent cultural spaces for themselves within Israel and identifying with the Palestinian demand for self-determination, young Israeli Palestinians are increasingly integrated into Israeli society. They communicate in Hebrew, acquire higher education at Israeli universities, and work at white-collar jobs (e.g. Abu-Laban and Bakan, 2011; Abu Much, 2022; Nusair, 2010; Smootha, 1990; Weiss, 2021; Zidani, 2021).

In this study, I investigate a television show that discusses how Palestinians navigate life in Israel. My inquiry is informed by an emerging conversation in peace studies. Examining interactions between ordinary people, ‘everyday peace’ (Mac Ginty, 2021) brings together scholars interested in how local culture and practices make peace possible. Media scholars have a long history of studying popular culture in everyday settings. They have demonstrated that broadcast media (Scannell, 1996) and digital media (Jenkins, 2006) are created by and for ordinary people, arguing that media reflect people’s daily concerns, generating conversations about things that matter to them and facilitating a cultural forum or a public sphere where they can be thought through (Newcomb and Hirsch, 1983; Papacharissi, 2009).

In this article, I use everyday peace in Israel/Palestine as a starting point for building a theory of media encounters between conflicted communities. I diverge from peace as an analytical framework due to its fraught history in Israeli political thought. Instead, I will

explore media encounters on the Israeli sitcom *Arab Labor*, studying it as a text and an industry product. I will argue that shows like *Arab Labor* reflect a commitment to recognizing conflicted communities' struggles, discussing perennial identity problems, and supporting creative collaboration between ostensible enemies. I begin my discussion with everyday peace and the need to problematize peace in Israel/Palestine, which can be done through media studies.

## Everyday peace and the contribution of media studies

Mac Ginty (2021) opens his book with a description of children abducted to become child soldiers in Uganda, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Some return to their villages; despite concerns over their violent past, their old communities embrace them (Mac Ginty, 2021: 1). Government agencies or civil society organizations do not broker these reunions. They are a pragmatic tactic locals use to make life livable under dire political circumstances. Similarly, the 'local turn' in peace studies focuses on relationships between people based on fundamental values like mercy, truth, and justice (Hirblinger and Simons, 2015; Lederach, 1997). Everyday peace does not ignore power dynamics; it can only exist when individuals from the two sides are treated equally (Williams, 2015).

Scholars of everyday peace are interested in micro-level interactions between people, traditionally dismissed as insignificant in IR. As Mac Ginty (2021) points out, one of the critiques commonly made of this theory questions whether everyday peace can be 'scaled up' to the state or international level. Everyday peace does not negate the importance of states as organizing mechanisms, yet it rejects the assumption that the local is an 'empty space' that awaits top-down interventions. Problem-solving approaches initiated by states or foreign agencies tend to prescribe remedies that ignore structural problems affecting local communities (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013; Paffenholz, 2015).

Drawing from de Certeau (1984), the everyday in this theory is conceived as a space for unorganized political resistance; it encompasses tactics employed spontaneously in mundane activities happening below the state's radar that cannot be quantified and thus cannot be surveilled and controlled (1984: xvii). Such activities foster 'humane relationships, bridge differences, and counter structural violence' (Berents and McEvoy-Levy, 2015: 118), but not through formal development projects or dialogue meetings. They emerge from unscripted, serendipitous encounters, just like the villagers embracing child soldiers discussed earlier. Therefore, states struggle to 'see' everyday peace, and researchers struggle to study it, posing a significant methodological challenge (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013: 778).

In this study, I want to linger with the idea of encounters and problematize peace in Israel/Palestine. While Israel sees itself as a peace-seeking nation, its politicians often distance themselves from it (Gavriely-Nuri, 2015), and the Israeli news media tends to use peace to brand Israel favorably in the international arena without any commitment to diplomatic negotiations (Katz, 2022). Archival research reveals that Israel rejected peace initiatives that could have prevented war (Bar-Joseph, 2006) or made false promises to present its own initiatives (Raz, 2013). Israel has used formal peace processes to prevent Palestinian independence (Anziska, 2018), manipulate international law

(Erakat, 2019), or isolate the Palestinians through agreements with other Arab countries (Guzansky and Marshall, 2020).

By focusing on encounters, I avoid the contested meaning and dubious legacy of peace. Encounters demonstrate how media studies can help address the problem of the erratic everyday that peace scholars face because media capture, freeze, and archive ephemeral ordinary interactions. Social media, for example, objectify conversations, storing them for future reference, rather than letting them vanish into thin air (Schwarz, 2011). Similarly, books, movies, radio, and television tell detailed stories about people's lives. Ismail (2005) contends that the only way to understand the conflict in Sri Lanka is through texts that 'abide by it', by which he means texts that are loyal to experiences of locals. Although supposedly fictional, texts like novels provide intimate accounts of what it means to live in and through violence.

In the next section, I provide an overview of media theories of peace, most emanating from journalism studies. I will point to their limitations in capturing everyday encounters and then pivot to other theories that underline the power of popular culture to unpack complex national identities.

## **Thinking beyond peace theories in media studies**

The news does not like to talk about peace. According to Wolfsfeld (2004), journalists are drawn to wars because they make good stories – they are simple, eventful, and dramatic. On the other hand, peace talks are slow and cumbersome, making them unnewsworthy. Seeking to rectify this bias, Galtung (2003) differentiates between a 'low road' and a 'high road' to reporting conflicts. He underscores that conflict and violence are not synonymous; while the former is integral to every human interaction, the latter is not. Thus, conflict journalism's 'low road' assumes that every disagreement between people must be a zero-sum game. The 'high road' sees opportunities for progress in conflict, highlighting ideas and initiatives that avoid violence (Wasserman, 2021).

Galtung (2003) prescribes a checklist of tasks that peace journalists should fulfill in their reporting to support peace. Such suggestions have led to heated debates on whether and how peace journalism can or should be practiced. Some scholars have argued that promoting peace is not the job of journalists and that the crude division between war and peace journalism does not reflect the reality of news reporting (Hanitzsch, 2007; Loyn, 2007; Tenenboim-Weinblatt et al., 2016).

Other news theories are consonant with peace. Media events are pre-planned events covered by multiple news outlets that deliver live coverage of secular 'high holidays'. They constitute moments that unite the nation and reaffirm its values (Dayan and Katz, 1992). The rarity, magnitude, and festive nature of media events can help make peace more appealing; the Egyptian president Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977 helped stage peace between Israel and Egypt for a skeptical Israeli public through a demonstration of diplomatic heroism (Liebes and Katz, 1997). Alternatively, news media can capture and resonate exciting moments when national liberation materializes, like the fall of the Berlin Wall (Sonnevend, 2016).

Media witnessing suggests that watching distant suffering through televised news compels the viewer to respond and work for social justice and peace; we can no longer claim we do not know about the suffering of distant others when that information

becomes easily available (Ellis, 2000). However, a witness can never fully grasp the experience of war (Peters, 2009); furthermore, the ethnocentric bias of the news media means that national news organizations care little about the lives of others. They often turn distant suffering into a voyeuristic, ironic spectacle (Chouliaraki, 2006, 2013).

I argue that we should look for media encounters in popular texts and media industries in addition to exploring pathways for peace diplomatically. Television shows often reflect on the meaning of interacting with others. Moreover, television scholars care about inflection points where popular texts become markers of social change. In their canonical article, Newcomb and Hirsch (1983) maintain that television functions as a cultural forum; it creates public rituals where the meaning of living in society is contested, without necessarily resolving the issues on the agenda. This theory was conceived during the US network era, when audiences had limited choice, turning prime-time programming into a televisual town square. However, multichannel television can still produce revolutionary texts that facilitate discussion (Hendershot, 2013) or mark a shift in discourse about social problems, especially when inspecting an amalgam of shows that target that same issue (e.g. Douglas, 2010; Lotz, 2014).

Hall (1996) reminds us that changes in representation are not external to people's experiences; they reconstitute their internal worlds (1996: 443) and become a space for negotiating a multilayered identity. For example, Black people living in the Caribbeans use Rastafari popular culture to express a yearning for a lost Africa they have never known (Hall, 2001); for Palestinians, there is a need to mourn a Palestine that was never established. As the first Israeli television show written by a Palestinian, and with the relative creative freedom it enjoyed, which I discuss below, *Arab Labor* presented a unique opportunity to talk about the Palestinian national trauma while recognizing Jewish fears after over a century of violent conflict.

I have already suggested that text and industry must be studied together to understand *Arab Labor* as a cultural phenomenon (see D'Acci, 2004). The Israeli television industry illustrates the entanglements of Jews and Palestinians in Israel. It has a complicated history, moving from the symbolic annihilation of Palestinians and other minorities to efforts for inclusion. Nevertheless, these efforts did not lead to a televised representation of Jews and Palestinians as equals before the production of *Arab Labor*. Moreover, changes in ownership and the operation logic of television begat tensions between financial interests, ideological alignments, and a desire to offer innovative programming. *Arab Labor* was produced amid these transitions during the short Israeli 'network era', immediately before the fragmentation engendered by the multichannel era. These circumstances were critical in allowing *Arab Labor* to discuss social problems in their nuanced complexity. In the following section, I will examine the political-economic context that made *Arab Labor* possible.

## **Public service, commercial, and post-television: The historical significance of *Arab Labor***

Israeli television was founded in 1968 as a political project concentrated on educational programming. Established immediately after the 1967 war, its intended goal was to tackle

the anxiety of Israelis watching programs broadcast from neighboring Arab nations. Israel's single television channel, operated through a public-service model, was designed to propagate a clear Zionist ideology based on Jewish supremacy (Lavie, 2015a; Oren, 2004; Press-Barnathan, 2019). Palestinian characters were largely absent during the monopoly years; shows like *The Big Restaurant* (1985–88) or *Zehu Ze* (1978–98) represented Palestinians stereotypically as uneducated, coarse people, driven by plots and conspiracies, alienated from their 'cultural backwardness' while trying to resemble the West (Eshed, 2005; Shifman, 2008).

In November 1993, the commercial Channel 2 began its official broadcasts, challenging the tax-funded Channel 1. It quickly became the new Israeli 'campfire'; Channel 2's prime-time programming was a mediated ritual where Israelis met daily (Pinchevski, 2008). The channel was committed to funding original drama reflecting the heterogeneous Israeli society. Unlike Channel 1, Channel 2 needed to sell airtime to advertisers. Private companies operated the channel on alternating days, fighting tirelessly for ratings while trying to please the regulator responsible for renewing their license periodically (Tokatly, 2000).

The early commercial era of the 1990s modernized the industry, yet its Zionist fervor did not change. In his political analysis of Channel 2, Yuran (2001) shows how the traditional jingoism of Israeli television continued, with an unwavering desire on the part of Channel 2 to embody the mainstream; it became 'infatuated with national fantasies at the foundation of state ideology' (2001: 11). For example, the show *Bootcamp* (1998–2001) focused on the hardships of army recruits, a quintessential Israeli experience. It legitimized the use of violence by soldiers, perpetrated in military and domestic settings, reflecting the militarism of Israeli society (Adelman, 2003).

Still, Israeli viewers wanted more variety. The Israeli multichannel era started in the early 2000s, after cable and satellite services were regulated (Sofer, 2015). Consequently, the third phase of Israeli 'post-television' (Harlap, 2017) began when providers offered video-on-demand services, making hundreds of niche channels available to subscribers. Reality TV emerged as a particularly popular genre at the time; while some shows were considered cultural 'trash', others gained accolades for discussing moral issues (Lavie, 2016). After many years of symbolic annihilation, some shows featured Israeli-Palestinian characters. Nevertheless, encounters between Jews and Palestinians seldom encouraged coexistence; Palestinian identity was frequently sidelined, and when it was brought up, it was often depicted as threatening to Jews. Jewish competitors and judges would talk down to Palestinians who expressed dissent against state values or symbols (Karniel and Lavie-Dinur, 2011).

Nevertheless, changes in the logic of watching instigated a profound transformation in available content. Communities hardly seen on the screen previously appeared more frequently when television moved from getting its revenue through commercials to getting it through subscriptions and from ratings-driven broadcast schedules to streaming and binge-watching. Israeli post-television features more realistic portrayals of life at society's margins. Shows like *Shtisel* (2013–20), focusing on a family from an Orthodox neighborhood in Jerusalem, and *Zaguri Imperia* (2014–15), discussing the life of a Mizrahi family from the peripheral town of Be'er Sheva, were created by individuals originating in the same places. They gave audiences from the periphery a unique

opportunity to see their life-worlds on the screen for the first time (*Zaguri*) or provided an intimate, non-stereotypical look into a closed community, often estranged from the general public (*Shtisel*). It was a period of excitement among young creators who felt they could push cutting-edge ideas through ‘quality television’, which was rapidly becoming a respectable form of art, like cinema before it (Harlap, 2017; Lavie, 2015a, 2015b). This window of opportunity would soon close, when commercial interests prevailed, making it harder to produce shows that did not speak to the consensus (Lavie, 2015a: 93–4).

*Arab Labor* (2007–13) was made at this transitional moment, at the crossroads between commercial television and post-television in Israel. Its creation encapsulates the tension between the artistic desire to write hard-hitting social critiques and the need to be in the mainstream to make a profit. Produced by Keshet, Channel 2’s leading operating company, it adhered to the logic of broadcasting schedules and the dictates of regulators, which worked to the show’s advantage. In the early 2000s, the Second Authority for Television and Radio, the statutory body overseeing Channel 2, was displeased with the companies’ preoccupation with high ratings; a report ordered by the authority, published in 2004, indicated that minorities were dramatically under-represented on the channel. It compelled the authority to recognize this long-standing bias in Israeli television and demand that companies emphasize multiculturalism and the public interest when applying for the new Channel 2 tender (First and Avraham, 2007).

Keshet was one of the two winners of the tender; it used *Arab Labor* as a flagship production, showcasing its commitment to multiculturalism. It was a groundbreaking show centered around the life of a Palestinian family. Sayed Kashua, its creator, was the first Palestinian to write an Israeli television show (Gal-Ezer and Tidhar, 2012). *Arab Labor* focuses on Amjad Alian, a Palestinian journalist from Jerusalem who repeatedly acquiesces to the expectations of his Jewish surroundings, embracing and mimicking their behaviors; he often drags his family into his misdeeds, embarrassing and infuriating them.

Ideologically, *Arab Labor* addresses the absence of a national identity for Israeli Palestinians, who are always rendered as not Israeli enough to be welcomed into the nation, and not Palestinian enough to embody the Palestinian struggle (Hochberg, 2010; Shimony, 2013). The show encapsulates this precarious limbo by constructing Amjad as a ‘Jewish-Arab’ (Shimony, 2013), whose efforts to pass as a Jew and constant failures illuminate Jewish racism against Palestinians (Druks, 2020). The show explores the hybridity of national identities, as Kashua brings Jews and Palestinians into contact with each other and their internal selves in unexpected ways. The show deconstructs Palestinian stereotypes (Hochberg, 2010) and moves across languages (Ribke, 2023) to convey a critical message about the dangers of imagining fixed identities and linguistic formations that do not correspond with people’s experiences. Kashua appeals to the Israeli Jewish audience in *Arab Labor* and his novels by telling them a quintessentially Jewish narrative of a persecuted minority that has been flipped on its head; in Kashua’s texts, the Palestinians play the Jews, and the Jews become the perpetrators (Mendelson-Maoz and Steir-Livny, 2011). Humor plays a strategic role in these texts because it softens the satirical blow while maintaining its critical edge. Humor embeds

critique in people's daily struggles, taking place in familial or friendly relationships. Thus, *Arab Labor* encourages a move away from a state-dictated security discourse telling Jews what to make of Palestinians (Kosman, 2015: 24).

*Arab Labor* is an ideal case study for examining everyday peace and imagining peace beyond state-centered paradigms. While scholarship on *Arab Labor* highlights its poetics as a critical text, it does not explore the social significance of tackling everyday problems undergirding an intractable violent conflict through popular culture. This study fills the gap, not by arguing that *Arab Labor* persuades audiences to believe in peace but by focusing on the show's production wherein media industries and professionals invest in nurturing critical thinking through entertainment.

## Methods

This study is based on a triangulation of a close reading of *Arab Labor* and a media industry study. I carefully watched and took notes on every episode of the show's four seasons. My reading is 'close but not deep' (Love, 2010), meaning that I focus on descriptions of characters' experiences in the text, offering my explanation without trying to deconstruct them. According to this approach, the researcher should not seek out the text's hidden ('deep') meaning but appreciate its reflection of everyday situations.

My textual analysis will emanate from the experiences and practices of industry professionals, underscoring the connection between the two realms. I conducted five in-depth interviews with the show's two directors – Roni Ninio in season 1 and Shai Cappon in seasons 2–4; producers Udi Leon and Yoni Paran; and Keshet's programming manager, Ran Telem.<sup>1</sup> They lasted 45–90 minutes and were held between July and November 2020, roughly seven years after the show's last season ended. This temporal distance allowed interviewees to place *Arab Labor* within the historical trajectory of Israeli television. While all the interviews I conducted were held with Jewish industry professionals, I supplemented them with 11 videos and 38 written interviews and responses to the show in Hebrew, English, and Arabic that appeared in the media. Most of them are interviews held with the Palestinian members of the team, including the show's creator, Sayed Kashua, and lead actors like Norman Isa, Mira Awad, and Salim Dau. I have also include excerpts from columns Kashua published between 2006 and 2014 in *Haaretz*, Israel's leading liberal newspaper. My analysis looks at the personal experiences of the show's creative team and its production culture; I outline how industry professionals created a distinct community where questions of identity, order, and power were negotiated continuously (Caldwell, 2008; Herbert et al., 2020).

## Media encounters between Jews and Palestinians

### *Processing trauma*

In his *Haaretz* columns, Sayed Kashua tells personal stories drawn from his family life and the experience of being an Israeli Palestinian. Efforts to resemble the Jewish society are a recurring theme; Kashua does not settle for his attempts to pass as a Jew but forces his family to join him. For example, he explains how he insisted his daughter



should learn to play the piano ‘not because I wanted her to become a pianist, God forbid. I wanted her to be like one of those white people [Ashkenazi Jews] who like to complain about how their parents forced them to play when they were growing up’ (Kashua, 2015: 100).

*Arab Labor* has an episode that directly corresponds with this real-life scene, where Amjad forces his daughter Maya to quit playing Oud, a traditional Arab stringed instrument, and learn Western classical music instead (Season 2 Episode 7 [S2E7]). Other examples include Amjad’s decision to become a vegetarian (S3E7), celebrate the Muslim holiday Eid al-Adha like the Jewish Passover Seder (S1E5), or learn proper manners (S3E6). The show’s social critique derives from the irony in Amjad’s position; Shai Cappon, the director, described him in an interview as ‘a Palestinian racist against his own people’ (Meidan, 2015).

However, *Arab Labor* does not remain at this seemingly frivolous level. Kashua tackles difficult situations where Palestinians encounter state power. In another column, describing an occasional stroll in Jerusalem, Kashua sees a Palestinian boy riding his bicycle in the Jewish side of the city; a police officer immediately stops him and accuses him of stealing the bike while ignoring pleas of the boy, who does not speak Hebrew (Kashua, 2015: 76). In an episode titled ‘Shelter’ (S3E10), Amjad and his family are stuck in their apartment building’s bomb shelter because war has broken out; the long, stressful wait sparks tensions between Jewish and Palestinian neighbors. They start playing truth or dare; Yoske, an older Jewish man, asks Amjad: ‘If you were given a choice, would you prefer living in Israel or one of its neighboring Arab countries?’ After a short pause, Amjad confides in his neighbors a heartbreaking story from his childhood. His family lived in a village outside Jerusalem, and one day his father sent him to a pharmacy in the city. Amjad prepared for the trip as if it were a holiday, yet when he boarded the bus to Jerusalem, the driver started asking him intrusive questions; when he got off, a police officer immediately recognized him as an Arab and called him over. Amjad, who did not speak Hebrew then, was utterly confused; he cried, yet the passers-by ignored him. Amjad concluded the story:

At that moment, I decided I didn’t want to be a stranger anymore. I wanted to feel like I have a place [in society] and would do anything to feel this way. But nothing helps. It will never work.

Amjad’s breakdown is a moment of revelation as he finally finds the courage to confess how exhausting it is to try to please Jewish people to fit in. Unlike what his Jewish friends and colleagues like to think, Amjad does not enjoy his passing adventures. Being interpellated as a Palestinian in Israel can be humiliating and sometimes dangerous; when Kashua observes the boy with the bicycle, he does not help him, just like the passers-by in Amjad’s story. He makes every effort to avoid being recognized as a Palestinian. Kashua recollects a childhood trauma in interviews when he was searched by a soldier while riding home on the bus from Jerusalem to his village Tira as a teenager (Beit Avi Chai, 2013). This experience is almost identical to the story Amjad tells in the shelter.

The episode not only allows Palestinians to speak about their fear of Jews; it also lets Jewish characters express their traumas. Natan, a Jewish neighbor and Amjad’s friend, responds to Amjad with a painful story of his own:

Whenever I see an Arab, I get scared. I'm sorry, but that is the truth [...] when I see an Arab I don't know walking down the street, boarding a bus, entering a restaurant, I become alert, and there's nothing I can do to stop feeling this way.

Dov Navon, the actor who played Natan, talked about the meaningfulness of this scene to him:

Sayed wrote me a brilliant monologue, I read it with tears in my eyes [...] it is a very clean monologue about his fear, which is very human [...] it was the time of suicide attacks on buses<sup>2</sup> and my daughter was five years old [...] she really loved riding buses, and I told her they break down on their way (quoted in Hershkovitz, 2013).

The 'Shelter' episode exemplifies how a television show can become a place where the most painful experiences of a violent conflict can be discussed openly. While a fictional sitcom, the themes explored on *Arab Labor* are often a re-articulation of personal memories of the conflict. 'Shelter' is one of the most somber episodes in the sitcom's four seasons. Its placement within the show's arc was strategic and reflects the shared commitment of Jewish and Palestinian creatives to make sure that the show succeeded commercially and resonated widely.

### *Enticing listening through friendly collaboration*

On 22 July 2013, the Israel Democracy Institute (2013) held a special event titled 'Arab Labor on Prime-Time: Between Comedy and Reality'. It was a roundtable featuring Sayed Kashua, Shai Cappon, and Ran Telem, Keshet's programming manager, alongside scholars, media practitioners, and a representative of the Ministry of Education who spoke about the show's potential to educate children about diversity. In one part of the conversation, which revolved around the difference between comedy and satire, Kashua was asked if the episode where Amjad grows to believe that all dogs hate Arabs (S2E3) was trying to convey a broad message beyond laughing about Kashua's own fears. Kashua explained that he deliberately places 'soft' episodes before hard-hitting ones like 'Shelter' to allow him to continue to express social critique without risking the show's popularity.

This strategic thinking about how to get audiences to listen was constantly at play in the production of *Arab Labor*. An example is the episode 'Memorial Day' (S2E8), where Maya, Amjad's daughter, appropriates one of Israel's most sacred rituals, the annual ceremony commemorating Israeli soldiers killed in battle. Maya turns it into a memorial for the Nakba.<sup>3</sup> As a member of her Jewish school's choir, she sings the Reut Song,<sup>4</sup> yet she does so while thinking about old photos of Palestine before the 1948 war her grandmother had shown her (see Goren, 2020). Turning an Israeli icon on its head, Maya's song performance highlights the Palestinian national tragedy and demands its recognition (Honnet, 1995). Many of *Arab Labor*'s creators described this episode as the pinnacle of the show; Cappon told me that 'after we made this episode, everything else felt like an aftershock'; Udi Leon, a lead producer, described it as a turning point:

We live in a country where you can't say 'Nakba', and I put the Nakba on prime-time. There is nothing more sacrilegious. When I went to the synagogue on that Shabbat [after the episode aired], I thought they [the congregation] would throw rocks at me, but nothing happened [...] I think that after it aired, we stopped holding back, [we knew] we had an audience who liked the show.

Leon's remarks allude to the early days of *Arab Labor*'s production when Keshet's executives hesitated to air a satire focusing on a Palestinian family. At the pilot stage, they made peculiar demands, requiring that 80% of the language spoken on the show be Hebrew, forcing Kashua to make questionable adjustments, so that Palestinian characters were shown communicating in Hebrew among themselves (Kupfer, 2008; see also Ribke, 2023). Roni Ninio, the director of the first season, told me how he negotiated the casting process with Keshet. He insisted on hiring Norman Isa – an anonymous theatre actor at the time – to play Amjad, because he accurately captured the character's pierrot-esque nature. In exchange, Ninio agreed to cast Mariano Idelman, a regular member of Keshet's flagship satirical show, *Eretz Nehederet*, as Meir, Amjad's Jewish best friend.

Ninio also told me the show was initially called 'Wuj' Ras' ('a mess'; literally headache in Arabic), but when Kashua changed it to 'Arab Labor', the name immediately struck a chord with the entire team for its multifaceted meaning. It denotes the labor of Palestinians trying to fit into the Jewish society, like Amjad; it also points to the labor of industry professionals, specifically Kashua and the show's predominantly Palestinian cast. Connotatively, the name is ironic; 'Arab labor' is a pejorative in Hebrew, marking Arabs' work as cheap and unprofessional, and which ought to be replaced by 'pure' Hebrew labor (Hochberg, 2010: 84). Kashua appropriates this pejorative aspect by associating it with his groundbreaking show while expressing his anxieties that the stereotype is true, and his show would ultimately fail commercially.

Eventually, concerns and anxieties waned; Keshet's hesitance was replaced with staunch support. Interviewees attributed much of the show's success to the friendship and chemistry between Kashua and Cappon, after Cappon joined the team in the second season. A former TV star-turned-director from Tel Aviv, he told me that working with Kashua in Jerusalem was a transformative experience:

I can tell you that through Sayed I got to know an entire population I didn't know existed. The Arab youth, the intellectuals who live in Jerusalem. Great people, smart, creative [...] I also realized that Jerusalem, with all its complexity, is much more liberal than Tel Aviv. When we got out for a beer in Jerusalem, you could see Arabs and Jews drinking together. That's something you would never see in Tel Aviv.

The collaborative creative work of Palestinians and Jews on and off the set of *Arab Labor* not only challenged prejudice and stereotype through the text, it also helped Cappon, a self-proclaimed liberal Jew, see beyond his preconceived notions of the country's cultural and political geographies, realizing that friendships can be forged in the most unexpected places. Still, *Arab Labor* does not settle for exposing prejudice or critiquing identity formations. It calls for action, exploring how Palestinians can demand change as a minority in Israel. Strong Palestinian women, who are the diametrical opposition to Amjad's character, articulate this demand in the show.

### *Feminist activism*

Feminist critique is not new to Kashua's work. In his novels, he scrutinizes the roles assigned to women within Palestinian society (Rottenberg, 2008) and defies the heteronormative behavior of Palestinian men (Olmert, 2018). *Arab Labor* adds another critical layer by featuring Palestinian women who pose an alternative to a weak man like Amjad. One of them is Maya, his daughter, who grows from a child into a woman over the show's four seasons. Following her subversive interpretation of Memorial Day, discussed earlier, she becomes a political activist (S4EP9). In an episode titled 'National Sports' (S4E8), she trains and excels as a judoka in an Israeli training camp. However, she faces racism from her teammates and decides to leave the team. As she packs her belongings, the Palestinian janitor of her training facility approaches her and persuades her to rejoin practice to represent him and all the other menial Palestinian workers in the Judo club who follow her admiringly.

Maya ultimately participates in a European championship and wins the gold medal; when she stands on the podium and the Israeli national anthem starts playing, she raises her arm silently to reveal a bracelet of the Palestinian flag. By performing this protest, Maya advocates for the Palestinian cause yet does so as a member of an Israeli sports team. The tension between her positionalities suggests that Israeli Palestinians can have Palestinian pride. Fatma Yahya, the actress playing Maya, was involved in similar activism as an Israeli high school student, uploading a YouTube video in Arabic calling on other Israeli-Palestinian youth to educate Israeli Jews so they would see Palestinians beyond stereotypes and superstitions (Nagar, 2016).

While older than Maya, Amal represents the same generation of young Palestinian women fighting for Palestinian justice. She is deemed 'problematic' twice; as a human rights lawyer, she fights for Palestinians against the Israeli authorities (e.g. S1EP8), while as an unmarried, opinionated woman, she is surveilled by Amjad's father to make sure she does not meet with single men (S2E4). She marries and has a child with Meir, Amjad's Jewish friend (S3E1), a controversial decision in Israel where inter-faith relationships are taboo (e.g. Lachover and Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2022). She educates Meir about the Palestinian struggle to the point where he uses his Jewish privilege to help them. Meir tricks the Israeli authorities into thinking he established a new settlement in a Palestinian village in the West Bank, leading them to connect it to basic infrastructure (S4E2, see also Druks, 2020). Mira Awad, who played Amal, is an activist, actor, writer and singer-songwriter; in interviews, she talks about being a member of a generation unafraid to confront and criticize Israeli society; a generation that 'has stopped apologizing about being from this place' (Nuriel, 2007).

### **Working through conflict in media encounters**

*Arab Labor* discusses the profound identity problems of Israeli Palestinians, offering two alternative behaviors, acquiescence or defiance, represented by Amjad and Amal/Maya, respectively. The show underscores that both behaviors are equally legitimate when individuals navigate an impossible political reality. As such, the show as a text creates two types of media encounters: an encounter with the self by initiating an internal

Palestinian conversation about what it means to live in Israel, and an external encounter with Jewish Israelis that shows them how their dominance shapes the fabric of Palestinian everyday life. As an Israeli show, *Arab Labor* was written primarily for a Jewish audience. The Jewish discovery of the Palestinian plight requires a process of unknowing; after almost a century of academic and military knowledge production about Palestinians with little Palestinian involvement (Eyal, 2006), *Arab Labor* demonstrates how little Israeli Jews know about Palestinian life.

However, I do not claim that watching the show persuades Israeli Jews to embrace Palestinians living in their midst, nor do I claim that Palestinian audiences become proud of their heritage because of the show. Instead, I argue that *Arab Labor* functions as a televisual cultural forum that legitimizes the experiences of Palestinians, empathizing with their struggles when facing absurd, racist situations as Palestinians in Israel. It also recognizes and expresses the Israeli pain from the conflict when Natan gets to tell his story in the shelter. The connection created between Palestinians and Jews, which begets a more nuanced understanding of the conflict, is not limited to the text. It can also be found in the friendship between the industry professionals who worked on the show together.

This study demonstrates the value of media studies for everyday peace scholarship; when private experiences of encountering people from the other side are mediated, they cease to be private. Television making becomes a form of public therapy at the town square or campfire. *Arab Labor*'s script, Sayed Kashua's various novels, and interviews with industry professionals give peace scholars texts they can analyze to discern the meaning of everyday peace. The intermingled experiences of real people and fictional characters – Sayed and Amjad, Mira and Amal, Fatma and Maya – demonstrate how women function as leaders of everyday peace (Boulding, 2000). Many interviewees described the show's commercial success as a 'miracle'. Harnessing Keshet's prime-time broadcast strategically, *Arab Labor*'s therapeutic cultural forum became available to millions of Israelis. Thus, the only way to fully understand *Arab Labor* as a cultural phenomenon is to see it through the vicissitudes of the Israeli television industry – an industry that began with a monopoly hostile towards expressions of dissent against Zionism and indifferent to the experiences of minorities. While the inauguration of commercial television in the 1990s did not necessarily change this ideological commitment, it made it clear that the expectations of the heterogeneous Israeli audience to receive diverse programming could no longer be ignored. Subsequently, the regulator's notion of public interest played a decisive role in shaping *Arab Labor* as a critical text.

The show's unexpected success proves that television making can be a form of peacemaking. Media encounters between Jews and Palestinians on and off screen are not the outcome of diplomatic negotiations conducted among political elites. They are part and parcel of ordinary life, found in popular texts and the process of creating them.

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**Notes**

1. While it is customary to anonymize the names of interviewees, I use real names because the work of media professionals on *Arab Labor* was public and should receive recognition.
2. Navon refers to the years of the Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000–5), which were characterized by deadly violence on both sides and included Palestinian suicide attacks against Israeli civilians. Buses were a common target.
3. Literally, ‘the catastrophe’ – the name given by Palestinians to the 1948 war, which led to the establishment of the independent state of Israel, but also to the destruction of Palestine as a national project and the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to exile.
4. Literally, ‘the brotherhood song’; one of the most iconic Memorial Day songs, written during the Israeli independence war/the Nakba in 1948. The text mourns the lost lives of young Israeli soldiers.

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