Tourism as a Space of Possibilities: Reconciliation Tourism Enterprises in a Conflict-Ridden Destination

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Abstract
This study explores reconciliation tourism initiatives in Israel and the West Bank as a discursive arena in which ideas about reconciliation are constructed for tourism purposes by eight organizations that offer travel experiences that include reconciliation as a major theme. By critically analyzing the manner in which ideas about reconciliation are constructed for tourism purposes, the research provides insights reconciliation in destinations with active conflict. The presentation of fieldwork data centers on three themes: the recognition of multiple narratives, the inclusiveness of victimhood, and the commitment to transformative ontology. Each theme is supported by evidence and discussed in relation to its theoretical frameworks. Implications are drawn for practitioners tasked with marketing reconciliation tourism initiatives in conflict-ridden destinations.

Keywords
conflict transformation, peacebuilding, third space, pre-transitional justice

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Middle East, Israel and the Palestinian Authority enjoyed a steady and impressive increase in the number of attractions and tourists. Tourism has flourished in this area even without the long-awaited peace. As conflict has been present for decades, each side has learned to use tourism to advance its own interests (Banfield, Haufler, and Lilly 2005; Blanchard and Higgins-Desbiolle 2013; Farmaki 2017; Herbergs 2012; Koensler and Papa 2011; Miklian, Alluri, and Katsos 2019; Wohlmuther and Wintersteiner 2014). In the past decade, however, more tourism initiatives in the region are incorporating the themes of reconciliation and peace into the products and services that they offer tourists (e.g., Moufakkir and Kelly 2010; Schneider 2019). This is not a unique development. Literature from around the globe on tourism in contested areas has suggested that reconciliation tourism activities are sometimes implemented even before a conflict has been resolved. This study focuses on these initiatives in a specific geopolitical context by analyzing the discourse on reconciliation in the region as constructed in tours offered by eight organizations. In addition, this study provides a critique of these practices by exploring the unique discourse of reconciliation they form in a destination that is also the site of conflict. Optimistic readers may see this thematic analysis as a description of how these destinations construct a discourse on reconciliation and what lessons can be learned about the relationship between tourism and peace.

The intersections between tourism and conflict are usually discussed in the academic literature in the context of destinations where the conflict has ended (Bräuchler 2015). In such destinations tourism has served as an arena for the implementation of the peacebuilding in societies that have sought reconciliation in the wake of a long-standing conflict. In post-civil war Rwanda, for example, the government made tourism a central sector in economic and social reconstruction. In this spirit, the Gisozi Memorial Center, also known as the Kigali Genocide Memorial for victims of the eponymous massacre, became a heritage site representing the new ethos of reconciliation that the government promoted after the war (Alluri 2009). In neighboring Burundi, which also endured prolonged ethnic wars, the Peace and Reconciliation Ministry made tourism an important element in restoring the state’s image by promoting the inclusion of ethnic minorities in the tourism sector and encouraging the cooperation of entrepreneurs from ethnic groups mired in

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conflict (Novelli, Morgan, and Nibigira 2012). In South Africa, although the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg operates as a private enterprise as part of the Gold Reef City theme park, it demonstrates the educational, cultural, and national role that tourism initiatives can play in the transition to a post-conflict era (Rankin and Schmidt 2009). In Bosnia-Herzegovina, tour guides from various ethnic groups (e.g., Serbs, Croats, Muslims) were trained to present complex political realities to tourists visiting the new country in the wake of the Dayton Agreement (Causevic and Lynch 2011). Memorial sites serve as reconciliation platforms for cross-community visits (Aussems 2016). In New Zealand, signs for tourists include both the Maori and the European narratives, reflecting the bicultural ethos in the spirit of the Treaty of Waitangi that the country seeks to promote through tourism (Carr 2008).

In tourism, reconciliation can take many forms, some of which have been criticized for the exploitative dynamics by which governments willingly forfeit social assets to benefit corporations (Klein 2007) or for the unrealistic and/or superficial aspiration to promote reconciliation through sporadic travel practices. Despite these problems, this study takes a discursive approach to identify the recurring themes through which reconciliation is constructed in a destination where conflict remains active. It asks to illuminate the manner in which the emerging discourse on reconciliation in tourism in a conflict-ridden destination is constructed through tourism offerings. In other words, reconciliation travel practices can be examined as a discursive arena in which speculative ideas about reconciliation are developed and narrated. This approach provides a useful perspective through which we can make sense of reconciliation tourism initiatives in destinations with active conflict. Thus, it not only highlights the way certain aspects of the conflict are embedded in the experiences offered by tourism providers, but also helps critically examine the potential role of tourism as an arena for agents of transformation (Soulard, McGehee, and Stern 2019). Consequently, this research is unique in both its engagement with the relationship between tourism and reconciliation in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its focus on the cultural significance of reconciliation tourism initiatives at a cultural site in which innovative political trajectories and examples are manifested through tourism services.

**Literature Review**

**Reconciliation, Conflict Transformation, Victimhood, and the Third Space**

The socio-psychological scholarship on conflict studies and intergroup relations provides useful concepts and insights for understanding how ideas about reconciliation are constructed for tourism purposes in conflict-ridden destinations. To begin with, reconciliation is often considered one of the final processes in post-conflict conditions (Demirel and Eriksson 2020). As one of the final steps in peacebuilding, reconciliation usually requires hostile parties to come to terms with the past and to be willing to build a shared future. As reconciliation is a socio-psychological process, scholars agree that a prerequisite for reconciliation and peacebuilding is the need to create actual and symbolic spaces for forgiveness and justice (Barkan and Karn 2006; Edwards 2010). Some scholars advocate following clear steps or stages in order to have a successful reconciliation that corresponds with the adversaries’ readiness (Auerbach 2009). Auerbach’s (2009) reconciliation pyramid, for example, suggests seven stages: acquaintance (with competing narratives), acknowledgment, empathy, restitution, responsibility, apology, and narrative incorporation. A lack of interaction between adversaries might prevent progress to the next stage. The final stage at the top of the pyramid is narrative incorporation. In this stage, both sides adopt an integrated, shared narrative that they have constructed together.

Over the past three decades, the approach to conflict transformation, as opposed to conflict management and conflict resolution, has become popular among conflict scholars. The rationale is that peace agreements do not resolve conflicts. Instead, conflicts with their dynamism and energy are transformed into something else and, in this sense, are useful resources (Dietrich 2013; Lederach 1995, 2003; Mitchell 2002). Miall, Ramsbotham, and Woodhouse (2011) suggested that this framework is even more important in conflicts where the final goal of reconciliation is to transform socio-political injustices embedded in the conflict. This approach pertains to the argument presented here regarding the actual and symbolic role of tourism, as a cultural practice and as an intercultural economic sector, in destinations with active conflict. Thus, unlike political tourism initiatives in Israel and the Palestinian territories that usually use the conflict as a selling point, with or without taking a side, here I demonstrate how tourism initiatives use aspects of the conflict to imagine alternative possibilities of reconciliation. In other words, this study offers an explorative analysis of the manner in which budding travel practices in a conflict-ridden destination can be also viewed as seeds of political transformation.

“Transitional” and “restorative” justice are inclusive terms for a field of knowledge, and the social and legal mechanisms deriving from it, describing institutionalized efforts made in the process of a society transitioning from a state of ongoing conflict that includes systematic abuse and human rights violations to one of sustainable reconciliation. Transitional justice practices encompass judicial and non-judicial means that post-conflict societies can use to address large-scale or systemic human rights violations for the purposes of accountability or redress for victims, mainly through prosecutions, communal truth-seeking, and socio-political reform. Restorative justice is a related approach that emphasizes meetings between victims and perpetrators, at times in the presence of external representatives as audiences or witnesses, to create a consensus and to improve the relationship between the sides. The main difference between these approaches and other forms of retributive or adversarial justice is the emphasis on recognizing, documenting, and
ensuring the non-recurrence of past wrongs, involving both sides in seeking justice and coexistence. The popularity of restorative and transitional justice practices can be attributed to the fact that they enable healing processes that consider the potential of conflicting communities for a common future (Horovitz 2016).

The best-known examples of such mechanisms were implemented after the end of complex conflicts. In Rwanda, the traditional legal system of Gacaca was adopted as an alternative legal tool, based on the commissioning of members of rival Hutu and Tutsi communities to serve as judges in hundreds of thousands of traditional community-based trials over the course of a decade (Rettig 2008). Another celebrated example is the Truth and Reconciliation Committees, established after the fall of the apartheid regime in South Africa, to document injustices and violence by integrating principles of restorative justice. Literature from around the globe on tourism in contested regions has suggested that reconciliation can take place even before a peace agreement has officially ended the conflict (e.g., Adwan and Bar-On 2004; Guo et al. 2006; Yousaf 2021). In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such practices have been described as pre-transitional justice activities, “an array of tools and strategies applied while the conflict is ongoing to promote the transition from a culture of denial and impunity to one of recognition and accountability and redress of injustices” (Zochrot n.d.). Specifically noteworthy in this context is Cooke’s (2017) reflection on the role of a collective process of decolonization as a discursive mechanism in which settlers engage in their active and sometimes unknowing participation in ongoing hegemonic colonial processes (see also, Stinson, Grmiwood and Caton, 2021).

Research on the acknowledgment of the other side’s victimhood and national narrative has demonstrated its important role in reconciliation efforts. The idea that exposure to the other side’s narratives and victimhood plays a potential role in the reconciliation process is evident in many empirical studies (e.g., Ben-David et al. 2017; Shnabel, Belhassen, and Mor 2018). Hostile groups tend to reject the other side’s narrative while defending their own (Bar-Tal, Oren, and Nets-Zehngut 2014). In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the denial of the other side’s political narrative has a special significance because the two national narratives are incompatible. The Israeli-Palestinian case is unique in that the perpetrator–victim dichotomy is a complex one (Bar-Tal et al. 2009; Noor et al. 2012; Shnabel, Belhassen, and Mor 2018; Vollhardt 2009, 2012). Nevertheless, according to Shnabel and Nadler’s (2008) needs-based model, victims of a conflict seek to restore their dignity and sense of agency; perpetrators seek to restore their perceived morality. Mutual response to these needs enables the transmission of messages implying that the victim does not seek revenge, while perpetrators acknowledge their part in the injustice and commit to preventing its recurrence (see also Nadler and Liviatan 2006).

Finally, in line with the research question, and after the initial evaluation of data, this study is inspired by the theory that tourism can be regarded as what Bhabha (1994) terms a “third space,” in which new possibilities, affinities, and identities are continuously developing in colonial and post-colonial conditions. Bhabha (1994) suggests viewing tourism as a third space in which new possibilities are developing in colonial and post-colonial conditions. Such dynamics, as insightfully noted by Amoamo (2011) in her study of Maori tourism in New Zealand, invites tourism scholars “to reconceptualize essentialized categorizations and thus, to regard and debate ‘culture’ in terms of the possible situations, responses, outcomes and consequences of hybridization” (p. 1255). Hollinshead (1998, 2009) made a case for applying Bhabha’s theories in tourism scholarship due to the inherent quality of tourism as a unique social setting for cultural production and emergent affinities and belonging for hosts and guests who do not fit comfortably into designated social and political boxes. Wearing and Wearing (2006), who applied the concept in their work on volunteer tourism, suggested viewing volunteer tourism settings as a third space in which “struggles over and against hegemonic constructions are occurring” (p. 147). Wearing and Ponting (2009) similarly suggested that interpersonal interactions in volunteer tourism projects enable new possibilities for both host and guest. These previous uses of the concept in tourism scholarship demonstrate the practical and symbolic role of tourism practices as peacebuilding and reconciliation mechanisms.

The Conflict and Its Touristification in a Nutshell

Although a review of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is beyond the scope of this paper, a balanced perspective is a useful vantage point from which to examine some key events in the Israeli War of Independence in 1948. Known as the Nakba (Arabic for “catastrophe”) in the Palestinian national narrative, this war forced more than 700,000 Palestinians to flee to Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon (Morris 2004). Following the Six-Day War between Israel and its neighbors in 1967, an additional 300,000 Palestinians became refugees, and those remaining in the West Bank and Gaza were brought under a military regime that Israel established in the territories newly captured from Jordan (known as the West Bank [of the Jordan River]) and Egypt (the Gaza Strip) (Oren 2002).

The resistance to this military regime and its effect on the lives of Palestinians led to the first Intifada (or uprising) that began in December 1987 and lasted until the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991. The Oslo Accords (1993) between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization brought the creation of the Palestinian Authority, which is now the political apparatus of Palestinians who reside in the West Bank (Schulze 2009). The failure to fulfill the ultimate Palestinian aspiration for a state at the Camp David Summit led—together with other causes—to the second Intifada, which began in September 2000 (Pressman 2006). After a series of terror attacks in Israeli cities, the Israeli government built a barrier designed to follow the 1949 Armistice Line (also known as the Green Line), which had political ramifications for negotiating the borders of a future Palestinian State. The
barrier is about 760 km long, in contrast to the approximately 320 km of the 1949 Armistice Line. This difference is the result of a decision to include some Israeli settlements—especially Jewish civilian communities located in the West Bank—on the Israeli side of the barrier. After the end of the second Intifada, many local popular Palestinian committees initiated grassroots activities against the separation barrier to prevent the annexation of their agricultural land.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become an important stop for many tourists in the region, who include exposure to the conflict in their itinerary. Studies tell us that international visitors to Israel and the Palestinian territories assign a range of meanings to their visits. Some devote the visit to showing solidarity with one side, while others are more interested in simply learning what they can about the conflict (Brin 2006; Kadman 2010).

Isaac and Plantenkamp (2010) suggested that international volunteers in the West Bank can generate hope among Palestinians by raising international awareness of the Palestinian cause. Belhassen, Uriely, and Assor (2014) highlighted the roles of international tourists in shaping the conflict in the Palestinian village of Bil’in. Hercbergs (2012) showed how Palestinian tour guides use unique guiding techniques, which she insightfully termed “political detouring,” to reveal the consequences of the Israeli occupation for the toured landscape. Clarke (2000) examined how the two communities in the city of Hebron (i.e., the Jewish settlers and the Palestinian residents) present themselves on guided tours for political tourists. Isaac (2010) analyzed the Palestinian Initiative for Responsible Tourism, a code of conduct that encourages tourists to behave more responsibly while traveling in the region. Fischer (2010) discussed the potential role of the tourism industry in promoting peace in the region. Mofakkir and Kelly (2010) suggested that local tourists can help generate hope not only for Palestinians, but also for Israelis. One of the insights arising from this body of literature is that public and private tourism entrepreneurs usually view tourism as an additional mechanism by which the agenda of one side in the conflict can be promoted. This is true even for tourism initiatives that try to promote responsible or sustainable tourism. In other words, the stories that tourism enterprises in the region usually tell are the story of only one side.

**Methodology**

The paper examines the discourse surrounding travel practices offered by eight organizations in order to examine the manner in which ideas about reconciliation are developed and constructed for tourism purposes in a destination with an ongoing conflict. To represent a range of initiatives and organization, the convenience sample consists of private and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The project also includes field observations, informal interviews, semi-structured interviews, and organization website analyses conducted from 2014 to 2022. The non-representative sampling of the examined activities includes eight organizations (see Table 1). These organizations were chosen because of their conscious aspiration to promote peacebuilding and/or reconciliation though travel. The methodological rationale of this paper is that grassroots practices that follow peacebuilding agendas reflect conceptual principles upon which reconciliation serves a touristic framework in a specific geopolitical context in which the conflict is ongoing. Therefore, the convenience sample fits the epistemological rationale of the paper, which is not to represent the reconciliation tourism market, but to analyze this emerging market as a discursive arena. This paper does not cover the Gaza Strip, to which international visitors have very limited access and which is governed by the militant Islamist group, Hamas, that rejects the idea of reconciliation with the state of Israel.

The data for this study came from online content on reconciliation tourism services and the eight organizations; interviews with entrepreneurs and key employees; field observations; and informal interviews. This eclectic approach is in line with the work of Van Maanen (1982), who suggested that ethnography has become a methodology that includes fieldwork tools such as “participant observation, formal and informal interviewing, document collecting, filming, [and] recording” (p. 103). Lune and Berg (2017) suggested that this ethnography represents “new” modes of research that are less strict than the traditional anthropological ethnography, which involves an extended period of living in the field.

To formulate the theme upon which reconciliation is constructed in the discourse surrounding tourism initiatives, multiple-level coding analysis was employed. Following Creswell’s (2007) suggestion for qualitative analysis, in a preliminary analysis of the field notes, I noticed that the construction of reconciliation is prevalent in business brochures, booklets, websites, and social media promotions. I explored these themes through interviews with business owners, employees, and tourists who have taken advantage of these services. With this in mind, I conducted a primary coding round, in which I identified the themes inspired by stages of reconciliation (Auerbach 2009). The analysis yielded several categories (e.g., dual narrative tourism, hopeful detouring, the inclusiveness of victimhood) that were merged into three themes that resonate with the literature on reconciliation and peacebuilding.

The data collection, data analysis, and report writing processes are not distinct steps in the interpretive method tradition. As Creswell (2007) noted, these processes are interrelated and often go on simultaneously in a research project. ... This leads critics to claim that qualitative research is largely intuitive, soft, and relativistic. ... Undeniably, qualitative researchers preserve the unusual and serendipitous, and writers craft each study differently, using analytic procedures that evolve in the field. (p. 150)

Based on this perspective, the analysis process is better represented as a spiral than as a line (see also Bernard 2006). In
this study, every new piece of data had the potential to alter the categories I identified to describe the themes that govern the reconciliation tourism market in Israel and Palestine. The final categories were selected not because they are the most accurate way to describe the reconciliation discourse, but rather because they were flexible enough to contain the various data sources while collectively representing a coherent discourse.

**Findings**

The presentation and discussion of the data is organized around three themes: the recognition of multiple narratives, the inclusiveness of victimhood, and the commitment to transformative ontology. As accepted in qualitative research, each theme is supported by evidence and concurrently discussed in light of relevant theoretical frameworks.

**Recognition of Multiple Narratives**

Narratives are the discursive infrastructure of nearly all tourism. They tell the story of a space and turn it into a place worth visiting, remembering, and telling others about. Arguably, tourism narratives merely project the values and ideologies that govern the societies in which they are circulated. Yet the story that a destination tells can also project an imagined future and the aspiration for reconciliation. The territorial claim for the same piece of land lies at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Each national narrative uses various historical, religious, and social means that explicitly or implicitly legitimize its claim over the disputed territory. At the same time, each side, delegitimizes the other side’s claims. Over the course of history, these national narratives became almost hegemonic for the majority in each party to the conflict. Consequently, Israel and the Palestinian territories are complex traveling spaces, as they hold at least two conflicting but geopolitically significant national narratives. This is reflected, for example, in the differing tourist maps distributed by Israel and the Palestinian Authority that at worst reject or at best omit any mention of another national entity on that land (Wallach 2011). Books and websites on international tourism like *Lonely Planet*, try to reflect this geopolitical complexity, but the average tourist finds it difficult to obtain local maps that explain the multiple perspectives relating to the connection between a land and the peoples that inhabit it.

Mejdi Tours, co-founded by Aziz Abu Sarah and Scott Cooper offers unique travel experiences (Schneider 2019). In a conference organized by the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI) in 2016, Abu Sarah explained the Mejdi’s rationale and vision:

> We thought, what if we take economics and narratives and put them together? And we did it through tourism. So we started the company Mejdi, which is co-owned by my Jewish friend and me. Not many companies are co-owned fifty–fifty. . . . That in itself changes the paradigm but also the model we created challenges the narratives. . . . So instead of having one tour guide, we will have two: one Israeli and one Palestinian who will co-lead the trip together. And instead of having a couple of speakers, what if we will have many different opinions and many different speakers that represent thoughts that we might even disagree with?

The NGO Zochrót (Hebrew for “women remember”) demonstrates an alternative way of creating Palestinian heritage tourism to the ruins of villages occupied and depopulated in the wars of 1948 and 1967. Zochrót applies the framework of pre-transitional and transitional justice to tourism practices.
Since its establishment in 2002, it has arranged dozens of tours (see the company’s YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/user/zochrot). The iNakba app, launched by Zochrót in 2014, is the company’s most popular attempt to promote the Nakba through travel practices among the Israeli-Jewish population and international visitors. The app, available in Arabic, Hebrew, and English, allows travelers to locate and learn about 400 Palestinian sites that were demolished or abandoned. The app also allows users to add videos, photos, and comments from their visit.

In line with the decolonization framework (Cooke 2017; Stinson, Grimwood and Caton, 2021), Zochrót’s tours to depopulated Palestinian localities can cultivate an ethic of responsibility that restores the trust between the hostile parties.

During the fieldwork with Roots, an organization which brings together young people from Israeli settlements and the Palestinian territories in the West Bank, I observed a similar tour to El Kubieba near Hebron, during which the participants listened to stories from a Palestinian elder who had lived in the village before it was occupied and depopulated in 1948. The mutual recognition of multiple narratives was a common theme in the interviews conducted with four tour guides for Mejdi Tours and with seven tourists. One guide also worked for the Breaking Down Wall Tours organized by IPCRI (Figure 1); another also works as a tour guide for Ir Amim. Similar ideas were expressed during the interview with Shared Path’s CEO Uri Kandel, who stressed the promotion of the stories of Arab people and places in his theory of change. Kandel suggested that exposure to marginalized perspectives presented for Jewish Israeli visitors in Arab localities in Israel deeply affects them.

A final example of the centrality of this theme in the travel practices examined in this study can be found in the hospitality services offered by Judur/Shorashim/Roots. At a central junction in the West Bank, they set up a tent in which visitors are invited to meet West Bank Palestinians and Israeli settlers who are members in this organization that demonstrate a rare cooperation between West Bank Israeli settlers and West Bank Palestinians.

**Inclusiveness of Victimhood**

Binational collective victimhood, the idea that both sides of a conflict are its victims plays an important role in willingness to reconcile and even to take action (Shnabel and Nadler 2008).
Therefore, not surprisingly, the reconciliation tourism initiatives examined here confirm the results of previous studies, suggesting that acknowledging the victimhood of both sides contribute to the construction of reconciliation for tourism purposes. To illustrate how victimhood can be used creatively, it is useful to cite one of IPCRI’s Breaking the Wall Tours campaigns. On a visit to Nabi Salah, Palestinian activist Bassem Tamimi opened a talk by saying: “We are the victims of the victims.” This implicit reference to the Holocaust gained the sympathy of his mostly Israeli audience, which did not consist of peace activists, as is customary with political tours to the West Bank. On the bus afterward, the people who had attended the talk mentioned their surprise at hearing Tamimi acknowledge that Israel was a victim. He was then able to discuss the impact of the military occupation on his life.

The idea of inclusive victimhood was also evident in tours where mention of the other’s victimhood was not the main goal of the tour. In July 2021, at the end of Shared Path tour to Jaljulia, an Arab town in Israel, an Israeli participant asked the guide, a local resident, about the possibility of giving up the Nakaba narrative—or at least omitting it from the tours—to facilitate the Israelization of the residents of Jaljulia. He answered that the story about the Nakba should not be viewed as an obstacle to peace, but rather a bridge that links that two national narratives. He then mentioned the importance of teaching Arabs about the Jewish Holocaust.

Yet victimhood was not always used in such a manner. The dual narrative tour of Hebron offered by Abraham Tours offers competing narratives of the divided city, exposing tourists to them in sequence. These tours recognize the victimhood of both sides, a crucial but separate component of the two narratives. Perhaps this is because, in this divided city, the conflict is still very much alive. The victimhood of the Israeli side is presented in its historical context, culminating in a visit to a memorial site commemorating the victims of the 1929 massacre (Figure 2). The Israeli guide and the Jewish residents he hosted have also stressed stories about the discriminatory Mamluk policy that forbade Jewish worshipers from entering the Tomb of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, allowing them no closer than the seventh step on one of the staircases surrounding the holy site. They also described the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers who were buried near the city area in 2014. In addition to rejecting their depiction as perpetrators, the Jewish settlers who meet the tourists after the visit to the Palestinian side of the city also assume the role of the victims who seek to regain their lost power in relation to the international community represented by the tourists.

In a similar vein, the Palestinian guide, with the Palestinian Hebronites she hosted, stressed the socio-economic hardship of living under an Israeli military regime, the 1994 in the Tomb of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs by an Israeli...
extremist, and the ongoing harassment from Jewish settlers who enjoy the full support of the Israeli army.

Although the narratives in the Hebron tour often contradict each other and compete for the tourists’ sympathy, when it comes to the legitimacy of each side and their sacrifices, this tour illustrates how reconciliation tourism initiatives in a conflict-ridden destination can still provide a symbolic space for the victimhood of both sides to be juxtaposed. The visit to the museum in Beit Hadassah, commemorating the 1929 massacre of the Jewish residents of Hebron by Arabs (Cohen 2015) breaks with this victim–victimizer dichotomy. An unexpected element in this museum, which illustrates that even a tragedy can be a source of optimism, is the mention of Arab families who hid Jewish families and saved their lives. This inclusion of the Palestinian residents of the city in the commemoration of the victims dulls the sharp boundaries between aggressors and victims and cultivates a sense of collective victimhood among Hebron residents who opposed the violence. Although participants are encouraged to learn about the atrocities caused by “the other side,” it represents a paradigmatic, inclusive approach to commemoration that moves beyond the victim–victimizer dichotomy that characterized the Palestinian speaker has ever met an Israeli has been through this trip. And I have been in places where the only time that a Palestinian speaker has ever met an Israeli has been through this tour. . . The fact that we are able to stand together, whether we are in a settlement or in a refugee camp, and we are able to say our different narratives and argue and come to a place where we found some common grounds through our narratives is making people think about “what is this place about?,” “how can we move on?,” “where are the points of differences in our opinions and how we can bring them together.” Our goal is that if we can bring enough people, tour guides, and companies and businesses to use their place to bring people together and to change the paradigm, to change the way we think about the conflict that would create a difference.

If I don’t acknowledge there is a problem, how can I solve it? I have to acknowledge that this is a challenge. Inequality in Jerusalem is a challenge. I used to tell a joke about the competition of victimhood between Palestinian and Jewish Israelis. This is the reality, and the tours should acknowledge it.

AWARE of the bewildering effect of Ir Amim’s divided city tour, which is full of examples of victimhood, inequality, and violence, she ended the tour with good news from other regional organizations, such as Parents Circle and Kids for Peace, as she believed that this information gives hope and inspiration to those who believe in reconciliation.

Commitment to Transformative Ontology

One of the challenges that reconciliation tourism entrepreneurs face is how to avoid using the conflict to romanticize reconciliation at the expense of socio-political reality. In other words, talking about reconciliation in a place with an ongoing conflict requires some creativity because the toured reality tells another story. Indeed, in many of the tours in which I participated, the guides open and/or end the tours with a sentence about the bewildering effect of the experiences for those who seek hope. The findings show that reconciliation is usually embedded rhetorically by cultivating an alternative way of looking practically and symbolically at the conflict. This is done not by ignoring the reality, but by cultivating alternative perspectives on issues usually looked at in a deterministic way as either the causes or the results of the conflict. Theoretically speaking, this strategy resonates with the frameworks of transitional justice and conflict transformation, according to which features of the conflict can be used in a transformative manner.

Aziz Abu Sarah explained the manner in which how tourism, as business sector and cultural practices, can provide an alternative intercultural platform for political exchanges and possibilities.

Even today I came from a settlement where we took our group and I was thinking that the only Palestinian some of these settlers have even met really, face to face, in a conversation is through this trip. And I have been in places where the only time that a Palestinian speaker has ever met an Israeli has been through this tour. . . The fact that we are able to stand together, whether we are in a settlement or in a refugee camp, and we are able to say our different narratives and argue and come to a place where we found some common grounds through our narratives is making people think about “what is this place about?,” “how can we move on?,” “where are the points of differences in our opinions and how we can bring them together.” Our goal is that if we can bring enough people, tour guides, and companies and businesses to use their place to bring people together and to change the paradigm, to change the way we think about the conflict that would create a difference.

This ontological use of a transformative lens is often accompanied by a guiding tactic that I call “hopeful detouring,” inspired by Herbergs (2012) “political detouring” in her analysis of the manner in which Palestinian tour guides
draw tourists’ attention to consequences of the occupation Palestinians’ lives. The guides in Jerusalem, Hebron, and Ramallah used political detouring to spotlight localities, incidents, and artifacts that represent hope. In Ir Amim’s tour “United” Jerusalem tour in East Jerusalem, the guide who was trying to explain the complex legal situation of Palestinian residents of the city called the group’s attention to Jerusalem’s only bilingual school:

Guide: You are supposed to vote but you are only allowed to vote for local elections, not for the national election like the Parliament. . . . I am going to stop for a moment. . . . looking to your left there is a building that looks like a school, because it’s a school. This is called the DU-LESHONI school. It is the only school in Jerusalem where Arab and Israeli-Jewish children study together and they speak both Arabic and Hebrew. . . .

Question: Is this basically funded by the government?
Guide: This is mostly private funding. It’s got recognition from the Board of Education so it’s got certifications and funding from that level, but since they do a lot of extras, they got two teachers in class.1

This casual exchange demonstrates the way in which ideas about reconciliation are presented without ignoring dire conditions in the toured place. “Hopeful detouring” redirects the tour’s focus to “froths of hope,” such as poems, creative graffiti, organizations, and peacebuilding practices that are gently integrated into the itineraries.

Shared Paths and Green Tapestry are NGOs that use hospitality as a cultural means to reduce negative stereotypes, diminish prejudices, and promote cultural understanding between Arabs and Jews in Israel. Shared Paths was established in 2015 by Sikkuy—The Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality. Sikkuy runs Shared Paths in Arab towns in three Arab areas in Israel: the Southern Triangle, Lower Galilee, and Wadi Ara. It “aims to create social change through tourism” and “to forge closer ties between Jewish and Arab citizens and promote a shared society, by changing negative attitudes on both sides and boosting economic development at the local level.” The transformative component in these tours is their decision to use the tours to challenge stereotypes that many Israelis have about Arabs while visiting Arab localities. This is extremely difficult to do during an ongoing conflict, where each side takes offense at the actions of the other. In a June 2021 interview, Shared Paths CEO Uri Kandel noted the important role of domestic tourism in promoting cultural understanding and religious tolerance between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis.

We want to tell the story of the Palestinian citizens in Israel. To change the hegemony of who tell the stories of this population in Israel. Our theory of change is that there is a need for deepening Jews’ familiarity with the Arabs. Minority groups are always familiar with the majority group but not vice versa. A recent survey of The Israeli Democracy Institute shows 58.5% of the country’s Jewish citizens do not enter Arab localities. The rest 40% are entering only for shopping, not in order to meet the people. I know that such visits like we do have “bad rap” in the sense that they cannot really make a difference. People tell me “you cannot change someone’s worldview by one visit in an Arab city.” I nevertheless believe that, when you [. . .] meet the persons telling their own stories and the stories of their places, you will be able to rethink [. . .] the bad image that you have about Arab localities in Israel. The bad image will be cracked and this crack will remain with you even after the visit.

In a tour organized by this NGO on July 8, 2021, various incidents, including the riots of Israel’s Arab citizens in May 2021, were used to create an alternative perspective.

Although these NGOs operate within sovereign Israel, in which 20% of the population is Arab Israelis (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics 2019), they demonstrate the potentially transformative role of tourism between the Jews and Palestinians who reside in the West Bank. The Palestinian citizens of Israel are the Arabs who remained in the territory that became the State of Israel in 1948 and were granted citizenship. Over the years, these citizens have undergone “Israelization” and “Palestinization,” which has unique and conflicted identity (Smooha 2017). The complex political, historical, and social issues, all of which are related to the question of identity, are addressed on these tours. Situations of hosts and guests, often built around food, provide an environment in which they can safely discuss controversial issues, such as the 1956 Kafar Kasim massacre (Amram 2019).

The commitment to transformative ontology is also apparent in the innovative and subversive ways in which some of these organizations present a regional conflict to visitors. Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger, a settler in the West Bank and the co-founder of Judur/Roots/Shorashim, gave an online lecture, “How the international community can help bring long-term change in Israel/Palestine.” Schlesinger’s introduction is an appropriate conclusion to this section:

Roots, as you may or may not know, is the Israeli-Palestinian grassroots initiative for understanding, non-violence and transformation. We work at the heart of the conflict in the Palestinian territories, what some Jews call Judea and Samaria, and we do our best to build bridges of human acceptance, recognition, partnership, trust, and empathy between the two sides who live side-by-side but completely separate one from the other. Through face-to-face meetings and joint programs, we try to begin healing to what I call “the hubris of exclusivity”—a disease that leads both sides to deny the existence, the humanity, and the narrative of the other side. We in Roots believe that we are laying the human groundwork that is necessary for political solution that will bring peace to this tiny piece of land that both sides call home.
Discussion

By analyzing the emerging market of reconciliation tourism in a destination with an active conflict, this paper demonstrates the use of tourism as a site in which hopeful ideas and about reconciliation are inscribed into tourist offerings. Dual narrative tours, hopeful detouring, and the embrace of the collective victimhood perspective can be seen as rhetorical and performative tactics through which this is actually done in fieldwork. The three themes around which the findings are presented collectively demonstrate the symbolic role of a tourism setting as a cultural and political arena in which this final stage can be practiced and rehearsed by actors who believe in reconciliation. They seem to see tourism as a cultural arena in which they can creatively express their ideas.

These findings both echo and challenge the results of research on the reconciliation process (Auerbach 2009). Many of the stages in Auerbach’s reconciliation pyramid can be found in the findings, but not necessarily in the suggested order. For example, the mutual recognition of victimhood and narrative is a precursor to Auerbach’s seventh and last stage: the incorporation of narrative. According to Auerbach, a lack of interaction between antagonistic groups might prevent progress to this final stage in which both sides share an integrated narrative that they have constructed. The findings of this study that show that stages of reconciliation can be manifested whether or not their appearance in reality can be explained by applying the idea that tourism in conflict-ridden destinations can be seen as Bhabha’s third space (1994). Furthermore, the idea that the examined initiatives represent a third space contribute to the debate over the relationship between tourism and peace. These findings do not necessarily support one side of this debate: whether tourism is a catalyst for peace by promoting cross-cultural understanding or that tourism requires peace and political stability to exist. Instead, the third space framework for the interpretation of the findings suggest that tourism practitioners can manifest their ideas about the possibilities of reconciliation regardless of the reality.

The findings also collectively demonstrate the examined initiatives are closer to the theoretical framework of conflict transformation than to conflict resolution. In line with the conflict transformation approach that views conflict as an energy that should be channeled into a better reality and not as a problem to solve, the empirical evidence of how tourism is used in line with approach. In this sense, the tourism initiatives examined here do not present an idealistic or utopian view of resolution, but rather they deliberately use aspects of the conflict to promote and implement their tourism offerings on a possible trajectory of transformation. In “hopeful detouring,” directing the tourist gaze to reconciliation practices in the conflict landscape was done with full awareness that they were bubbles of inspiration picked by organizations or by the tour guides.

Shnabel and Nadler’s (2008) needs-based model suggests that for reconciliation to succeed, it should address the needs of both victims and perpetrators. While victims seek to restore their dignity and sense of control, the perpetrators seek to restore their morality. Arguably, viewing tourism as a third space enables the transmission of supportive messages that accommodate the needs of both sides in a safe context. Although I did not find the perfect example in which all needs were addressed, the data illustrate the manner in which tourism can be served as an alternative space in which some needs can be, rhetorically and symbolically, addressed, as in Mejdi and Abraham’s dual narrative tours.

Conclusion

The theoretical contribution of this study is primarily conceptual. The suggested analysis is the first attempt to define and examine reconciliation tourism initiatives. By applying discourse analysis to understand the principles around which reconciliation tourism initiatives are organized in the Israeli-Palestinian context, the study sets the foundation for further theoretical and applied examinations on the complex relationship between tourism and peace. Although previous conceptualizations of this topic offer a rather linear understanding of causality (Farmaki 2017), the third space highlights how tourism can be used for aspirational political expressions of grassroots actors. In this context, the theoretical arguments in this paper can be examined by empirical research in other conflict-ridden destinations. Once implied and enriched, the insights may provide tourism planners with a better understanding of the way in which an ongoing conflict can be used to create travel experiences that do more than restate or summarize the causes and consequences of the conflict, or by supporting one side.

The following limitations of this study should be mentioned. First, considering the convenience sampling of the organizations and the fact that the study was conducted on a single destination, caution should be exercised in generalizing the results. In addition, this study focuses on the supply side without a close examination of how tourists have perceived their experiences. It would be useful to investigate participants’ perceptions of the conflict or the way such initiatives affect the actual image of destinations. With that said, the insights from viewing tourism in conflict-ridden destinations as a third space can be applied by tourism marketers who might want to soften or restore the image of destinations. Marketers of destinations can either apply the three principles found in this study, which represent the discourse of reconciliation in conflict-ridden destinations, or use an applicable example, idea or technique (e.g., hopeful detouring, commitment to transformative ontology, acceptance of multiple narratives) in their efforts to maintain a hospitable destination image. Moreover, local authorities that would
like to soften their image as conflict-ridden destinations can also apply a policy that cultivate tourism entrepreneurs who employ the principles suggested here. Such a policy will increase the visibility of such initiatives which are usually not in the limelight.

I would like to conclude with a poetic note inspired by Michael Ende’s *Neverending Story*. The hero of the story is a boy named Bastian who travels into the imaginary world of Fantastica which is being eaten up by “Nothing” (Ende 1983). While reading the book of the same title, Bastian learns that the only way to defeat the despair caused by “Nothing” is to create a new Fantastica with the power of his own imagination, which also helps him to find his way back into the real world. Ende’s allegory is attractive both because tourism is often metaphorically described as the realm of dreams and fantasy (e.g., Belhassen 2020), and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is often described as a never-ending saga (e.g., Bar-On 2006). The idea of using tourism enterprises to imagine a future beyond the conflict is powerful and affecting. Not because it is so imaginary, but because this wishful thinking is taken place in the harsh reality of the conflict. By applying the theoretical angle of Bhabha’s third space, this study illuminates the overlooked role of tourism as a fertile space for imagination and wishful thinking with which humankind can fight darkness, despair and the “Nothing” that threatens to eat up our precious life.

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**Note**

1. According to the Israeli Ministry of Justice the DU-LESHONI (bilingual) school’s budget on 2020 consisted of: 64.6% donations from abroad; 16.1% sales of general services; 11.3% State funding; 6.9% donations from Israel; 0.8% municipal funding. (https://www.guidestar.org.il/organization/580293710)

**References**


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