



Conscious Life presents

Ayahuasca for Conflict Resolution

Guest: Dr Leor Roseman and Sami Awad

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[00:00:15] Alexander Beiner

I'm here with Leor Roseman and Sami Awad for a very special conversation. Leor is a neuroscientist and a psychedelic researcher at Exeter University and Israeli. And Sami is a Palestinian peace activist and founder of the Holy Land Trust, a non-profit Palestinian organization committed to fostering peace, justice and understanding.

Together they ran one of the most pioneering psychedelic research processes in history, bringing Israelis and Palestinians together for ayahuasca ceremonies aimed at conflict resolution.

For those unfamiliar, ayahuasca is a South American plant medicine comprises two plants, Psychotria viridis and Banisteriopsis caapi. And the active ingredient that's psychedelic is DMT. So Leor and Sami, welcome.

Sami Awad

Thank you. Good to be here.

Alexander Beiner

It's good to have you both. Yeah, this is a really a conversation I've been looking forward to and really excited to introduce people to the research you guys have been doing.

So, you know, you've been doing this incredibly innovative and I think very important work on the effect of ayahuasca on conflict resolution between Israeli and Palestinian people drinking together. I want to get into that in detail.

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I'd also maybe like to start with each of you describing or how did you meet, like, why did you, what was it that made you want to work together on this kind of project together? So maybe, Leor you could start and then Sami, you could give some...

Dr Leor Roseman

Sure. So I was a researcher, I'm a psychedelic researcher and I was at the time at Imperial College, London. Now I'm in Exeter and I was doing neuroscience and psychedelic therapy, but wanting to explore more on that and wanting to explore the groups and peace building and conflict resolution kind of move into the relational aspect of psychedelics.

And as Israeli I was searching for Palestinian partners in this. And I guess in the beginning many people actually directed me to Sami, but he was not ready yet to accept me. But through time we warmed up and we met on a regular basis until trust was built.

And I think Sami was already directed to that direction as well. So it was the right connection and working with collective trauma and healing collective trauma, it was the right connection and it was just what took a while until it was actually built when we said, "Okay, we want to work together and do this".

Sami Awad

Yeah. So for me, I come from a background of activism. I've been very much involved in political activism for Palestinian liberation and peacemaking since a very young age. Even started an organization committed to nonviolent resistance and activism and bringing people together and creating joint projects between Palestinians and Israelis.

And at one point in my journey of activism, I realized that we cannot achieve peace without addressing the collective trauma of both communities, that this issue has been ignored and neglected in the political process. But it is an issue in the background that is motivating both sides, fearing the other, mistrusting the other, even engaging in piece work out of fear and mistrust, not out of a commitment for peace and justice and equality.

And so, as Leor said, in my journey of exploring trauma healing, collective trauma healing, also personal engagement with plant medicine and seeing the effects on a personal level, I began to also seek what does it mean to engage in this on a collective work on peace work, on justice work, by bringing Palestinians and Israelis together. And I was interviewed for the research that Leor did. And then from there, as Leor said, it took us time, but we connected.

And when he came up with this very concrete project idea, let us do it, let us bring Palestinians and Israelis together to engage in collective work, trauma healing work, and collective vision work, I was fully in. I think it was the right time and I was ready for that.

Alexander Beiner

So this is obviously a really challenging time for the Israeli and Palestinian people to be having this conversation. What has it been like? What's the response been to this kind of work, to not just

obviously conflict resolution, but conflict resolution using ayahuasca or plant medicines? Has it changed over the last six months or so? What's the maybe, Sami, you could start from your experience with the people you're connecting to and then Leor from yours.

[00:04:50] Sami Awad

Well, I want to start by saying that it has entrenched my resolve to doing this work more understanding how collective trauma in the last six months, since October 7 has been used, has been manipulated, has been abused, the historic traumas that the Jewish community for experience immediately comes living as a living example of what happened on October 7 and beyond.

So this fear, this existential threat that people went through and continued to go through on the Palestinian side again, this existential fear of ethnic cleansing, of genocide that's happening to the Palestinian people, that we are being pushed out of this land again, connecting to the historic trauma of what happened in the Nakba 1948 only shows that if we don't address these issues in a concrete way, these issues will continue to come and haunt us.

So on a personal level, I would say the commitment is much stronger than any time before. I think the reality that we live in now, as you said, is very, very difficult, very challenging. And it's not just about plant medicine work. It's about any joint work, any joint spaces of Palestinians and Israelis coming together to create a different reality or to engage sometimes and just dialogue circles and spaces.

The situation since October 7 really polarized both communities, and many people who were involved in peace work also jumped into the narrative of their community against the other.

And so there is, I think, an overall rejection at this time of any joint work. There is complete mistrust between the communities. This set. There are many, many groups of Palestinians and Israelis that continue and I think are developing also new approaches.

Understanding the situation now is not like what it was before October 7 means. We also need to develop new tools of engagement, new understanding, new terminology, new language, new approaches on how we are also responsible to work within our communities in particular, not everything jumping into joint spaces. A lot of work needs to happen on both sides. So in this disaster, I see a slight window of opportunity, I would say.

Dr Leor Roseman

Yeah, I agree. I mean, we always got both praises and critiques in the past. Some of them are exaggerated and some are just like a good support or some are actually good feedback and critique. Right? So we got a lot, but some of them were accusations, right? I was being accused of being anti-Semite sometimes, as I'm a Jewish Israeli and being accused of being a colonizer Zionist, and kind of blind to any structural injustices and stuff like this.

And I think since October 7, we had to...I was actually in despair for a few months. I was like completely wrecked, hopeless. And there was part of me that didn't want to continue this work.

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And I think what Sami said of just the fact that the idea of dialogue in joint spaces, this is the challenging thing, more than the psychedelics here, to actually bring people together without psychedelics is really, really challenging, because there are lots of forces that exaggerate the separation from both sides. They exaggerate the separation.

So to do what we want to do, we really need to have that, you know, the dialog as the basis. So there was a part of me that wanted to disengage, but I think we just decided to maybe be quiet, let the storm pass a bit, you know, hold, gain strength, connect on a small basis, do work separately, Israelis and Palestinians, but with the intention of then later on meeting, right.

So kind of just have a solid foundation and let the storm pass and until the time comes and we can do this work again. And I think now I feel in the last month or so or a couple of months from my side, an extra kind of motivation.

And I hear it from more people as suddenly there's a need for such work and more people that I didn't even believe will encourage the psychedelic part of it suddenly are encouraging that maybe because they don't see any other solution, so they're willing to imagine all possibilities and allow all possibilities to happen.

So I think there are kind of, they're quiet, but there are lots of forces connecting and trying to continue to do some work.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, yeah. It's really inspiring to hear that. I'm quite touched by that, especially, you know, considering the difficulties and that there's still this desire that you both have for what feels like really important work. I want to talk about the actual study because it's, you know, I know quite a lot about it. We've spoken before, and, you know, one thing that I'm left with all the time is just how complex it was. Right? And just how many different aspects you were bringing in and what a feat it really was to get it together.

So maybe you could tell us, you know, for someone who's never heard of it, how. What was the study? Because there were actually two aspects or two kind of studies, right? So maybe the journey of, you know, and what you were actually trying to find in the research. Maybe Leor, you could start, and then Sami, after you could. You could add in your perspective.

Dr Leor Roseman

I'll start with the first study I was doing. The first study was more just ethnographic, qualitative, phenomenological research on the underground seen in Israel and Palestine. And that was not groups that we organized. And in this, I was with Antwan Saca, who is a friend of Sami and a colleague who was a peace activist. Together with Antwan, we did a road trip.

We interviewed many Israelis and Palestinians who drink ayahuasca together. Natalie Ginsburg from MAPS also was involved in that. And we. That we kind of started steering a certain energy. That was the feeling. Even through just conversations, we started steering energy.

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And the main themes that came from that, that people shared when they're drinking in the space together, even without the intention of conflict resolution, was that there are a few powerful moments. Some of them are this communitas, identity fusion, oneness beyond identities, right?

But if it was just that, we felt that we would criticize it, right? Because it can normalize the situation. It can just harmonize the situation and deny the conflict from entering. Sometimes conflict is needed to process and to liberate from structural injustices and so on.

So we worded it like that from the idea of the irony of harmony, that creating harmony on a small scale creates this pseudo equality that prevents the kind of energy that is required, the anger that is required for changing real life inequality.

Right? So, but then we saw, and we heard other stories. While others were about the strong moments of recognition. So suddenly, if you imagine Israelis and Palestinians coming with a framework, a consciousness framework that is defined by the conflict, the ethos of conflict.

We are always the victims from Israeli side, let's say. "We're always the victims". "We need to be united to win". "They are wrong". You know, there are a few stories that kind of help us process and give meaning to the conflict, and they preserve the conflict, but they also make us see the other in a certain way.

And we felt that there were moments of that kind of framework was reduced, and it allowed strong moments of recognition. So people describe these moments of, like, let's say, listening to Arabic music or listening to Hebrew music as a moment of strong expansion.

So they expanded something in their narrative. There was something that was unspoken or something that was new and novel, and they felt like the chests are opening, there's kind of breathing something that's unspoken. The political entered, but in a way that expanded frameworks.

And there was a strong moment of openness and recognition of the other and the other's pain and the other's challenges and traumas in these moments and the beauty of also the other culture, right? So there's through prayers and through music, there was this intercultural exchange that was very shifting in identities for people.

And then there were visions of collective trauma that they were very strong. The pain of the land, the blood that goes down to the land, seeing the trauma from the other side's perspective, having historical visions of the Nakba or the Holocaust. And it's kind of like bombastic trauma energy that was also motivating people to wanting to change, right.

So it wasn't just this kind of mystical experience of oneness and unity and everything is love. There's also an energy of kind of stimulating action, you know, stimulating mission or wanting to share a certain message, motivating people to act through those visions, through something new that was revealed, a revelation.

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So I have a paper from *Revelations to Revolutions*, right? *Revelations and Revolutions*. So the revelatory moment is a revolutionary energy that motivates people. And then we kind of that was some insights from this study.

And then we started designing the second study together with Armel Lehmann, who is a psychedelic therapist, Israeli, Indios Brasil, a Brazilian person, another. Another Palestinian facilitator. And together we started designing the second study based on some insights, but also doing something new and incorporating all the new voices that joined the project. So maybe you could...

Sami Awad

Yeah, yeah, yeah. For me, it was amazing. So everything that came out of the first research paper, as Leor said, was done in a setting that wasn't organized to be that, with that intention of bringing Palestinians and Israelis.

So the question became, what if we do it actually with the clarity and the setting and invitation for the participants to come to this, bringing people together and to drink together, and to engage in different aspects of conflict resolution, transformation, trauma, healing tools, in addition to drinking medicine together.

And then, so we had three groups of Palestinians and Israelis. We met in Spain, where we did this work. Also part of meeting in Spain before that was a lot of preparation work, where the groups met with each other. The Israelis were invited, and they did come into the occupied territories to see the reality of what life is here, to witness it firsthand as an experience having many discussions of building trust between the members before heading to Spain.

And in Spain, we had also created programs where people were able to really understand and express how their personal lives are affected by the collective of their nations and communities, and how the collective is also influenced by their personal engagement in their communities and nations.

That's a methodology called the spiritual questionnaire, where people really open up and go deep. And from that, they went into the first ceremony, which was focused on creating awareness and healing for the past, the collective past that we all faced.

And as you said, the complexity of it is that it doesn't just bring the Palestinian Israeli conflict. It doesn't bring just the Holocaust and the Nakba. It brings within each community also aspects of how they relate to their own identity groups. If it's the religious and the secular, if it's tribal and modern, many, many aspects, gender issues came up.

When we talk about collective healing, a lot, a lot comes up in these spaces. And so different individuals were going through different experiences. But it was quite amazing to see it all come together in that ceremony of medicine. And the processes that individuals went through.

After that, going through the next day of summarizing, integrating the experience, and then moving into a methodology of how do we look for the future? What is a vision of the future from a

place that is healed? What does peace look like when we are not afraid of each other? What does life look like when we are connected together as community,

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And then creating different programs and going into ceremony again with that intention of the future, of visioning the future, and again, to see the results that came out of this. And for me, I would say on a personal level, the participants went through a very, very deep and profound, transformative and healing experience. Being together.

The level of connection, the level of trust, the level of openness that they shared with each other. I would say as an activist for many, many years, I've never seen happen in much of the work that I've done in the past.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, I'd love to go in a little bit more into those ceremonies and to give people some context. There's lots of different types of ways that people hold ayahuasca ceremonies in different parts of South America.

And from Santo Daime, where there's movement and dancing and sometimes a slightly lower dose, and then to the Shipibo model of sitting, and you might have 30 people sitting in a circle with buckets ready to purge, and then a shaman singing icaros traditional songs.

So you had a lot of options to choose from, of, well, how are you going to make this particular ceremony for this particular group of people? So what were some of the considerations you brought into that, the kind of ceremony you wanted to make?

Dr Leor Roseman

Yeah, I think participation was important. So a facilitator that would allow participation, that the structure of the ceremony would not be too strong. Right. So you have, even in Santo Daime, it's a communal ceremony, but you have sometimes hymns and songs, and you read out of them, and the dance moves are quite structured, and there's no much space for participation in the sense of, like, really bringing yourself into that.

You know, it's more kind of the you sing together, it's very collective and communal, but without also individual participation, and maybe other ones are more. You lie in darkness and you just go into your personal journey. But there's not much space for communal elements.

So we wanted the personal processes space for that. We wanted communal processes, and we wanted participation. So the facilitator Indios Brasil, he kind of works in a quite mixed way. He came back from the Ashaninka tribe. He was traveling, he's traveling a lot. He absorbs a lot from different places. He lives in the Amazon, but he doesn't have any strict way of working and...

But the ceremonies were that the first cup was in darkness and it was more space for introspection. And then the second cup we'll light more candles around the altar and we bring the guitars out. So there's more, like the guitar comes from the chest. It brings people together, there's

more collective, there's joy sometimes, you know, so there's... It starts in darkness, and then the light comes later on in the ceremony. Yeah.

[00:20:18] Sami Awad

Yeah, I would add and say part of it is also creating the space where people are able to connect with each other and explore self and collective responsibility in the space, instead of them just sitting and receiving and going through their process.

Also, there was beautiful moments where people were supporting each other, holding each other, having different conversations with each other, going through processes together. And so that's that space of sort of like organized chaos, because we come from a chaotic place.

So in a way that bringing that, but in a setting that is also held and clear and a container that is able to hold that chaos, I think, for me, was very powerful and amazing, and it created even deeper connections with the participants to see them taking a role, because ultimately our aim is to cultivate and create leaders that are able to work in their communities. And that, I felt, really happened during these ceremonies.

Alexander Beiner

Amazing. Amazing. Go on, go ahead.

Dr Leor Roseman

The chaos allowed also the space of emergence, right? So because it was light facilitation, there is space for chaos. Sometimes maybe it's too much, you know, it's kind of a delicate dance and... But it allows space for emergence, for the group to bring something. And when it happens, it's magic. It's like something, "Wow. How did it happen?", you know?

But it requires for also participants to shift something in the way they're there in the space. They're not just receivers. The idea that the ritual is co created, if you're used to just receiving the ritual, it takes time to shift this kind of understanding, and it takes a while until the emergence happen. But when it happens, it's magical. It feels spontaneous, but it's kind of spontaneous almost every time. So it's like, as you said, it's organized chaos.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, it's amazing. I think it's interesting for anyone watching. We've had a lot of great people from the clinical world talking about psychedelics from lots of different angles. But what's often really consistent is this very ordered two therapists, one patient. It's one to one. It's very Western in that sense. It's very sort of you and your individuality and going inward. And then sometimes there's group retreats where there's a bit more of that communitas.

But what really excites me - many things about your research - is that aspect of the emergence and the chaos, you know, that I think is really quite unique. I'd love to hear from each of you, maybe Sami beginning what was the most impactful thing you witnessed during ceremony that has just really stayed with you in the last few years.

[00:22:55] Sami Awad

Wow. So many, so many things. Well, what's coming to my mind is, in the third group, we had a disproportionate number of participants, where we had, I think it was eight Palestinians and four Israelis.

Dr Leor Roseman

And no Israeli musicians as well.

Sami Awad

And no musicians. And so all the musicians were Palestinian. And for me, it was beautiful during the ceremony, how at one point, because the energy was also very Palestinian and very present, all of a sudden, the music and the songs turned into almost like a Palestinian wedding, a Palestinian celebration of dancing around the altar and singing Arabic songs and Arabic music.

And at one point, you could see that the kind of Israelis sitting on the side, because part of what we were addressing is this trauma. And then one of the biggest trauma is the demographic threat that there's going to be more of them than us, and what will they do if there's more of them than us?

And that came out. Stuff like this comes up in ceremonies and in that, in that dance, in that movement, and the invitation to see slowly how both communities mix with each other, interacted with each other. And the dancing started happening with everybody.

Everybody started participating where, "Yeah, we could actually celebrate together. We could be one together. Our differences shouldn't be what separates us, should be what brings us together to celebrate each other in our differences". So for me, that's a memory that really sticks for me in that time.

Dr Leor Roseman

Yeah, that was a good moment indeed. And I think for me, I mean, there's lots of memories, and there's something for me in the movement from tension to release that is, you know, on a personal level, it's catharsis, right? Emotional breakthroughs, release, or insights.

On a collective level, it's like, it's a celebration, but it's a celebration that comes out of, like, tension and pain and there's, like, uncomfortableness and you kind of feel that you're going to be stuck there forever. And it's that layer of surprise of the celebration of the relief.

But it's a celebration that comes from, like, from pain. It's not just like, you know, like, let's celebrate. You know, it comes after a deep process, after dealing with lots of stuff, after engaging with all the triggers and fears and angers and guilts and coming out of it, and then celebrating the quality of celebration is just, like, out-worldly, right? So it's like, I think that that movement from tension to celebration is something that I always enjoy.

[00:25:37] Alexander Beiner

And I would love to hear as well about really what you've learned from the research and kind of what's next. You know, this is, you know, what's exciting, potentially, is how can this really innovative research be applied to, say, conflicts in other areas or applied more to the conflict in Israel and amongst Israelis and Palestinians.

What's the, I know there's no simple takeaways, but where are you looking next? Where would you like to kind of keep developing what you're learning? Yeah, Leor, you can go ahead.

Dr Leor Roseman

So by the end of each program, there was strong energy. There was a circle of commitments the last day, and in the commitments, everybody were full of strength and hope. And this kind of really strong energy of like, "We can do it. We're a community. We're together. We can really do it. We can really change", right. There's really strong confidence as well.

And I think that the challenges in this project, and this is what the next project is aiming to deal with, is how to land with that energy. Right, so I imagine that, you know, you...always with psychedelics, you have these strong moments, and then you return to a reality that doesn't necessarily goes well with it. You know, you have sometimes those shocks.

So when you create the spirit of community, but you don't have the structure for a community later on, it can bring some, you know, sadness to people. If you bring the hope up, you might create the despair. If you bring the power to change, you might create...And without the tools to change, you might just, like, bring all this energy up without the tools to change.

So we did indeed see some people, like a month after returning, sometimes even six months after returning, dealing with those challenges, and we didn't really plan the integration in that sense. We didn't even realize that it will be so powerful, right? We were not ready that it will be so powerful.

We were just having this intuition, but we didn't really realize that it will work, you know, so, so we really didn't plan. We didn't really plan the integration well. And it's always with psychedelics, integration, integration, right. And but on the collective level, on the activist level, it really is an energy, a revolutionary energy that ignited.

And, like, if a revolution doesn't happen, it's so, like, tragic. If you fall in love and it doesn't happen, it's tragic, right? So the moments of opening up, that motivate movement, they want to ripple out in reality. And if the ripple doesn't, like, have space to ripple, if the creation doesn't have space to be created, then the energy, I think, can flip on the person or on a collective.

So the next project, Ripples, is a charity we're opening. And that's with that intention of also how to create a larger project, (this was a small pilot), so like a larger project with more continuity with a community that builds from one program after the other, that holds space for each other.

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Those who were in one program continue to maybe support processes of other programs, that there is a space to continue meeting to preserve the community spirit into a real community, and there's a kind of ecosystem that supports the creations that want to come out of it.

This can be art, it can be activism, but it can also be like, if there's a group of policymakers, then they want to create a document, right? So how to support the ripple of the creation of a document, how to support the ripple of, like, the creation of a song, right?

So also have the resources and the plan to continue that in a program that is much longer than just like a retreat. It's like a one year program. It has six months of building trust slowly, maybe having more accurate screening of people, then doing an immersion of ten days or two weeks, and then having six months integration.

And people sign up from advance for all of this process, right. So, the group knows that they hold each other for a whole year. And in that six months after, they also start moving the energy of this kind of excitement into creation.

Sami Awad

Yeah, I mean, I'll just add a little bit to say, the reality that we live in now for the last six, seven months of this tremendous violence and killing and pain that is happening, I think, calls for us to be active, to engage in this work. We know very well when lack of healing happens to traumatized community, what happens to these communities.

And then. So for us, I think it has to be a very clear intention for us to do the work and to bring trauma healing into both communities at a greater level and to understand that psychedelics is a tool. It's not the only tool, and we need to engage in numerous tools of healing.

If there is any future for the peoples of this land to live together in peace, we have to begin to address now what is happening and what just happened in 2023 and 2024 in this land. We cannot wait 30, 40 years from now and all of a sudden begin to talk about ancestral trauma and how do we heal it. We need to engage now. And so I think our work is going to be very important and very needed.

And like we always say, this is not meant...psychedelics is not meant for everybody, but for those who engage in it and go through the process. We also hope that they will take on leadership role. If it's in art and music and activism and politics, in building communities, many, many options are available to create this energy field of what it means to engage in peace work from a healed space.

Alexander Beiner

Beautiful. Yeah, thank you for that.

[00:31:32] Dr Leor Roseman

Kind of wanted me to add something that, you know, like theories of change you can imagine there's the force of saying no, this like activism, resistance, "Cease fire now", you know, "Stop the war, stop killing Palestinians, get out of Gaza".

You know, this is where the right now in our right now in our time, this is where all or most of the energy should go, right. It's like really just before thinking too much, just say no to what is like unjust, bad, you know, people are dying right now, say no to that. You know, this is like for sure.

And then there are other forces of change, of like, let's say consciousness research. You heal collective trauma, you heal identities, you heal frameworks, you know, you create the consciousness of the future. And there's the energy of, like, creating the bubbles of the future. Like the, how those, like there are two people, we live on one land and we need to get along, right?

We need to create a bubble of how it looks like. Without those communities that inspire, that live together, that create together, that enjoy one another, but also knowing the reality and being, you know, seeing the truth that is happening, seeing like not blinded to that. Without that, there's no inspiration. Without that there's just like an us or them mentality.

So even if all the forces of resistance go to say no, but there's no something that inspires how the future would look like, you know, it might create a strengthening us or them mentality and instead of an us and them mentality, right.

So I think we're project is kind of fitted there. We want to be in the resistance as well. We want to, like, we support, you know, the fights as well. We're not strategies that competing and we just see this as a source of inspiration.

Alexander Beiner

Yeah, it's really, really important and needed work and I'm glad you're both doing it. So... Yeah, thank you so much for taking the time. I think a lot of people will feel really inspired by this. So. Sami Awad, Leor Roseman, thank you, thank you.