

## Conversations on Compassion podcast

### Creating Beloved Community Through Yoga in Palestine w/Maha El-Sheikh

#### Transcript

**Maha El-Sheikh:** Wouldn't it be wonderful to open a yoga center here in Ramallah, a place where people can breathe... where families can come and just play. And breathe.

*Music*

**Leslie Langbert:** Welcome to Conversations on Compassion. I'm Leslie Langbert. Today, my guest is Maha El-Sheikh. Maha is a wonderful spirit I have very recently had the pleasure to get to know.

I'm talking with Maha today because she has a really inspiring story, and she demonstrates an incredible amount of courage, and in that courage, an example of resistance demonstrated through love and the creation of community.

There's often not a lot of stories, I think, that are told about the experience of Palestinians. And this conversation is to lift up and honor as well, the work that our teacher also did side by side in the West Bank in sharing the yoga tradition and sharing other teachings.

I hope that you enjoy.

Welcome Maha! It is so wonderful to be with you!

**Maha El-Sheikh:** Thank you Leslie. I'm really, really happy to be here.

**Leslie:** Yay! Yeah, so I've been so looking forward to this conversation for such a long time. I was so excited to learn that our paths have been crossing in different ways, but it was just really a few weeks ago that I kind of connected the dots, and so we have a couple of just extremely inspiring wonderful women in common. So, first our dear mutual friend Brooke Dodson- Lavelle.

For listeners, if you go back into our archive, we've got a Conversation on Compassion with her and her inspiring organization Courage of Care.

And our other deeply, deeply inspiring teacher who just earlier this year left the body, Shradhasagar, Ruth Hartung, who was the director of Seven Centers Yoga Arts in Sedona.

And so yeah, I just love that we have had these connections with both Shradha and Brooke now for some time and that their light and wisdom, you know, finally, brought us together.

**Maha:** Exactly! And we were even in the same space together and didn't know until we...well really you, connected the dots a few weeks later and reached out. I'm really touched by that.

**Leslie:** Yeah, you know everything happens in right time doesn't it?

**Maha:** It does!

**Leslie:** So, let's begin with just learning more.. about you and just tell us a bit about yourself and your background.

**Maha:** I was kind of raised with a curiosity always about my heritage and culture and the Middle East and was always kind of raised to be very proud of my Arab background and at the same time as a child trying my best to kind of find my way and fitting in in American culture which, maybe those who are also born to immigrant parents might be able to relate with.

**Maha:** And I always had this really deep sense of seeking justice, I think, from my father, who I can remember so clearly always kind of talking about fundamental human rights, and I would roll my eyes at the time, but also knowing very well, and being touched- very touched by that.

And so yeah, from a very young age, I was quite engaged in the pursuit for social justice on various topics most related to the Middle East, and particularly like the US involvement in the Middle East through the various wars, etc, especially around Palestine, and the occupation of Palestine and the US role in supporting occupation of Palestine.

So I, in early... around yeah 2006 or so, after working for a few years in Washington DC and international development, which was kind of the path I took to try to address social justice issues internationally, I was relocated to Palestine, which was a dream come true for me. That's kind of how I ended up there.

And what was meant to be a one-year job contract then turned out to be about 15 years in total, so it was a major, major... had a huge influence on my life.

And so, when I think about me or home Palestine comes up very, very strongly.

**Leslie:** What kind of, captured your heart in a way that that you felt such a such a desire to want to stay and to offer your support and offer your gifts there?

**Maha:** Yeah, Palestine captured my heart. That's a beautiful way to put it. Whenever people asked me, "where are you from?" I would always kind of say my blood is Egyptian and Jordanian but my heart is Palestinian and I very much feel that.

I don't know if you've ever been there? it's a place of so many contradictions in the sense that it's a beautiful land geographically speaking; incredible nature, the three of the most holiest religions... it is a very special place, and you know, under settler colonial rule.

I grew up knowing about what was happening in Palestine, so I did not go naively, however, seeing it with my own eyes was something that really made me understand that there was so much that I didn't understand and didn't know also and even after 15 years of living there, and working there every day I learned something new about what life living under occupation actually means, because it's quite shocking.

Your life is completely controlled by an external power. You know, you wake up in the morning and you don't know if you're going to be able to make it to school or work, or how you're going to make it to school or work. Or whether you're going to make it home or not, or whether you're going to have water when you get home, whether there's going to be certain food products or not.

So everything we kind of take for granted in the West as just common life is not taken for granted, there. With all that said, the people, the Palestinians are the warmest, most kind and loving, most hopeful people I've ever known.

I was continuously learning and humbled by their ability to live fully, to smile, to laugh, to be generous, to be kind, to be compassionate, even when it really felt like a lot of times the world was completely against them.

A lot of people ask me how I managed to live there for so long, knowing that the situation there is very, very harsh. And I always say it was because of the people. They showed me... they taught me life. Every day, they taught me life and I'm forever indebted and grateful for that experience and for the way that they allowed me into their lives.

**Maha:** And I just also have to say, in terms of my privilege - you know I went in with an American passport. It wasn't easy because I am Arab and so I was treated as an Arab first and not as an American first, so I was often humiliated - strip searched, had guns pointed at me when I would try to enter the country, etc.

However, once I was in because of my passport, I did have free access to all of historic Palestine, which many of my friends and colleagues who were born and raised there did not have the same access.

And I was able to even get in to areas many Palestinian refugees Palestinians and the date diaspora are not even allowed to go back to visit their own homeland. So I really say this with full acknowledgment of my great privilege to have been able to go at all and to be to be welcomed and cared for like I was.

**Leslie:** I'm so struck, too, by the experiences that you're sharing. That you had this sort of dichotomy between like coming in and you know being on that, on the receiving end of inequity, but also describing this sense of privilege of being able to gain access to sacred sites, there is just really...it's wild... like I don't... I can only imagine what that was like to live that. You know, hearing that I'm like whoa... that must just feel like you're...you know, spiritually emotionally kind of feeling like you're kind of ping-ponged between, you know *ok, so why this treatment in this way and then this other end of treatment in another way?*

**Maha:** Absolutely. That and then also being there as an American and seeing what my government, my tax dollars were doing to fuel that situation was like another level of it, you know? it was very odd at times... 'odd' is not really quite the right word, but you know working in international development, I was working with US-Aid funded programs that were, you know, doing good work, and at the same time, you know, it was also US money that was paying for the weapons that were being used to harm people.

So it was, it is, US tax dollar money that is being used for weapons that kill Palestinian children and then it's US government money that's going into deliver the medical equipment to help those same children. So for me that was kind of the most...the most difficult aspects to kind of deal with and manage was seeing that kind of hypocrisy in action I guess, and it really woke me up to the harsh realities of neo-colonialism today.

**Leslie:** It's so deeply jarring, and I think so many persons that are drawn to work in social justice and social services, even here in the US, you know...I know for myself, having made the connect eventually and a realization that funding for the organizations that I was employed by you know, for the most part, like they're kind of the architects of the systems that were creating the issues to begin with. It's a lot to try to reconcile and to find a way through.

And so, to sort of bring us into how do we make room for all of this, right? Without turning away from the suffering and also how do we kind of stay in this place of feeling like yes there still there is something that I can do, and even though these things are here, you know, something can be done.

**Leslie:** So, let's talk a little bit about practices and things that you found that maybe help to sustain you in the work- or things that that sustain you now as you're transitioning into new avenues of calling us into this sense of active hope that Joanna Macy talks about so beautifully.

**Maha:** You know, the practices that really supported me, looking back at my time there, were the yoga and yoga practices that you and I both have been practicing and involved with. When I got to Palestine, I was quite new to yoga and myself...but it was that practice that I felt helped ground me the most amidst like kind of all the external and inner turmoil that I was feeling and dealing with. And the other thing that really supported was community. Palestine has such a rich, hospitable culture of community and a very rich kind of culture of volunteerism and mutual aid.

When I was working in international development, and you know, seeing we're kind of hustling and trying to get as much money as possible to do these programs that last for a year or two, and then they go away and then when nothing seems to really be changing and yet all around me I could see that there were other kind of community driven activities taking place that were just part of the Palestinian culture that didn't need lots of donor money or anything. It was all based off mutual aid and volunteerism and I was just thinking 'wow that seems to work', and I am really questioning this other model of development.

So I was always really struck by that kind of type of community-led work and mutual aid, and I think that was what really for me resonated. And I think, what keeps people so hopeful and life affirming is that like sense of community and I definitely benefited from that as well.

I was always so struck, you know, when I would get really, really upset - and I got really upset a lot. I was scared and I was upset and frustrated and I would just look to my colleagues and my friends and see you know, how are they managing? And it was through the practice of joy together in community. You know, the family gatherings, the friend gatherings, the barbecues, the dancing the drinking coffee the smoking argila, even though that's probably not the healthiest choice, but just all of the ways of relating and being with each other was what really, really struck me as well.

I should kind of say also that you know, one of my major driving forces of actually leaving the US when I did was also because I felt like I didn't belong in the US at that time and part of that could have been you know living this double life of like the Arab-Americanness. Always being hyphenated. I was being asked 'where [are you] from?' you know, compounded with 9/11 and you know all of that that took place, and I felt back then, it was very difficult for me to find that sense of community and to also have these conversations that we're having today.

And so, going and living in a place like Palestine and kind of seeing all of that in action really felt like a coming home for me. Even though, again, I wasn't from there, but kind of seeing how that being able to take part in that type of community like that was very, very meaningful.

All of that kind of came together a few years later, to kind of put for this project we applied... I shouldn't say a 'project', as a community center that myself and in a bunch of internationals and Palestinians kind of started, which is the Farashe Yoga Center, and I think for me that was probably my biggest kind of coping mechanism was starting and running this yoga center.

**Leslie:** In the way that you're describing this sense of community and being a part of that in Palestine it's really coming through so clearly, this describing this way of feeling held by others. And you know that's one of the things we keep, I think, sensing into and talking about and calling each other into in our culture is you know hey, let's... we don't have to just compete with each other, or feel like we've got to figure it all out on our own. How do we sense in to call in our field of care and actually really create that and nourish that. It sounds like that was such a huge part not only of your experience, but when you were speaking earlier about how struck you were by all of the hardship and really, you know, can we name it - the trauma that Palestinian people are experiencing on the daily in so many ways, but this deep sense of joy and connectedness and compassion that seems to be kind of the piece that's really at the core of that. It is the strong community ties, that sense of connection.

**Maha:** Absolutely. I was just telling this story, the other day, of this time... I used to, as I mentioned before, I was able to access all parts of historic Palestine and Jerusalem. I was working at the time in Jerusalem and my colleagues who were Palestinians living in the West Bank were given special permission to go to our office in Jerusalem, they had to do that with permission, but they were not allowed to drive there themselves. So that would mean they would have to take public transportation, which would mean maybe a three-hour commute for a 14-kilometer distance, which should take about 15 minutes driving. I would often drive them in, and we would have to go through checkpoints - military checkpoints.

I would be so angry going through those checkpoints being stopped having guns pointed at us by what are really young children- 18 year olds. Many of them Americans who would determine whether we could cross or not, how long it would how long we would be kept for, etc. and so the way I would deal with it would be just you know refusing to look at them refusing to acknowledge their existence, until my colleague that I would take in every day, I saw his approach was different.

My Palestinian colleague who again, was not able to access his own homeland would look the soldier in the eye and say 'good morning.' I just remember the first time that happened, I thought, 'how could you do that?' How can you even? And you know, he just he just said, 'they can take my land, they can take my religious freedom, they can take all these things, but they cannot take my humanity. They cannot take my heart.' And so that was his way of really showing utmost resistance.

That was a huge learning for me in terms of, and I think we've heard the stories so many times in many different contexts, of the oppressed you know, defying the oppressor by holding on to their humanity

but it's, I tell you, it's so much easier said than done in reality, but that was just one example of that compassion and that humanity that I saw on a daily basis.

**Leslie:** I can imagine how powerful in that moment, you know to be, to and to see, in action and to hear from your colleague, you know his stance in that way, and his position of resistance in that way is powerful. I'm taking that in as well...

We started to talk about Farashe and this really beautiful community yoga studio that you co-created.

**Maha:** So 'farashe' means butterfly in Arabic.

And our logo it was designed by a wonderful Brazilian artist who donated this logo for us. It's a lotus flower with a butterfly kind of at the top and kind of a symbol of transformation.

**Maha:** Farashe opened in 2010, so it's turning 12 soon in November, and, as I mentioned, it was a group of us Palestinian and international colleagues who were actually all working in international development at that time and we were incredibly frustrated because we felt that, again...we really questioned whether - we didn't question motive, our intention of wanting to do good, but we questioned whether what we were doing was sustainable and really making a difference. I had been hearing you know, over and over from friends, from colleagues about just wanting space to breathe.

Ramallah is a beautiful city and it's kind of enclosed by a wall that surrounds it and at any moment the gates of these walls can close and you're just kind of held captive, jailed. And the city's in the West Bank and it's become kind of the urban center for the West Bank so it's quite crowded, quite congested.

While it's in quotations under Palestinian Authority rule when you're living under occupation you don't have any sovereignty or any control and so just you know here and felt very much myself just needing space to breathe, sometimes, because you know it's just so... the heaviness of living under occupation as such that sometimes you just feel like you can't breathe.

And, and then also hearing from a dear friend of mine, also about you know wishing for space where families could go and kind of play together and be together. At that time, yoga was really such a big part of my life in terms of my own practice and my own well-being and I just thought wouldn't it be wonderful to open a yoga center here in Ramallah? A place where people can breathe. Where families can come and just play and breathe.

And yeah, I kind of mentioned it to a friend who mentioned it to another friend, and that person approached me one day and said 'hey, I heard you had this idea for a community yoga center' and said well... and part of the idea also was that it would be completely community-led. It would be completely volunteer. So, embodying the principles of seva- of selfless service and, and so yeah, this person, who is the President of the Bridge Development Group, which is a real estate group in Palestine said, 'I will give you space for free, if this is something that you would like to do'. And so it went from like a just an idea of like *wouldn't it be nice* to all of a sudden *here's the space go for it*, and so we did!

So, I think it took us six months. The space was right in the center of Ramallah, accessible to all, by public transportation. That was really important to us.

Our mission is to make access to yoga, meditation, well-being practices accessible to all and part of that is also in terms of geography. And yeah, and then volunteers- folks from everywhere just kind of came in and helped out; re remodeled the place re-did the floors, painted, built stuff...and within six months, we had a center to open and only two yoga teachers, so I...at that point, I was not a yoga teacher, I had never dreamed of being a yoga teacher, that was not in my plan at all!

**Maha:** But it was kind of like *Oh! Well, we're opening this yoga center and we need teachers*, so I hopped on a plane to the US and did my 200-hour teacher training and went back. And there was another friend who had done her teacher training recently in, I believe it was Bali, so the two of us, we opened the doors on November 7, 2010.

We had no idea what was going to happen and yeah before we knew it...I think we were offering two classes a week or something, and before we knew it, we had packed classes, we had people traveling from cities two to three hours away to attend and yeah the demand was much, much greater than we could believe. I really think it was just in the stars. Everything came into alignment to kind of bring everybody together. This was community coming together to create this space for each other and completely by volunteers, completely by donations and is still going 12 years later.

**Leslie:** What is some of the feedback or some of the experiences that you're hearing from folks that are that are finding release and play, and whatever benefits that they are finding after being at Farashe?

**Maha:** Sure. Well, I know yoga was around and has been around in Palestine, even before Farashe opened. We did open, as you know, technically, the first center that that offers yoga classes, however, there were a few a few students who then became teachers of yoga in Palestine before that happened. So, I think there is, you know they're seekers everywhere- spiritual seekers everywhere and it's actually not surprising that it found its way into Palestine.

For many of our students that come through, what they've said is that it really has helped them to kind of re-establish their connection to their own faith. So, there's a deep spirituality already existent in there in the culture and I think the practice of yoga has been seen by many as a way to reconnect to that deep spirituality and faith. So, the reaction was really that.

You know that, of course, we have folks who come in for the physical part of the asana practice and that's something we, from the get- go were really kind of mindful of not wanting it to just be a asana center but really wanting it to be a yoga center that is about mind –body- breath connection and spiritual activism and that's why our commitment to it being a volunteer center is so strong.

### *Music*

**Maha:** So yeah, we've had we've had instances in kind of the most traumatic events where coming together at the center and participating in practices together, has also been really useful. I'm remembering a time where this horrible bus accident that...unfortunately it was a school bus accident that killed children.

And I remember us thinking that day like, *Oh, we are in mourning, this is a horrific accident and should we even open the center today, you know, should we be mourning?* And then we decided *well, this is, these are the times when the practices are needed and can be most supportive*, so we did open our

doors and folks came in. Folks who had never even done yoga before came that evening and we just all sat together and we were again packed and we sat in silence together.

**Maha:** And it really struck me then in that moment how powerful the practice can be and how powerful creating a space for people to come and sit in silence can be. And like I said, many had not even...they just they came, knowing that they could do that there, not having actually taken any classes before or anything. So that's just one example of lots of times kind of coming together in support of.

For example, political prisoners- administrative detainees who are arrested and held without charge. Coming together to also offer these practices for them, so I think it's really a space of healing together, being together and of trying to cultivate transformation together as well.

### *Music*

**Leslie:** Maha, how has the pandemic impacted Farashe and kind of, where, what sorts of shifts or even like, new insights or even new kind of pathways of creating space and supporting community have arisen in this time?

**Maha:** Oh, that's a great question, Leslie.

Well, you know, I think, like most of the world, we were we were also impacted with not being able to come together in person, we also went through the lockdowns.

What's interesting is that we moved everything online quite rapidly and where you were able to kind of sustain that way. However, of course, it did...it was difficult. It was difficult, both for the students and also for the teachers to move everything online. We actually started our very first Arabic language yoga teacher training during the pandemic. And I think we met... gosh, we started in January, I believe, so we met in person once and I believe after that we had to move online, all of a sudden and conduct this teacher training online and it was a 10-month program and we did it! We graduated teachers and they are now teaching at Farashe and other places.

I have to say this also...you know Palestinians are so innovative and they're so creative when they're met with some sort of challenge. So, as you can imagine, you know when you're not really sure how or when you're going to get from point A to B because of checkpoints or closures, etc you do find creative ways to manage. and so the pandemic was a challenge. It did affect things, and we did...we were able to find really quick solutions, thanks to that creativity.

**Leslie:** Love finds a way, right?

**Maha:** Yeah yeah! Love finds a way.

**Leslie:** I want to touch on a little bit about kind of maybe the initial pieces of scaling up and training yoga teachers and that was partly with Rama Jyoti Vernon and with Sraddha -Ruth Hartung, yes? Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

**Maha:** Of course I do, yes, so grateful. I think, as I mentioned, we were only two when we started and the demand was really high, and so we realized, we need more yoga teachers to do this, and so we

actually were very, very blessed by a great number of international yoga teachers who volunteered their time and came out to Palestine and conducted teacher trainings.

**Maha:** So, of the first ones was Anahata Yoga and they came out and trained teachers, and one of the things I'll also mention is our focus wasn't so much about training yoga teachers as in just yoga teachers, but also training schoolteachers, health professionals, social workers, etc, who could use practices of yoga in their daily work, again to make it as accessible as possible for folks.

So a lot of our early kind of scaling up was around that and really thanks to Anahata Yoga, and a myriad of others, to whom I'm also grateful for and as time went on, we were also realizing that it was wonderful to have that support of internationals coming to Palestine to teach.

And that we felt to really root as a center we wanted to be able to train teachers ourselves in Arabic. Because otherwise what we were doing was, teachers would come, and we would have everything translated, which also worked, and we thought it would be really even more amazing if it was in Arabic.

So Give Back Yoga, actually Rob Schware with Give Back Yoga have come to visit us and do some trainings and connected us with Rama Jyoti Vernon and Sraddha. And that was a big, huge shift for us to be able to realize that that dream of being able to conduct our own teacher trainings. So, Rama and Sraddha came out to Palestine and taught workshops in a variety of settings including health clinics and teachers and psychosocial counselors and after that experience we spoke a little bit more, and Sraddha had said that she would be very happy to help us kind of develop our own teacher training program.

**Maha:** So, Seven Centers offered scholarships to five Palestinian yoga teachers, or aspiring yoga teachers to come out to Sedona, Arizona to take her 500-hour yoga teacher training and from there be able to develop our own teacher training and so that was an incredibly generous gift.

And after the five of us completed that training, we worked closely with Sraddha to develop our training which we really tried to contextualize for Palestinian context. So this is a...it's a yoga wellness training that's what we call it, about hypertension and diabetes and so we really tailored our teacher training to address those major issues, and it also includes ayurveda which we also have kind of you know ayurveda and Palestinian traditional cooking and Palestinian wisdom around medicinal plants etc are actually quite similar so that's been a really fun process of kind of seeing the linkage between the two, and making sure that indigenous traditions of Palestine are also incorporated.

And yeah, we came up with a teacher training program, we were certified by Yoga Alliance as well, and we launched our first teacher training in 2021 I believe.

**Leslie:** This is just so inspiring the way that you went into this land, this community and felt so embraced by both the land and the people and then had such incredible vision and imagination to create space. And I love, so much the way you described it as this vision of a place where families could come together to play and to breathe.

So beautiful. And so much gratitude as well to our beloved teachers who are on the star plane now and, hopefully, continuing to still guide us, Sraddha and Rama both.

**Maha:** Oh yes, yeah. We're... mean, we're so grateful and I just hope that they're watching and seeing all of their wisdom and their teachings continuously growing with us.

There is a letter that Rama had written to yoga teachers- it's in her book, Sacred Geometry. It's just such a beautiful letter and that's one we had translated into Arabic. I constantly remind our teachers to go back to it because I think it really encapsulates what it is to be a forever student in the practice of yoga which is really what we are. To guide and share with others the teachings and so yeah, really so grateful for all the wisdom that they've given to us and I still feel them very much alive with us today.

### *Music*

**Leslie:** I think one of the things that I that's so powerful in our conversation Maha also in the example that they really you know embodied for us to was really you know, illustrating so clearly for us that yoga is such a universal practice, and I know that I have, I have seen in different settings that I have taught yoga and sometimes in introducing students to different contemplative practices that there's sometimes a misconception, you know, that folks feel as though, that these practices are somehow antithetical to whatever their own, you know, spiritual practices or even you know religious traditions are and so there's you know this a little bit of I guess additional kind of support and kind of guidance around you know really sharing that there's not anything that you're being sort of asked to believe, there's nothing in your in your own faith that you need to abandon at all, and I think you know, and in this conversation so powerful the way that you're describing how so many of the participants at Farashe are like, *this is bringing me even more deeply into my own spirituality, into my own practices, my own beliefs.*

And you know, looking at one of Rama's great embodied examples you know, in the world with her brilliant conflict resolution training that she had employed in talks in her own human rights work, you know being invited to be this mediator and facilitator between diplomats from the then Soviet Union and the United States, you know when that was all starting to shift and change and really taking the yoga sutras and you know, building that into a whole methodology, if not, you know, a curriculum that was so very useful right? So useful and so effective, which really to me, it just continues to demonstrate the universality of these practices that it's really kind of calling us in to see ourselves and to see each other in more full ways.

**Maha:** Absolutely, and I think that's kind of in our evolution of Farashe, where we're also kind of landing at right now, as well as trying to learn and understand and embody what the yoga sutras what the yoga philosophy says about justice and social justice and how to do so in a in a transformative and generative way and so that's what we're looking to dive into next, which is really, really exciting and I mean of course it's there all the time, but to really take the time now to reflect and say *okay well how, how do these teachings, how can we work with these teachings and that way to really stand for social justice and to create the world that we want to live in and to embody that sense of love and connection and community that we all know, is what is needed, and yet so easily...not so easy to always sustain and so, how can we use these practices to as a reminder to keep us in that place of loving community and in working for justice and liberation.*

**Leslie:** Maha, I'm so grateful for this conversation, this has been just so wonderful to explore with you all of this really inspiring work and I'm so grateful for you sharing your experiences, too, in Palestine.

**Maha:** Thank you so much Leslie for the opportunity to talk about these issues that are so dear to my heart and to also give a voice for Farashe and for Palestine and yeah I just I just hope we can continue having these types of conversations about you know how to come together, coming together in community to find help our help ourselves find home with each other so that we can really create the world that we want to be in, so thank you so much.

*Music*

**Leslie Langbert:** Thanks for listening. Conversations on Compassion is produced by me, Leslie Langbert, and the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences Center for Compassion Studies. Our engineer is Gary Darnell, with the University Center for Assessment, Teaching and Technology. To learn more about the Center for Compassion Studies, visit us online at [compassioncenter.arizona.edu](http://compassioncenter.arizona.edu) or follow us on Instagram @ua\_compassioncenter.

Music in this episode by