

Sustainable dialogue and peace between Israelis and Palestinians

Bringing hope

Russell Pearce

Fordham University (USA) law professor Russell Pearce conducted interviews with two organizations that promote dialogue and peace between Israelis and Palestinians: Combatants for Peace and Parents Circle. The aim was to understand how members were able to maintain their reciprocal and loving relationships in the aftermath of October 7, 2023, and the war in Gaza.

The prophetic social justice thinker Mariame Kaba notes that “we are living in . . . calamitous times. We are bombarded twenty-four seven, it seems, by terrible . . . news.” But “bad news [is] not the only news.” We have the choice to “wake up every single day and decide to practice hope.” Practicing hope means we search for hope, we don’t wait for hope to come to us.

That's what I'm trying to do with this contribution. In the midst of grim news from Israel and Palestine, I have found hope in two of the organizations that promote dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians – *Parents Circle* and *Combatants for Peace*. I was able to interview Palestinians and Israelis from both groups so that I could better understand how they have maintained their reciprocal and loving relationships in the aftermath of October 7 and the war in Gaza.

The members of the *Parents Circle* organization have each had a family member killed by the other side and committed themselves to reconciliation nonetheless. The Irish Novelist Colm McCann tells the story of two *Parents Circle* members in his novel, *Apeirogon*. Israeli Rami’s 13-year-old daughter Smadar was blown up by a suicide bomber on the main shopping street in Jerusalem. Palestinian Bassam’s 10-year-old daughter Abir was on her way to school when an Israeli soldier shot her through the eye and killed her.

The founders of *Combatants for Peace* were fighters. The Palestinian founders were fighters who created a reading group to study Gandhi and Mandela when they were in an Israeli prison. After they were released, they read about Israel reserve officers who were

refusing to serve in the West Bank and they invited them to meet. The Israelis accepted the invitation. The Israelis drove without weapons to the West Bank. Some of them feared that they would be kidnapped or killed. They did not know who they would be meeting. They parked and were told to get into the cars of the Palestinians and they drove to their meeting place where both Israelis and Palestinians told their stories. They have now been together for 19 years.

Beyond the cycle of violence

How do these groups function? Both have equal leadership between Palestinians and Israelis, and both consider themselves as not political. They do not take a position on politics within their communities nor assume a position on what final peace should look like.

They do have other boundaries, though.

Participants told me they agree on “seeing the humanity in the other. The tool is dialogue. The essence is relating person to person in this place where everything is controversial. Where people often cannot agree on anything, we all agree on the sanctity of human life: equal human dignity and equal human rights for every person, whether Israeli or Palestinian.” There is also shared opposition to Israeli occupation.

Participants in addition agree on a commitment to nonviolence because they want a process that will reduce death and bereavement. But how to be a nonviolent peace activist is sometimes complicated. For most Israeli Jews who are not charedi – ultraorthodox -- service in the Army is considered a fundamental responsibility. And many Palestinians share a commitment to resistance by any means necessary.

A Palestinian youth leader told me the following story: Two girls were talking at a recent program for bereaved teenagers who had lost family members. The Israeli girl mentioned that she would soon be going into the army. The Palestinian girl responded, “so you are going to be a nonviolent peace activist in the army? Maybe I should be a nonviolent peace activist in Hamas?” The Palestinian facilitator intervened – he told the girls that this is exactly the kind of dialogue they should be having. He reminded both that he could not tell them what to do with their lives but that they should remember the cost of the cycle of violence – how he had lost his brother, how an Israeli counselor had lost his sister, how all of them, Palestinian and Israeli, had lost loved ones to the cycle of violence.

Deep sharing and building bridges

For all of them, October 7, 2023 and its aftermath have been a test.

An Israeli leader of *Combatants for Peace* reported that his first reaction upon hearing of the October 7 massacre was to want to get back on his tank and kill Palestinians. Then he received phone calls from Souli, Jamir and Rana – Palestinian friends and colleagues whom he considers family. They asked, ‘are you safe, how do you feel, do you know

friends and family who lived near Gaza?’ He says that their voices pulled his soul out of a hole.

And indeed it turned out that someone considered family by both the Israelis and Palestinians in these groups – the peace activist Vivian Silver – was on October 7 thought to be a hostage, but was later found to have been murdered by Hamas.

After October 7, one Palestinian student in the *Parents Circle* group for bereaved teenagers, posted a picture of a Hamas members standing on an Israeli tank. He viewed the Hamas massacre as a military victory and believed that the Israeli military has made his life hell. His Israeli friends felt betrayed. The Palestinian boy was supposed to be their friend. Nonetheless, the Israeli and Palestinian youth insisted they still wanted to continue meeting. For a period of time after the posting, the Palestinian and Israeli youth met separately. Their facilitators helped them process their feelings, reminded them of the humanity of the other, and reinforced the importance of talking to someone who hurt your feelings and seeking repair.

The days after October 7 were not easy for the adults either. At their first staff meeting on October 8, people were in shock and felt dread and anxiety. The totally different coverage in Israeli and Palestinian media meant they initially came together with very different understandings. Conversations were not easy but they shared their feelings and emotions, and rebuilt their bridges even stronger than before.

The option for non-violence

In the immediate aftermath of October 7, both groups were ostracized in their own communities precisely because of their commitment to nonviolence – and indeed some of the young people were bullied. But only a few people left the groups. Many more have joined. Some – unfortunately – because so many are newly bereaved. Others have come because they see hope in nonviolence and dialogue. For example, the numbers of Palestinian youth seeking to enroll in a program for nonviolent resistance has tripled.

On May 12, *Combatants for Peace* and *Parents Circle* jointly hosted their *19th Annual Joint Israeli-Palestinian Memorial Day Ceremony*.²

Najlaa told of her 28-year-old nephew Abed who was killed in Gaza when he went to look for food and diapers for his two-year-old twins.

Ahmed lost 60 members of his extended family in Gaza in the ongoing war. He observed that “Behind each [of the 60] name[s] there is a human with a story and a family and dreams.”

Yonatan Zeigen, the son of Vivien Silver, shared:

“The unbearable pain I feel as a son who has lost his mother is not just personal... All ... need to look bereavement in the eye, know the names of the deceased and the bereaved,

internalize the price they are paying, and that society as a whole is paying, and also see the bereavement of the other and recognize that the pain is the same. . . .”

This year, the Joint Memorial Day received more widespread attention than ever before – both internationally and in Israeli and Palestinian media. Internationally, since October 7, these groups received far greater attention in the United States both in the media and among audiences who never expressed interest before. In Rome, Pope Francis has hosted members of both *Combatants for Peace* and *Parents Circle* multiple times.

A transformative dialogue

Why after October 7 did the groups maintain their connection and grow even stronger?

Both Palestinians and Israelis report that dialogue has been transformative. They say their dialogue is one of love, that they have opened their hearts, and they have become family. They have learned to see themselves – and to see God – in the other.

A Palestinian participant observes, “The transformation we went through was a very sacred experience for each of us and this has left a deep impact on our souls, as well as a deep connection. . . . It’s a journey and a process to turn the other into a brother.”

An Israeli similarly observes: “We work to build trust and become a family, years of sacred work with all the challenges, dynamics and doubts.”

When I asked how the power imbalance between Israelis and Palestinians impacts the dialogue, a Palestinian participant responded, “How can oppressed and oppressor come together? That’s a really important question. *Combatants for Peace* – from day one – acknowledged oppressed and oppressor but it doesn’t take away from responsibility for all of us to come from love and to recognize each other’s story, [including the full equal rights and dignity of every human being.]”

A Palestinian leader of *Combatants for Peace* observed, “ I don’t have the privilege to lose hope. I am a spiritual person – I have to believe there is another way.

An Israeli leader of *Combatants for Peace* added, “Our approach is that hope is an action, a muscle, not a term. We [need to] work it out all the time, to make it alive, to work on it.”

In conclusion, the Jewish sages teach that “if you save one life, you save the whole world”.

A Palestinian who leads the *Parents Circle* youth program explained, “You change one person, you change a whole world.”

¹ Vivian Silver was an Israeli women's rights activist. She died on October 7, 2023, following Hamas' invasion of her Kibbutz Be'eri. She is one of the founders of the organization Women Wage Peace.

² <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israelis-palestinians-hold-joint-online-memorial-help-our-wounded-humanity-heal/>
<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-05-12/ty-article-magazine/.premium/michal-lost-her-son-najalaah-buried-her-brother-together-they-seek-a-different-future/0000018f-6c9b-de93-a1af-7c9b51dd0000>