

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

# Every enemy is someone whose story we do not know

*Robi Damelin\**

### 1 How I got involved

Losing a child in a senseless conflict is not something one learns to 'get over'. It becomes a permanent fixture in a broken heart, and for me personally it has become a choice between whether to die, in a sense, along with my child, or to try to do everything in my power to prevent other mothers, both Palestinian and Israeli, from experiencing this pain.

I was born and grew up in South Africa during the very dark days of the Apartheid movement. However, from a very early age, I felt the injustice and did what I could to stop the cruel and wicked treatment of anyone who did not happen to have a white skin. Sadly, all those who were white benefitted from the system, as the Israelis in many ways benefit from the occupation. Growing up in this environment and coming from a more liberal family, as well as the freeing of Nelson Mandela and the subsequent Truth and Reconciliation Commission, all played a large part in the choices I made after the loss of my beloved David.

When the Army came to tell me that David had been killed by a Palestinian sniper while serving in the reserves, one of the first things I said was: 'You may not kill anyone in the name of my child'. I do not recall saying this but was told by the people who were with me when I got the worst news any parent can receive. Those words were perhaps a premonition of what was to come. I was not filled with a sense of revenge: who could I punish or kill to bring my child back? Perhaps I could save the life of another child if I could become a part of a group that believed in non-violence and reconciliation.

Three months after David was killed, I spoke at a rally in Tel-Aviv. The message was to end the occupation. There were some 60,000 people at the demonstration, and I have no idea where I got the courage to stand up so soon after David was killed and to state what was to become my future message. In general, I do not prepare speeches or anything before going to speak, but in this case I did. The message of reconciliation is by now an integral part of who I am, and I speak from the heart. This is a short quote from the speech I made all those years ago. It is so

\* Robi Damelin is an Israeli active member of the Parents Circle-Families Forum, for which she acts as spokesperson and Director of International Relations. Detailed information and updates about the projects, events and activities mentioned in this Notes from the Field can be found at the Forum's official website: [www.theparentscircle.org](http://www.theparentscircle.org).  
Contact author: Robi Damelin at [damelin@zahav.net.il](mailto:damelin@zahav.net.il).

prophetic of what I was to do and become; I would probably say the same words today:

Can we as a nation not realize the scars which the Intifada leaves on the souls of both Palestinians and our children? Can we not realize that our presence in the Occupied Territories will only lead to more and more violence and to the ruination of more and more families touched by death? The pain is the same for any mother – Palestinian or Israeli – and their lives will never be the same. I appeal to the bereaved Palestinians, who suffer the same pain as me, to help convince Israelis that the future can be one of co-existence, we just cannot do it alone. Can we as a nation not understand the longing of the Palestinians to have their own homeland? Have we become so cynical after all we have been through so as not to understand their pain? Is any piece of land worth all this pain and suffering?

Shortly after the demonstration, a religious Jewish man named Yitzhak Frankenthal came to see me. He was the founder of The Parents Circle-Families Forum (PCFF). He invited me to a weekend in East Jerusalem to meet with bereaved Palestinian and Israeli families. I remember sitting around a table with bereaved Palestinian mothers and looking into their eyes and realising that we shared the same pain. I knew that if we could stand on a stage and talk in the same voice for non-violence and reconciliation, we would be a unique example to others.

I started to travel all over the world and spoke in the most prestigious venues and was indeed very pleased with myself. Congress, the House of Lords and British Parliament, Canada, all over Europe. I always travelled with a Palestinian partner, spreading our message.

## **2 Addressing the family of my son's murderer and becoming a victor**

One night, when I was back in Israel, there was another knock on my door and when I opened it, I saw three soldiers. They came to tell me that they had caught the man who killed David. This is when life became very difficult for me: this was really the test. Do I mean what I am saying? It was a test of whether I really have integrity in the work I am doing. Do I really mean what I am saying when I talk about reconciliation? The fact that he was caught did not give me a sense of satisfaction, except to know that he will not be able to kill anyone else. I had no sense of revenge; I have never looked for that.

It took some three months of questioning and struggling with what to do, and finally I wrote a letter to the family of the sniper. This for me was a changing moment in my life. I gave up being a victim and became a victor. Two Palestinians delivered the letter to the family, and they promised to give it to Thaer, the man who killed David. The letter is as follows.

This for me is one of the most difficult letters I will ever have to write. My name is Robi Damelin, I am the mother of David, who was killed by your son. I know

Robi Damelin

he did not kill David because he was David. If he had known him he could never have done such a thing.

David was 28 years old. He was a student at Tel-Aviv University. He was studying for his masters in the Philosophy of Education. David was part of the peace movement. He did not want to serve in the occupied territories. He had a compassion for all people and understood the suffering of the Palestinians. He treated all around him with dignity. David was part of the movement of IDF Officers (Israel Defence Forces) who did not want to serve in the occupied territories but nevertheless, for many reasons, he went to serve when he was called to the reserves.

What makes our children do what they do? They do not understand the pain they are causing your son by having to be in jail for many years, and mine, who I will never be able to hold and see again, or see him married, or have a grandchild from him. I cannot describe to you the pain I feel since his death and the pain of his brother and girlfriend and all who knew and loved him.

All my life I have spent working for causes of co-existence, both in South Africa and here in Israel. After David was killed, I started to look for a way to prevent other families, both Israeli and Palestinian, from suffering this dreadful loss. I was looking for a way to stop the cycle of violence, nothing for me is more sacred than human life, no revenge or the hatred can ever bring my child back. After a year, I closed my office and joined The Parents Circle-Families Forum. We are a group of Israeli and Palestinian families who have all lost an immediate family member in the conflict. We are looking for ways to create a dialogue with a long term vision of reconciliation. After your son was captured, I spent many sleepless nights thinking about what to do. Should I ignore the whole thing? Or will I be true to my integrity and to the work I am doing, and try to find a way for closure and reconciliation?

This is not easy for anyone and I am just an ordinary person, not a saint. I have come to the conclusion that I would like to try to find a way to reconcile. Maybe this is difficult for you to understand or believe, but I know that in my heart it is the only path that I can choose. Meaning what I say, is the only way.

I understand that your son is considered a hero by many of the Palestinian people. He is considered to be a freedom fighter, fighting for justice and for an independent viable Palestinian state. But I also feel that if he understood that taking the life of another may not be the way, and that if he understood the consequences of his act, he could see that a non-violent solution is the only way for both nations to live together in peace.

Our lives as two nations are so intertwined. Each of us will have to give up on our dreams for the future of the children who are our responsibility.

I give this letter to people I love and trust to deliver. They will tell you of the work we are doing and perhaps create in your hearts some hope for the future. I do not know what your reaction will be. It is a risk for me. But I believe that you will understand as it comes from the most honest part of me. I hope that you will show the letter to your son and maybe in the future we can meet. Let us put an end to the killing and look for a way through mutual understanding and empathy to live a normal life, free of violence.

It took nearly three years for me to get a response from Thaer, not exactly what I expected. He said that I should stay away from his family and that he killed ten people to free Palestine. I knew, however, that when he was a small child he was exposed to his uncle being violently killed by Israeli soldiers and he lost another two uncles in the second Uprising (Intifada). He was not affiliated to any political party so it would appear that it was an act of revenge.

After receiving the letter I had a sense of freedom and that my life was no longer contingent on what this man decides to do. It opened a space for me to go to South Africa to meet perpetrators and victims who gave evidence in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and to explore the meaning of forgiving. I was the protagonist in a documentary 'One Day After Peace' during this journey (<http://onedayafterpeace.com/>). I learned how documentaries can open doors to so many audiences all over the world.

I have applied to the authorities to go into the jail to meet with Thaer, without success. Hopefully with this new government I will be more successful.

### 3 About the Parents Circle-Families Forum

The PCFF is made up of more than 600 bereaved Palestinian and Israeli families who have all committed to reconciliation and non-violence. This commitment is a unique example for all those who are exposed to our message through the many projects on the ground both in Israel and in Palestine and Internationally. It is an organisation that continues to work even though there is an ongoing conflict. The trust they have built up is actually above the conflict. They do not stop working regardless of the situation, through war and violence which is an every-day occurrence.

#### 3.1 *Preparing for the future*

The PCFF mission is to prepare the public for a future reconciliation framework to become an integral part of any political peace agreement. Without this framework we can at best hope for a ceasefire until the next time. More than 25 years of experience makes the PCFF the most relevant organisation to take on the role of reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians in a way that is appropriate for the two nations involved in the conflict.

One is tempted to say: 'Peace is not even in the picture, why are we talking about reconciliation?' However, history and other conflicts give us the example that there must be a framework in place for when a political agreement is signed. We must continue to believe that the time will come. We must continue to work on the ground, not only to prepare the public for that time, but to make them believe that that time is entirely possible and within reach. We are working on a mock reconciliation process which we hope to start soon and for it to be turned into a television series and used for broadcasting say on Netflix or HBO.

For the past 25 years, we have watched members go through transformation from hatred and revenge to an understanding that non-violence and reconciliation and empathy for the other, even if we do not agree, is the only way to protect people from further loss. We have a vision to create a library of testimonials of members

Robi Damelin

who have taken the journey of understanding of the humanity in the other and to use these testimonials in Israel and Palestine, and indeed all over the world. Stories of actual transformation could be an example for classes of conflict management and resolution, and international relations. The PCFF is constantly invited to address dialogue meetings at universities all over the world and of course locally. Imagine if these universities have access to a library of actual change in concepts and behaviour and moreover change in people who are the least likely to have experienced this transformation from hatred or revenge.

### ***3.2 Working in a broad perspective***

Much work is happening on the ground and of course also online since the Covid-19 outbreak. A lot of the work we do can be adapted and used all over the world both in conflict areas and in places where polarisation has taken over. There is a definite need for sharing of ideas and methods for creating harmony and the PCFF would be pleased to share our methods. This may seem strange as we are in the midst of an ongoing conflict; however, being able to create empathy and trust even in the most difficult of circumstances should and can be a gift for others wanting to make the change. In the following paragraphs, I would like to share some of the work we are doing 'in the field'.

#### *3.2.1 Parallel Narrative Experience (PNE)*

This project was born out of the knowledge within the group that we may have shared the same pain which created sympathy, but that did not mean that we actually agreed with each other's interpretation of milestone events happening in our history. We knew instinctively that in order to create complete trust, we would have to learn and experience how we saw our own history and that of the 'other', and that even if we did not agree we would acquire the skill of listening with empathy. The success of the project was such that we decided to take it out into the general public. Over the years and with the help of Georgetown University, the programme has grown and we now have more than a thousand alumni.

The programme lasting three months includes a visit to the Holocaust Museum, not for comparison of suffering, but simply to understand the DNA of fear in the Jewish people and to learn parts of their history. Many Palestinians believe that the Holocaust was a myth. We also visit a village which existed before 1948 as part of Palestine, but which today is part of Israel. Understanding the longing of the Palestinians for 'what was' and seeing keys to doors that will never open again around the necks of some of the Palestinian women creates empathy and an understanding and a compassion for their narrative and sense of loss.

The group will also have a lecture by a Palestinian and an Israeli professor, each giving their interpretation of the milestones of our history; for example, 1948 would be the creation of the state of Israel but for the Palestinians it is the 'Nakba' catastrophe of having to flee and losing their homes. Each milestone has a different version, which is how each party sees the 1967 war, the subsequent 1973 war and all of the uprisings and wars ever since. Hearing a two-sided story and reacting to both narratives with empathy is for some an extraordinary life-changing experience.

We try to choose people from the same professional background for this project so that they have something in common and can continue to create projects after the workshops. The above is a small example of what takes place in the whole project, but does give an indication of how intense it is and the distinct possibility for trust that it creates. It can definitely be adapted for many other places.

### 3.2.2 *Dialogue meetings*

The PCFF conducts dialogue meetings both in Israel and in Palestine, in schools in private homes, in women's centres and with many groups visiting (before Covid-19) from overseas. What we have gathered from these meetings where a Palestinian and an Israeli bereaved member of our group tell their personal story, and then take questions is that we absolutely do not know each other. In an average meeting in an Israeli school for a class of around 30 Israeli 17-year-old students, you will discover that they have never met a Palestinian, that they do not speak Arabic and that they have almost all been overseas. This again is an illustration of the cut-off.

This is almost a mirror image of how the Palestinians interact and see the Israelis. We do a lot of dialogue meetings with women and for them it is a revelation; the only Israelis they have been exposed to would be settlers or soldiers, so why would they think we are any different? Since Covid-19, we have done literally hundreds of dialogue meetings on zoom for international universities, Synagogues, churches and many other groups. In many ways it has opened the world even more to our message.

### 3.2.3 *The women's group*

We understand that the time has come for women to come to the peace table. The PCFF created a group of women from within the group and it has grown considerably. A core of women has gone through an intensive course on reconciliation and leadership. It was incredible to see 140 Israeli and Palestinian bereaved women walking up Rothschild Boulevard in Tel-Aviv on International Women's Day, handing a flower to the public. Each flower had a note attached which read: 'We would rather give you a flower than put one on a fresh grave'. This year 24 Palestinian and Israeli women made a beautiful book of pressed wildflowers which they dedicated to Kamala Harris. In the past they have created products that helped to spread our message and increased the income of the women. In fact, we launched a project of embroidered shoes in the European Parliament, then in the Bundestag and then in Congress. This was a wonderful opportunity to spread our message. The group also created a photography exhibition called 'The Presence of the Void' which was shown all over Israel and at the Willy Brandt house in Berlin.

### 3.2.4 *Summer camps*

Each year we run a summer camp for bereaved youth from both sides. This year was so moving as it was the first time they could meet in person since Covid-19. Some 40 teenagers from 14 to 18 years spent several days together getting to know and understand the narrative of the other, having fun and discovering just how similar they are. They also work on sharing their personal stories which is so moving and leads us to understand that bereavement does not stop with one generation. It is

Robi Damelin

very gratifying to see that some of the past participants in the summer camp are now the facilitators and have gone on to be Young Ambassadors doing work in their communities and together.

### 3.2.5 *Memorial day ceremony*

For the past 14 years we have held an alternate ceremony on Israeli Soldier Memorial Day. In the beginning it was very controversial and very few people attended. The ceremony started with Palestinians and Israelis telling their stories of loss and with wonderful music and poetry readings. Many Israelis including the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence were totally against allowing Palestinians to join us at the ceremony. Fortunately, the Israeli High Court did not agree with them and allowed us to continue with Palestinian participants. This year we held the ceremony online with a limited number of guests attending small ceremonies both in Israel and Palestine. Some 250,000 people joined online and it was more than moving. This is a chance for both sides to understand the sanctity of human life and the cost of the conflict.

### 3.2.6 *Young ambassadors for peace*

This is an innovative programme to create the next generation of leaders who will continue with the work of non-violence and reconciliation. These young adults are often graduates from the summer camp who want to take the work and leadership further.

### 3.2.7 *International travel*

Members of the group have been invited to almost every place on the globe. As already referred to earlier, we speak and lobby in places in Europe, like the European Parliament, the Bundestag and the Spanish Parliament. We have been invited to give briefings in The House of Commons (UK) as well as Congress and have met many members of the Senate (USA). We also have been invited to many campuses all over the world. This is a really good opportunity to speak to Moslem and Jewish students who seem to import our conflict into their countries. Hopefully, once the Covid-19 disaster is over, we will continue as our message is not only local, but also international.