

The Parents Circle/Bereaved Families Forum
Making Peace in the Mideast, One Family at a Time
by Mary Eisenhart



Peace is not a prayer, peace is in the hands of each and every one of us. Peace is not just between states, peace is between a man and his friends, man and wife, parents and their children, between neighbors, between partners, between all human beings and between states. The basis for any peace is compromise and reconciliation.

-Yitzhak Frankenthal, founder and chairman, The Parents Circle-Bereaved Families Forum

In the Middle East, losing a family member to sectarian violence is a common and grim fact of life, one that often perpetuates and exacerbates conflict. But when Yitzhak Frankenthal's son Arik, serving in the Israeli army, was killed by Hamas activists in 1994, Frankenthal chose a different path.

"As I was sitting shivah for Arik a friend said to me, 'Now you understand it is impossible to make peace with an enemy that understands only violence,'" he told the *Village Voice* in 2002. "And I knew that was all wrong. I knew the only reason Arik was murdered was that there was no peace between our peoples, and I blamed the leaders. The Palestinians were acting exactly as we would if we would be under occupation. The occupation is a kind of terror that we are doing against Palestinians, and they are doing unacceptable terror against Israelis. As a man who loves his people and his country, I decided that I had to do whatever I can to help bring reconciliation and peace. There is no other solution."

Frankenthal began contacting other bereaved Israelis, garnering, in addition to some abuse, a core of people who wanted to meet; then they began to meet with Palestinians in the same situation. “We couldn’t make reconciliation by ourselves,” Frankenthal told the *Voice*, recalling the first meeting with people in Gaza. “We share the same sorrow. When someone tells you about his infant killed by a soldier, you cry the same tears as when someone tells you his child was killed by a suicide bomber. We all want no one else to suffer the pain we share.”

From that beginning, the Parents Circle/Bereaved Families Forum has expanded to include over 500 members, many of whom spend a great deal of time, in Israeli-Palestinian duos, speaking to youth and adults on both sides of the conflict – many of whom have literally never met a member of the opposite group.



Along the way spontaneous projects have arisen to increase communication and understanding, often one person at a time. In an area where military checkpoints and severe restrictions on personal travel effectively keep Israelis and Palestinians from interacting in normal human ways, the Hello Shalom/Hello Salaam project is a toll-free line that allows any Israeli to pick up the phone and talk to a random Palestinian, and vice versa. Says Robi Damelin, the Parents’ Circle public relations officer, whose son David was killed by a Palestinian sniper, “We created it in 2002 as a sort of counter to the powers that be that say there’s no one to talk to. Since then we’ve had over a million calls on this line, which is a toll-free line for all Palestinians and Israelis to talk to each other.

“Sometimes people scream at each other and say appalling things over our telephone line, but if they give each other their telephone number at the end of the conversation, which has happened, then I would think that there is some hope. That’s the beginning of talking, and it’s

not throwing stones or killing each other. For me that's very important. I don't see anything negative about people talking to each other. Something wonderful may not come out of it, but nothing negative can come from getting to know the person on the other side."

Her colleague Ali Abu Awwad, her speaking partner on a recent U.S. visit, also bears the scars of the conflict: the son of a politically active family, he was imprisoned for four years for his efforts in the intifada – "I threw lots of stones," he says in the documentary Encounter Point (see sidebar). After being released, he was shot by an Israeli settler, and, while in the hospital, learned that his brother had been shot and killed by an Israeli soldier at a checkpoint.

In 2003, the Parents Circle/Bereaved Families Forum received the Rex Foundation's [Bill Graham Award](#) for its peacemaking efforts, and we were recently able to talk with Damelin and Awwad about their ongoing work.

Says Damelin, "Our group has a broader vision of two sides trying to find a way to live together, because there've been so many peace agreements, and very little person-to-person, people-to-people work on the ground. This is where it's very important, what we're doing."



Rex Foundation: So many people who have suffered losses like yours turn to more violence, more vengeance. Why did you choose a different path?

Robi Damelin: It's not all black and white. When I heard that David had been killed, when the army came to talk to me, my first reaction was "You may not kill anybody in the name of my child." Now I have no idea where that came from.

I can't talk about other people and what they do and what they don't do. Yes, it's true that many people think that vengeance is the way to go, but there isn't any vengeance for a lost child. How many people would I have to kill in order to make myself feel better, and would it? It wouldn't. So that was not an option for me ever. And I realized that the man who killed my child didn't do it because he was David, he did it because he was a symbol of something. So after about six months, Yitzhak Frankenthal, who was the founder of the Parents Circle, came to talk to me, and invited me to go to a seminar where there were about 60-80 Palestinians and the same amount of Israelis, all bereaved parents. I went to that seminar, and I thought that this would be a good framework for me to make a difference. I was working with other groups, but this seemed to me to be the most powerful organization that could really make a difference.

Ali Abu Awwad: It's complicated. The majority on both sides, they don't choose violence; they don't react at all. They are quiet, they are silent – and this is actually a reaction, because when they are silent the other people use them. Everybody becomes a part of it without feeling it. Most of the bereaved families are not reacting by killing each other. Somewhere there may be people who support violence inside themselves, but they don't get it on the ground in violent behavior against each other. Maybe they hate each other, true; they are angry, and so and so, but they don't kill each other.

I grew up in this also, not just in this daily pain and daily suffering; I also grew up in a political home. My mother used to be one of the famous leaders of Fatah, which is part of the PLO. Being in a prison and all that I have been through, I also read about nonviolence. First of all it was a personal choice; I choose it for myself, because I cannot react in violence anyway, because personally I cannot kill somebody.

Before, I was not pro-violence, I was not pro-peace, I was just desperate. And when this happened, it removed me; it made me think deeply about – I want a reason to open my eyes in the morning. So how can I deal with this? Because I believe that even the people who support violence are doing this to deal with the anger, and by showing it to the other side through violent behavior. But I cannot do it, so what shall I do? And then I thought, killing somebody, it's not returning back my brother. Causing the same pain that I have to somebody else is not making my pain more easy.

And politically, supporting violence is not leading my people to independence. It's not removing the occupation. People have been reacting with violence, and we are losing, especially the Palestinians. Because the whole world now starts looking at the case as there are these extreme Palestinians and they are killing. It's an injustice to judge a whole people under occupation in this way, so what shall I do to change?

I got involved after my mother; she was the first one to get involved. What happened to me at that meeting when I met the Israeli bereaved families for the first time, and I saw those people who are talking about our right as Palestinians to live in justice and in dignity, in our own independence, with all of the high price that they paid – it touched me, and I feel I depend on them, I'm part of them, because we have the same pain, we are just human.



Rex: What work are you personally involved in?

Damelin: I'm very much involved in the schools; for me that is the most rewarding work. David was a student, doing his master's in the philosophy of education. In many ways it's kind of commemorating who he was. I spend a lot of time in classrooms; over the course of 2005, the Parents Circle did more than 1,000 classroom dialogues in Israel and Palestine. So that is a huge amount of students. We have a group of about 50 members who do these classroom dialogues, and that is a main part of the work we're doing.

I'm also part of a project to create a television series on the second channel in Israel. It's a drama series, a fiction drama of 10 episodes, and it will be in Hebrew and Arabic on prime time. It will interweave some of the stories from people from the Parents Circle, but mainly the audience will watch it like anything else you'd watch on TV. There's no peace message, just the narrative of two families, which obviously would give a greater understanding for both sides, just humanize things a little. And then at the end we'll show a making-of, and then people will recognize that much of what they've seen is true.

Awwad: I talk to many schools as one of the Palestinian members who are active; I talk to universities, I talk to people on both sides. I talk to people who are fighting; I talk to the army. I talk to many people about this movement, about the Forum and about nonviolence. Many

people, when you say peace, they despair. They don't know that there is a difference between peace and nonviolence. Peace is the end, peace is agreement, peace is the life. But nonviolence is the way to live. It's the way that could lead you to life. Nonviolence is not a hope, like peace; nonviolence is a mission and a duty.

I used to talk to angry people from both sides. They are angry, because this is the way that they deal with fear and pain. Then when I talk to them, hear their pain, their history, their different experience, their behavior today and the future, I wonder where are we leading ourselves by being so angry, so upset, and violent. As a person who has suffered a lot I can touch them, I can reach them. To show the people how to use the pain, not just how to deal with it.

It doesn't mean that everything will be OK. It doesn't mean that the violence will stop and the occupation will be removed tomorrow. But to finish we have to start, and how we start, this is the question: to allow the people to control the reaction, to have this connection between the feeling and the mind, and to get this out through a nonviolent behavior, through a human behavior that will allow the other side to understand your rights, and which will allow you to understand there is hope and there is somebody on the other side who understands you.

Rex: What response do you get?

Awwad: In Israel, especially the students tell me that they have never met a Palestinian before. It's not surprising, because they see the Palestinian by being in the army reserve, or they see the Palestinian by being in the settlements, and they don't have any contact with Palestinians. They see the Palestinian in the media holding a gun, and they don't know what it means to live in a refugee camp.

They ask me, well, if there are many people like you, as you say, where are they? We don't see them. Yes, they don't see them, because the Palestinian life is so different from the Israeli life. Palestinians are not demonstrating for the peace, like what is happening in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, but on the other hand they are not doing anything against the peace either.

Nobody realizes that until we meet them. And sometimes they react in another way. Sometimes they don't want to hear me – I mean, part of them doesn't want to accept me. But I hold myself there, and keep talking to them, and at last – it's happened to me many times – at last they come to me and they shake my hand, and they say, you helped us to open our eyes, and to open our minds, because we never thought that there is a human on the other side.

So the Palestinian has to be convinced that nonviolence could lead you to peace, could lead you to independence, but nonviolence is a duty. Even if you've been controlled by the occupation, this is a successful way to control your feelings and decide for yourself how to act. When you react with violence, the occupation has an excuse to use this reaction against you.

It's complicated, you know. It's huge.

I have a friend; now he wants to give up fighting. When you see the people touched by you, by this message, you feel that you are changing things.

It's a process; it takes time. We need the political level also; we cannot do it alone. There's the human level and the political level, but we cannot reach the political level without helping the people understand the other side.



Rex: How do you cope with the problem that's common to many peace workers, the accusation that you're betraying "your" side and "giving aid and comfort to the enemy"?

Damelin: Actually that's very much in the minority. We haven't come across this very much, and when we do it isn't from Israel or Palestine, it's from radical right-wingers in America. Ali has standing in his community; I mean, somebody who's been to jail for four years, who's been shot by a settler and lost his brother can hardly be suspected of being a collaborator. Of course I've had some remarks, I can't say that I haven't. But as bereaved parents and families, we've paid a high price to say what we say, and generally there is a sense of respect, in Israel and in Palestine, for both of us.

But you do get kooks, and I guess wherever you do work, whatever country, there's always some extreme people who are frightened by this work, because we shake up their belief system.

Rex: The Parents Circle's work is very much of a particular time and place, but does it have any lessons for the rest of the world?

Awwad: Sure. I believe that all of us are involved in this circle of our humanity. I believe that our conflict has been used by many other people to kill other people, not just Israelis or Palestinians. And I believe that when I help by also solving another conflict, another hatred here, there, everywhere, it pushes my case to be solved more. Because when I solve your problem you start to care about mine.

And the other thing is, I believe that everybody has a message in his life. It doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter if you are Palestinian or Israeli or Egyptian or Christian or Muslim or Jewish; you are part of this world. So what are you doing, and how are you doing that? How are you connecting to this identity, or nationality, or religion?

It doesn't mean I will become an Israeli or a Christian or a Jew; people keep their identity and their religion. But there is another thing more holy than everything, which is their humanity. So if we put this power and this movement and this cycle around, we can involve everybody to help and support us by supporting themselves.

Damelin: We were at a conference on restorative justice in Milwaukee, with professor Mark Umbreit; he's worked on Death Row introducing families of victims to murderers or perpetrators of the crime. The mother of Amy Biehl, the Fulbright student killed in Soweto, was at the conference together with one of the men who had killed her daughter. And in September we were here for the September 11 five-year commemoration in New York.

So I met with many people from all over the world who have been the victims of terror, or who have created organizations for reconciliation. From that point of view it's been very enlightening – we're not just an island on our own. I think what's interesting is that we have a very profound effect on people, mainly because it's a Palestinian and an Israeli talking with one voice.

I was in San Francisco in September – a hip-hop artist named Michael Franti invited us to come and talk in Golden Gate Park at the Power to the Peaceful festival; there were something like 60,000 people there.

I have to tell you that when we arrived there and I saw all these amazing colors and dresses and outfits and people, I was quite astounded, because I thought that I had seen it all. But the fact is that there's a sense of acceptance there; I think if I were wearing a carrot coming out of my head, that wouldn't have created too much noise.

It's not music that I understand, but I can tell you that when I did stand on the stage and I started to hear the words and understand them, I started to realize that this is the most incredible protest music. And I felt all the music coming through my legs.

I was there with a partner called Nadwa, and I said, these people are never going to listen to us. But Michael Franti stood up and told everybody to sit down and told them who we were, and 60,000 people sat down on the grass and listened to us for 15 to 20 minutes, which was amazing, because they were all fired up.

And then I walked around, and I saw a lot of hate posters – kill Bush, destroy Rumsfeld, assassinate what's-her-name, Condoleezza Rice. And that really upset me, because that's the same language, just the other side of the coin. You know, the things they're supposed to be anti-. If you're a peace group, that's not the rhetoric you should be using. But that's just my personal opinion.

Awwad: I want to say that it's not our destiny to keep dying violently, and if we cannot solve this conflict, the world has more power than us. How many people have to die for the rest of the world to wake up and help us?

I think the behavior of the world is going in a crazy direction, which will cost everybody in this world an even higher price. We have to stop it or we will be sorry after a few years.

The other thing is it's very easy to be right; everybody wants to be right. It's very hard to be honest. So people prefer to be right, they prefer to be a victim; when you feel you you're a victim you're giving an excuse for your behavior against the other side. On the other hand, everybody wants to see the other side as a devil, to excuse their own behavior against him, because if I see him as a human, there is a payment, there is a price, and nobody wants to pay the price.

What I'm asking from everybody, not just in Palestine and Israel, is just not to be stuck by those feelings and those thoughts. Being human doesn't mean to feel sorry for the other person; I don't want people to feel sorry for me. It means understanding what the people need to live as humans by supporting them.



Rex Board Perspective

Rex board member Nick Morgan:

“We were inspired by the Parents Circle’s work that involved cross-border solutions to this very complex problem of cooperation and trust and kindness between warring countries, warring communities. We learned of their work drawing on victims from both sides of this PalestinianIsraeli conflict, and we were inspired by the fact that this group looks for humane solutions to a longstanding political and religious problem. That’s what drew us to this organization – that they don’t take sides in this conflict, but rather foster community-based solutions based in human kindness and understanding.

“We cast a net far and wide looking for organizations that were working for solutions in this Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and became aware of them through the Santa Cruz Peace Center, which was hosting dialogues given by the Parents Circle. We interviewed many people in the Santa Cruz area, and all of them spoke very highly of Parents Circle’s cross-border approach.

“The Parents Circle is an inspiration to all of us because of how they bring people together from the misery of this conflict to the hope of working together, both Israelis and Palestinians whose stories inspire the youth in those regions to look beyond the conflict and look at the personal impact of this great struggle. We hope that by highlighting Parents Circle’s work we can inspire the next generation, both in the region and in the world, to find peaceful ways to resolve these conflicts.

“Because of the late Bill Graham’s interest in Jewish community affairs, we thought this would be an appropriate way to honor his spirit, of looking at solutions to the problems in that region.”