

Mourning and Protest in Jaffa, January 2009

The three-week war in Gaza which began late in December of 2008 was, to many informed observers in Israel and Palestine and elsewhere, avoidable. That, and the large number of casualties among non-combatants, along with massive damage to industry, agriculture, and animals, evoked outrage, sadness, and protest among many groups of Jewish as well as Palestinian citizens in Israel.

Seeking a shared response. On January 2nd, the idea for some kind of shared response to the war was raised by participants in USAid-funded Change Advocates course for Israeli and Palestinian mental health workers, at a joint social activism training workshop. The Gaza attack was in progress. The Jews and Palestinians in the room shared a deep feeling of sorrow and sought some way to voice their protest – together. There was a sense of "we must do something!" Two women, a Jew and a Palestinian – Maha Skalali-Tali and Sarit Moray – initiated and led the development of the idea. They felt strongly that it was simply impossible to sit silently by on the sidelines, especially given the dimensions of civilian deaths, which were continuing to mount.

On January 10th at Wahat al Salam / Neve Shalom, the Change Advocates convened a planning meeting with about 25 people from their own group and several other organizations -- SHATIL, OSIM Shalom-Social Workers Making Peace, The School for Peace at Wahat al Salam / Neve Shalom, PsychoActive, and the Parents Circle–Bereaved Families Forum. At a time when emotions were running high, the Change Advocates were able to bring together a diverse group to plan and promote a joint program. The date was set for January 17 – only a week later. A week is a very short time for organizing something of this magnitude, but the group was very anxious to hold this gathering while the war was actually in progress.

A ritual of grieving, in three languages. There was discussion of what to call the event; the name chosen in Hebrew was *Sukkat avelim* - a "*succah* of mourning" – a *succah* being a roofed outdoor ritual space in the Muslim tradition when the family is mourning it was also a custom in the Hebrew culture in the past. The name chosen in Arabic, similarly, was *Ha'imat hadad wa'asa* - a "tent of mourning and sorrow" In English, the event was called "A gathering of protest and mourning."

Over the intervening week, most of the group, Jews and Palestinians, worked together intensively to organize the gathering. Everyone took a task, and the cooperation was smooth and mutually supportive. Some people worked on finding a venue; others prepared black placards bearing the names of citizens killed (and the war was not yet over...); others dealt with the media, and others worked on getting the word out to both communities. While some people created a multi-lingual printed program, others contacted the speakers.

Jaffa – a city of both Jews and Arabs – was chosen as the site. The group settled on the Jewish-Arab Community Center as a logical setting.

On January 14, with only three days to go, the group met at Jaffa's Arab- Jewish Community Center, which had agreed to host the gathering. Meanwhile, the Tel Aviv

municipality issued a letter declaring that the event was "political" and that the city therefore did not approve the use of the community center for the event.

The organizers telephoned to Rabita – the Association for Arab residents of Jaffa – who agreed to rent their premises for the 17th. This was a much smaller hall, but it would have to do.

An overflow audience. On January 17, more than 300 people came to Jaffa to protest and mourn – together – the suffering and loss of life in this latest round of bloodshed. The hall was standing room only. People stood in the balcony and on the stairs and in the street, where a speaker was hastily placed to provide sound to the overflow crowd.

The program opened with an Israeli musician, Yair Bouksbaum, playing the viola. The first speakers were the two emcees: Maha Sakali Tali from the Change Advocates course, and Arnona Zahavi from PsychoActive, the mental health workers' activism group. They facilitated the whole event beautifully. Ms. Shulamit Aloni, former Israeli Minister of Education and perhaps the foremost figure in the history of civil rights in Israel, spoke forcefully as always. She was followed by Professor Ariella Friedman, a psychologist, from Tel Aviv University. The gathering also heard Dr. Ahmad Abu-Tuahina, director of the GCMHP-Gaza Community Mental Health Center, speaking from Gaza by telephone, in the midst of the ongoing fighting.

The gathering also heard Lt. Col. (Res.) Yoel Peterburg, among the founders of the Apache helicopter unit in the Israeli Air Force and a conscientious objector, on the impossibility of foreseeing the consequences on civilians of a war conducted from the air. Prof. Ramzi Suleiman, a psychologist from the University of Haifa, called for an investigation of war crimes in Gaza, to include Israel's senior political and military decision-makers.

Three scheduled participants were unable to attend: Nir Oren, Jewish Co-Chairman of the bi-national Bereaved Families Forum, who was under arrements on grounds of "unauthorized assembly" for participating in a silent protest vigil in Beersheba. His Palestinian Co-Chairman could not attend due to the closure enforced on the West Bank. The third was Dr. Abu-Tuahina, whom we heard by telephone; he remained in Gaza with its injured, displaced, exhausted and traumatized residents.

Advocating nonviolent alternatives to war. The event was widely reported in the press in Israel. No such gathering can stop a war, but it enables us to say that the war did not pass without protest and mourning on the part of ordinary citizens. Jews and Arabs in the region continue to advocate for nonviolent alternatives to the planned destruction of human life, including noncombatants and children, and of civilian infrastructure like farms, homes, and schools.

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What speakers said in Sukat Avelim event:

**Shulamit Aloni:
Disgraced IDF no longer Israel's "Defense Forces"**

"Given the terrible actions taken in this war," said former Member of Israel's Knesset and longtime civil rights champion Shulamit Aloni yesterday, "the IDF can no longer be known as the 'Israel Defense Forces.' When I fought in Israel's War of Independence, we thought we were creating an exemplary society, but our army today is no longer an army of defense. It is a brutal and hedonistic army of conquest." Aloni was the keynote speaker at a "gathering of protest and mourning" following the massive civilian deaths during Israel's war in Gaza in recent weeks.

A standing-room-only audience of three hundred Israelis overflowed the auditorium at the Association for Jaffa Arabs on downtown Yefet Street, and loudspeakers were hastily set up for the latecomers standing outside in the cold. The program opened with a brief shared ritual of mourning – poetry read aloud and the music of an oud and a violin. The event was initiated and organized by the 2008 graduates of a course for activists, called Mental Health Professionals as Change Agents, later joined in the effort by several activist organizations: the School for Peace at Wahat al Salam / Neve Shalom (where the change agents program, funded by the EU, is run); OSIM-Shalom: Social Workers Make Peace; the Bereaved Families Forum; and PsychoActiv-Mental Health Professionals for Human Rights. Displayed in the lobby of Rabita Auditorium was a list – inscribed in white ink against a black background – of the names of the civilians killed in the war, Arabs and Jews, alongside memorial candles lit in their memory. Most of the afternoon was devoted to workshops addressing themes like "From Mourning to Protest" and "The Sacredness of Life as a Shared Value."

Aloni minced no words. "I've heard people saying that 'we gave them Gaza and look how they behaved.' But we did not give them Gaza, to our disgrace; instead, we turned Gaza into a giant detention camp with a million and a half inmates, with no way in or out. Those leaving at three o'clock in the morning on their way to work were scrutinized as if they were slaves. People who are incarcerated in a detention camp have the right to respond.

"The IDF... spares no thought for families, old people, women and children. The [Israeli] public unashamedly celebrates the killing and the destruction. They rejoice that we have a large, strong army – but this army is no longer the Israel Defense Forces. I was a soldier in the IDF during [Israel's] War of Independence. We thought we were creating an exemplary society, but Israel has abandoned its values and the values of its Declaration of Independence."

Aloni was harshly critical of Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai, who withdrew permission to hold the event at the Jewish-Arab Community Center in Jaffa, its planned location. "I thought Huldai believed in freedom of expression. How disgraceful for Tel Aviv's mayor that the city did not provide a venue for this civic gathering of people working for Jewish-Arab partnership and dialogue and peace." Aloni added, "There is another voice discernible here, but they silence it. I am sure that people will wake up now, and that this disgrace

will be expunged. It will be expunged if Israel opens the gates and helps rehabilitate the terrible destruction it has caused, if it builds hospitals and rebuilds schools and helps rebuild the homes destroyed in this ghastly festival of destruction."

Psychology Professor Ariella Friedman of Tel Aviv University: "I am dumbstruck that such a large percentage of the nation thinks this campaign [in Gaza] is legitimate. I don't think the Jewish people is the worst nation on earth, nor, sadly, is it the best nation on earth. But the circumstances here have turned us into people who perpetrate atrocities – and are then silent. I've heard people say that this was a 'successful war' – what cynicism, what spiritual numbness. There is a model here: they begin a war with a grand display of arrogant posturing but without any idea how they want to end it, and people enthusiastically embrace that decision. And afterwards they say 'there was no choice' – since when did we have no choice?"

"In Israel," continued Prof. Friedman, "some people want to hang on to their faith in [their] morality at any price while waging war by any means. The price is an extreme separation between us and them. In Israel, the people weep over every citizen killed and there is a tremendous sense of togetherness. Yet how do people respond to the death of a mother and her five children, as happened one night in Gaza? Supposedly we are an enlightened army seeking only peace, doing what we do because we have no other option, whereas the killing that the other side perpetrates is intentional and evil. These are superficial statements that help people to deal with the intolerable situation and not to face the fact that they are committing atrocities against people under their control. That is the only way they can commit evil acts and still feel moral."

Dr. Ahmad Abu-Tuahina, director of the GCMHP-Gaza Community Mental Health Center, talked with the gathering by telephone: "The children of the Intifadas have undergone dreadful traumas. In the first Intifada, soldiers broke into homes and abused parents in front of their children. These children were traumatized: they discovered that those who are supposed to defend them have no defense, hence they were obliged to take the initiative to defend themselves. Children who felt lost and abandoned sought some figure to identify with, and they identified with the powerful – with members of Hamas who were fighting for their honor. This situation created a wave of extremism among the children and adults of both peoples. The same situation obtains today. In Gaza today there is no safe place – no safety at home nor on the street nor even in UN buildings, and the fact that UN buildings are no longer safe is heavily symbolic. The two children who were trapped for several days under a building with their mother who had been killed – imagine what kind of adults these children will grow up to be, after such an insane experience. With this war, Israel has nurtured its own enemies and obliterated the prospects for coexistence and peace."

Lieutenant Col. (Res.) Yoel Peterburg, among the founders of the Apache helicopter unit in the Israeli Air Force and a conscientious objector: "I helped create the Apache unit in the Air Force which today, with its dreadful missiles, so terrifies Palestinians. I commanded the capture of the ship Karine A. My experience is that the Air Force has undergone a steep moral decline, particularly among combat helicopter [pilots]. Until the second Intifada, we were not permitted during a targeted assassination to carry out the mission if within a radius of 500 meters there were 'uninvolved bystanders.' If we saw a vehicle approaching the village, we aborted the mission. Now they are launching one-ton bombs at houses when the pilot has no idea who is inside. After a bomb of that size hits, there is no way he can know who was there in hindsight, either. Two cornerstones of the

IDF code of conduct become irrelevant here – respect for human life and the purity of arms."

Prof. Ramzi Suleiman, a psychologist from the University of Haifa: "You called for a gathering to mourn, but I refuse to mourn, not for the dead among my people and not for the dead of another people. Mourning helps keep the dead person among us after their spirit has departed. I cannot go forward yet; today I am still alive and in pain and protesting. I still have enough life left in me that I can look straight at the murderers of children and women and men, look them in the eye, or as someone once said, see the whites of their eyes, and tell them: Murderers, you have killed hundreds of children, women, and men, you have destroyed Gaza, a wretched place where a million and a half human beings live."

Prof. Suleiman enumerated the guilty: the Prime Minister, the Defense Minister, and the Foreign Minister, along with the Chief of Staff, and added: "When the day comes that these people stand before a war crimes tribunal, I would like to see on the defendants' bench not just those who gave the orders and those who fired the weapons. I would also like to see those who 'fired and wept.' The authors and cultural icons who lent sleazy credibility to this terrible crime."

Three scheduled participants were unable to attend: Nir Oren, co-chairman of the Bereaved Families Forum, who is currently under arrest, on grounds of "unauthorized assembly," for participating in a silent protest vigil in Beersheba. The second is his Palestinian co-chairman who could not attend due to the closure enforced on the West Bank. And the last is Dr. Abu-Tuahina, who remains in Gaza with its injured, displaced, exhausted and traumatized residents.

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