

Try listening to the person in pain

Israelis and Palestinians are finding reconciliation using testimonies, says Miriam Arkush

United in grief: Robi Damelin (left), an Israeli, and Ali Abu Awwad, a Palestinian, members from the Israeli-Palestinian Bereaved Families Forum

WHEN missiles fell on Gaza and Sderot in January, repercussions were felt around the world. In Cambridge, as at other universities in this country, students took up their own “arms” – demonstrating, writing letters and articles, and lobbying through blogs and Facebook. Earlier this month, however, they were told by a passionate Israeli-Palestinian duo that creating more wars around the world was not going to solve anything.

Robi Damelin, an Israeli, and Ali Abu Awwad, a Palestinian, were there as part of the UK tour of the Israeli-Palestinian Bereaved Families Forum. They are united in their loss. Mrs Damelin’s son David was killed by a Palestinian sniper, and Mr Awwad’s brother Yussuf was killed by an Israeli soldier; he also spent four years in an Israeli prison.

More than 500 families, similarly bereaved by the conflict, make up the Forum, all with their own tale of pain, but all holding the belief that reconciliation will come about through dialogue rather than revenge. Realising that the other side also has feelings of pain makes impossible the dehumanising attitude of “us” and “them”.

The effect is remarkable. As victims, we have a tendency to demonise the other side, denying that they too have a story of suffering. This, Mr Awwad explained, is what has happened between Israelis and Palestinians. But telling stories as a model of dialogue gives a human face to the other.

“The Palestinian mothers feel the same pain as I do,” Mrs Damelin said. “I promise you. We feel the same pain when we go to bed at night.”

Mr Awwad told the audience about the Israelis he had encountered in his life — stone-throwing settlers and gun-wielding soldiers. Until the year his brother died, that is, when his family were contacted by an Israeli family who belonged to the Forum: they wanted to visit Mr Awwad’s family in his Palestinian village.

Within 30 minutes of the visit, everybody was in tears. “It was the first time in my life I had seen an Israeli cry,” Mr Awwad said. “I was used to soldiers in my house, but I had never seen the humility of the other side.”

The audience was filled with the leaders of the university Palestinian Solidarity movements, the Israel Society, the Islamic Society, the Jewish Society, church groups, and dialogue groups. You could see many of them visibly moved by this public act of mutual recognition. In light of it, the angry demonstrations that marked the start of the last university term began to seem childish.

Kat Hanna, a third-year student who has attended many events in Cambridge about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, said that the evening had “a humbling and inspiring impact”. “As much as we rant and rave, we students can be more destructive than constructive. There is a certain feeling that it is more ‘fun’ to do the shouting than the reconciliation.”

She hopes that the impact of this event will trickle down to the ranters and ravers. "It was the embodiment of showing the story of the other... Let's learn a bit more about the conflict first."

THE Woolf Institute of Abrahamic Faiths, which co-hosted the event, is an academic teaching centre, dedicated to breaking down barriers of intolerance through the study of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is taught on all courses, and the approach is to offer a safe space in which students can explore the issues in an informed and intelligent way.

The Forum's approach of humanising the conflict will have an impact on the Woolf Institute's teaching, says Dr Ed Kessler, its Director. The personal stories bring home the complexity of the subject. Students tend to want simple answers, but even the simple questions have complicated answers here.

The Forum's goal of recognising the human face behind the perception should be able to inform interfaith dialogue as much as the inter-political conversation. "Telling stories can certainly heal the rifts between religions," Dr Kessler says.

"We know this because stories are at the heart of all our religions. If they can open up a religion to its followers, stories and human faces can certainly communicate something of that religion to others. We use stories frequently here."

These could be biblical stories, Dr Kessler says, or parables, both of which are used by holy writings to communicate deeper messages. Comparing, for example, vineyard parables from the New Testament and Talmud can bring to life the interaction between Jewish and early Christian thought.

Dr Kessler also emphasises the use of testimony, especially in Holocaust studies. The testimonies of Holocaust survivors or witnesses make the subject real for students. Stories, whether personal accounts, biblical narratives, or parables, can communicate something of the other in a particularly effective way.

One thing seems clear, though: we are all going to have to get much better at listening to one another if we are to become like the Damelins and Awwads of the world. "We are married," Mr Awwad said during the evening, "but it's a very complicated marriage. We have to get divorced, to calm down. But, it's our destiny to get remarried: we share the same home, the same kids."

If we are ever to heal the broken marriages of our world – between husband and wife, religion and religion, nation and nation – we are going to have to be able to listen to the story of others, and accept them on their own terms.

Then we can begin to work together to heal the rift. "Being a victim, there is so much pain," Mr Awwad said; "but giving up victimhood, there are so many responsibilities."

Miriam Arkush studied Theology at Cambridge University, and now works at the Woolf Institute of Abrahamic Faiths.