

Blood ties: can mutual grief unite the Middle East?



Pro Israel?

Pro Palestine?

Just Pro Peace

Ali Abu Awwad and Robi Damelin have been campaigning for a resolution to the conflict in the Middle East via peaceful dialogue since the deaths of their family members.

An immeasurably long history of misunderstanding and violence has caused an unparalleled and seemingly irreparable level of discord between two states that are now seemingly synonymous with conflict: Israel and Palestine.

On Monday 8 November the Students' Union hosted an event with the UK Friends of the Bereaved Families Forum (FBFF), which was attended by around 30 Sussex students from all backgrounds. The event centred around the presence of Ali Abu Awwad, a Palestinian man whose brother died at the hands of the Israeli army, and Robi Damelin, an Israeli mother whose son, David, was shot dead by a member of Palestinian militant group Hamas. The duo is currently touring the UK with the FBFF to share their experiences and speak about their vision for peace in the Middle East.

Today the organisation, also known as the Israeli Palestinian Bereaved Families Forum, comprises more than 500 families. Its UK secretary Chani Smith said: "The FBFF creates opportunities for the two sides to share with each other their historical narratives and personal stories. The pain suffered by victims on both sides is channelled toward a greater empathy of the other and toward a determination to find a solution which will allow both Israelis and Palestinians to live in security, freedom and with dignity."

Having won several prestigious awards including the 2010 Ghandi Foundation International Peace Prize, the FBFF attempts to forge societal channels between Israelis and Palestinians in preparation for a time when political agreements can be signed and peace can be reached. Their pamphlet reads: "To build a bridge, you don't need millions of people. You need enough people to build a bridge so that a million others can cross over it."

Concentrating firmly on the humanity of the Israeli and Palestinian people, as opposed to the politics of their respective peoples, the FBFF advocates the "sharing of grief, extending the hand of friendship [and] exploring common humanity." So, although it is first through bereavement that the organisation comes together, it believes that peace between them can be sought through this same experience.

The FBFF have reached the ears of more than 30,000 students worldwide. In spite of this impressive figure, the turnout at Sussex was, according to a third-year Palestinian Law student who wishes to remain anonymous, "shockingly meagre considering how many of us on campus are affected by the conflict. It is this precisely that underpins and to a certain extent fuels much of the hostility that many students, both Palestinian and Israeli, seem to face."

At the start of the meeting, a video was played featuring both Israeli and Palestinian individuals sharing their experiences of losing loved ones as a direct result of the ongoing conflict. As members from each

side of it explained how they had begun a reconciliation process with those from the other thanks to the actions of the forum, as Mr Awwad said: "I may have lost my father, but I did not lose my head", it became evident that this meeting would be a world away from the politically-oriented discussions surrounding the issue that Sussex students are arguably all too familiar with.

That the meeting was held in Mandela Hall was for Robi Damelin coincidental, but very appropriate. She said: "Nelson Mandela is one of my heroes. He knows how to get to the heart of an issue; the issue of humanity. In fact, a cousin of mine studied at Sussex years ago and was involved with the Union so-naming this hall."

Robi's motivation for taking an active role in the forum's running and for hosting the meeting at Sussex, as well as at other universities in countries across the globe, is to challenge commonly held social and political ideologies relating to the conflict.

The fundamental idea that carries the heavy responsibility of the type of peace the FBFF are trying to initiate is certainly present, but how relevant to students of Sussex is the idea of reaching peace through empathy and shared grief? It is here, after all, that the forum believes a change in attitudes can develop. An Israeli student, who also does not wish to be identified, said: "Last year, I was involved in the campaign against the boycott of Israeli goods. This resulted in me being the target of some really personal and hateful comments from people I had never even met. As a result, I've resolved to stay away from the whole issue while I'm studying at the university."

Meanwhile, a student involved in the pro-boycott campaign reported that her friends were accused of anti-Semitism, simply for pushing for a boycott of Israeli goods and despite the fact that some group members were themselves Jewish.

The reality of the situation here at Sussex might then challenge the basis of the messages of peace that the FBFF promote and questions how those who have not suffered bereavement as a result of conflict, who simply want to stand up for what they believe in, can ever possibly empathise with those on the opposing side.

However, Ali Abu Awwad, whose brother Youssef was killed at an Israeli checkpoint, shared Robi's sentiments. Ali said: "I was frustrated with the Palestinian government, the failed peace agreements and the politics of the occupation in general and I felt that the only way for things to truly be changed was on the ground. We need a social resistance and not a political one.

"As a Palestinian I don't hate Israelis, I just want to understand them and them to understand us."

Something that appeared somewhat crucial to their summary of the social, propaganda driven aspect of the conflict was what they described as the "fear" of Israeli people and the "suffering" of their Palestinian



Graffiti inscribed across the Israeli West Bank barrier, also known as the "Apartheid Wall".

Photo: www.evolveandlive.com

counterparts. Here the idea was that dialogue is the art to finding the truth; the truth of both sides as opposed to an all-encompassing truth that benefits only one institution.

This generated something of a response from the attendees and it was a Palestinian student that asked: "What is it that we can do here at Sussex as individuals then? Certain members of our student body have decided to boycott Israeli goods on campus and some are even looking to have them banned altogether. Is this a positive productive action?"

Robi at this point responded: "Who are you helping by doing this? These are political steps being taken in a climate where social action is the answer."

Awwad, meanwhile, offered another response to the issue: "Love can never be a tactic or a strategy. A non-violent resolution is the key. You see, physically you can win, but what's inside my chest, you cannot beat."

Following this, in apparent contradiction to her self-professed non-political stance, Robi advocated action such as contacting local MPs to implore them not to take sides in light of their influential political standings.

An attending rabbi quickly called this discrepancy: "I'm growing increasingly disturbed at how I hear politics creeping into some of your remarks. Is what you're trying to achieve a strategy?"

This inevitably raised questions of two individual yet interwoven truths; the truth of the Israelis and the truth of the Palestinians. Robi fairly acknowledged that they as an organisation didn't "have the monopoly on truth" but despite this, she seemed certain that everyone's individual truth, although sometimes elusive, was the very essence of their cause.

In a statement later obtained from the UK Friends of the Bereaved Families Forum, provided as it was felt that Sussex-specific issues were not adequately addressed, Chani Smith stated that: "Speaking to students in Israel and Palestine is high on the agenda for the Bereaved Families Forum and we were pleased to bring the message of reconciliation to the University of Sussex. Both in Israel, Palestine and abroad, being Pro-Palestinian or Pro-Israeli does not help anyone as it only perpetuates the conflict. Demonisation of one side by the other simply accentuates the divisions and hostility and makes reaching a solution harder. It also evidently creates conflict on your campus. We hope that Sussex students, particularly those divided on the Middle-East conflict, will look for ways to facilitate dialogue, and learn more about each other, as well as promote a non-violent approach to resolving the disparity."

A pamphlet handed out at the meeting reiterated this sentiment: "If I kill someone in revenge, will that bring my baby back to me? And if I cause someone else pain, will that ease my own pain? Absolutely not."