

Testing dialogue to the limit

A forum for families on both sides of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is helping those hit hardest to choose reconciliation instead of revenge, as Margaret Holness discovered

Choosing life: a Palestinian, Ali Abu Awwad (standing), and South African-born Israeli Robi Damelin (to his right), tell their stories of loss, and speak about the work of the Bereaved Families Forum at a recent interfaith meeting at the Sacred Heart, Wimbledon

TWO SCENARIOS. An Israeli shell falls in Bethlehem, killing innocent civilians. Cue televised scenes of masked men shooting AK-47s in the air and calling for revenge. Six miles away, in Jerusalem, a suicide bomber blows himself up on a bus. Several passengers are killed or mutilated. Cue interviews with politicians threatening deterrent attacks.

“Why do they always concentrate on revenge?” asks Chani Smith, an Israeli-born musician, and the wife of a north London rabbi. “It encourages the extremist minority, and dehumanises the conflict. It also denies a voice to the majority on both sides who yearn for peace.”

Mrs Smith found another way when her close friend, Anna, “a lovely, vibrant woman who worked for peace”, was killed. “The last time we met, she warned me against travelling on buses. Then, one day, someone rang to tell me she was dead. She had been on a bus blown up by a suicide bomber. I had to do something. Then I heard about the Bereaved Families Forum. It was just what I was looking for.”

The forum brings together people who have lost close relatives and friends in the Israel/Palestine conflict. The organisation grew out of the Parents Circle, a support group started in 1995 by the father of a 19-year-old Israeli, Arik Frankenthal, who had been kidnapped and killed by Hamas the previous year. Perhaps surprisingly, Palestinians who had lost children also joined the group, which, under its new name, now includes more than 500 families who have lost immediate relatives.

Two members whose sons were killed in 2002 are typical. Robi Damelin, a South-African-born Israeli and a lifelong peace activist, joined after her son David was shot by a sniper at an isolated West Bank roadblock. Fellow member Elham Elsoabe’s son, Ghasan, was shot by Israeli soldiers when he ran into the street to tell children to go home as tanks rolled into Nablus. Nine other members of her family have died as a result of the conflict.

“The support of other members in the group helps to ease my pain,” she says. Her other son, Marwan, who had been beaten by soldiers, joined the forum because: “He believes in peace and reconciliation, not death and violence.”

Mrs Damelin and a 34-year-old Palestinian, Ali Abu Awwad, described the work of the Bereaved Families Forum when they visited Britain this autumn, speaking to church councils, interfaith groups, Muslim groups, and synagogues, and at universities where meetings were organised by Jewish and Islamic student societies.

Mrs Damelin told meetings how she had written to the family of the sniper who had killed her son, who had been opposed to the occupation, explaining her own commitment to peace. “Forgiveness doesn’t mean giving up your right to justice, or saying it’s OK, but you can’t belong to an organisation like this unless you are willing to forgive.”

Her co-speaker, Mr Abu Awwad, who spent four years in Israeli prisons, was being treated in Saudi Arabia

for bullet wounds in his leg, when he heard that his older brother had been killed. He was devastated, “wondering how to go on”, when he became involved with the Bereaved Families Forum. Until then, the only Israelis he had met were soldiers or settlers.

Now, he engages in dialogue, “putting the hardest cases on the table”. He hopes for an end to “the crazy cycle of blood”. Mr Abu Awwad tells how a guard standing in pouring rain at an Israeli checkpoint was shocked when he sympathised with him. He had expected the Palestinian to enjoy his discomfort. He sees the incident as an important point of contact.

The speakers, and others like them, take the same message of pain and reconciliation to schools, colleges, universities, and other groups in the sharper situations of Israel and Palestine, where feelings remain raw. There, the agonies they describe are felt more keenly than by interested sympathisers in Britain or the United States.

Personal encounters are vital to building trust, says Mrs Smith. She points to the outstanding success of another outreach initiated by the forum, Hello Peace (known in Israel and Palestine as “Hello Shalom”, or “Hello Salaam”). This free telephone service allows Israelis and Palestinians to dial a special number and speak to a stranger on the other side of the conflict.

It has its roots in a call made by an Israeli woman misrouted to a Palestinian home. The mistake resulted in a long conversation – which began in suspicion and ended in warmth and a desire, on both sides, to carry on talking.

Founded in 2002, the cross-border telephone service has since facilitated almost one million calls. “They are not all sweetness and light. Some begin in anger, but usually understanding grows,” says Mrs Smith. “The popularity of the service gives a lie to the claim by some that there is no popular demand for peace.”

Another of the forum’s projects is co-operation between Israeli and Palestinian artists, 135 of whom have created a ceramics exhibition, “Offering Reconciliation”, interpreting their ideas of peace through pottery. The exhibition has already been shown in Israel and the US, and the Friends of the Bereaved Families Forum (UK) are negotiating for a high-profile show here next spring.

Though the Families Forum has a significant profile in the US, and enjoys the endorsement and regular support of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, it is less widely known in this country. Among its patrons, however, are the actress Juliet Stevenson, the Lebanese-born international flautist Wissam Boustany, and Huw Irranca-Davies MP.

Just before his death, the late Dr Zaki Badawi had agreed to join them. The Muslim writer Ahlam Akram is a co-chairman, and the Archbishop of York has been asked to support the cause.

The success of the forum convinces Mrs Smith that peace will come. “Israelis and Palestinians are bound by love of the land. It will not be a cold peace. We will be friends.”

The Bereaved Families Forum relies on volunteer staff. As its work expands, the forum is facing rising costs, and is now actively fund-raising. Jerusalem-based artist Liat Shternli, whose two brothers were killed during their military service, has designed a “peace bracelet” to raise funds for the forum’s peace initiatives, in which stones representing the land of Israel/ Palestine are interspersed by iron beads representing the separation of death. The bracelets cost £30 and can be ordered via the Friends of the Bereaved Families (UK) website. Donations can also be made through the website, or can be sent to: FFBF (UK), 5 Temple Close, Cyprus Road, London, N3 3SB.