



UK Friends of the Bereaved Families Forum (FBFF)

NEWSLETTER 21, NOVEMBER 2011

Seham Abu Awwad and Robi Damelin visit London

From the moment Robi and Seham's plane touched down at Heathrow on 8th November until their speaking engagements ended on the 12th, things were pretty hectic.

The two women arrived from Chicago where

they had been doing a speaking tour and coped valiantly with their jetlag.

Within hours of arriving in the UK they spoke eloquently to a small group of MPs at Portcullis House about the current situation in Israel and Palestine.

One of our patrons, Labour MP Huw Irranca Davis, organised the meeting.

We took the opportunity to discuss plans for future FBFF events with him, and to talk about ideas for an Early Day Motion to highlight the cause of

reconciliation and peace in Israel and Palestine.

■ The photo below shows Seham offering support to one of the student donors at our Blood Relations blood donor session in the West End: more details on page 3.



'Their labour and exertions must be ours' – LJS Rabbi

Rabbi Alexandra Wright of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in St John's Wood kindly hosted an interfaith lunch at which Seham and Robi spoke (photo on right). She eloquently summarised some of the key points at the meeting in her weekly message to her congregation.

Robi Damelin is a South African born Israeli; Seham Abu Awwad, a Palestinian Arab, was born on the West Bank – two women from worlds apart, but both tragically have lost a close family member as a result of the conflict in the Middle East. Robi's son, David, was shot by a sniper and Seham's brother, Yusef, was shot by an IDF soldier during the second intifada.

Robi says she has struggled to give up being a victim and said: 'forgiving is giving up your just right to revenge.'

Seham had to care for her younger brothers and sister when her mother was in prison. She was just 14 years old. Living under occupation has been extremely difficult for her and her family, but she is clear that she does not want to sacrifice the blood of her own children in this conflict.

That is why both women have undertaken a gruelling programme of speaking in Israel and Palestine, in the United States and in Britain. Their stories and their struggles moved an audience of nearly 30 people at the LJS on Wednesday.

Their goal is to create a framework through programmes, education and speaking engagements which reach out to every section of Israeli and Palestinian society and that will lead to peace. 'No one asks



what we want,' says Robi. 'No one cares about the people, it is simply the leaders going their own way. But what we are doing is reaching out to our own people and talking to them, persuading them that what they think and how they act are the only things that will lead to reconciliation and peace.'

Beneath the exteriors of two women speaking passionately for understanding of each other's people and for reconciliation lies the deep unhealed pain of bereavement and loss. It is difficult to imagine what these women go through. For all our conflicting feelings about what is currently happening in Israel, for all our disillusion perhaps in the ideals of its founders, it would be a tragedy of the greatest order if we were to

choose to disengage from the struggle in which these women are involved. Their labour and exertions must be ours, because the hard-won values by which they live their lives, are the values that lie at the heart of Judaism – the unqualified pursuit of peace and reconciliation, so that 'nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor ever again train for war' (Isaiah 2:4). 📖

Yachad, the organisation working for a two-state solution in Israel/Palestine, hosted a successful breakfast meeting where Robi and Seham spoke. Those who attended had an in-depth debate about the complex issues around resolving the Middle East conflict.

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'I am very moved to see people reaching out to each other'



Above: Robert Senior, CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi UK, introduces the Blood Relations film.

Below: Robi Damelin and Seham Abu Awwad speaking at the launch.

Bottom: Daniel Taub, the Israeli Ambassador in London, meets Seham and Robi at the Blood Relations donor session.



One of the highlights of the week was the UK launch of the Blood Relations campaign, a partnership between PCFF and the advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi. The campaign was launched in Israel/Palestine in September. It involves Israelis and Palestinians donating blood to each other not only to save lives, after so much blood has been spilt in the conflict, but also to symbolically heal the conflict.

At the launch, Saatchi & Saatchi hosted the UK premiere of the short 'Blood Relations' film and opened the 'Impossible Brief' exhibition. The competition had appealed to advertising agencies and others in the creative industries around the world to come up with a campaign to help solve the Middle East conflict.

The following day a group of students came together at the NHS Blood Service centre in Margaret Street, near Oxford Circus, to donate blood together.

The Jewish, Muslim and international students were supported by Seham and Robi.

Daniel Taub, the Israeli Ambassador, who came to participate in the blood drive, welcomed the initiative. 'As a combat medic in the IDF I learned that issues of life and

death can help bridge the divide. I am very moved to see people reaching out to each other in such an important and creative way,' he said.

Ali Abu Awwad, spokesperson and project manager, said on behalf of the Parents Circle-Families Forum: 'Blood Relations seeks to provide a catalyst for dialogue by demonstrating two peoples' shared humanity through the common bond of blood. It is incumbent upon us to stress the need for an ongoing dialogue towards peace.'

The Union of Jewish Students helped to organise a lecture at the LSE at which Robi and Seham addressed students from across London.

Hadiya Masieh, an FBFF management committee member, organised a very successful women-only event at Palmers Green mosque in north London. Robi and Seham shared a platform with two female speakers from the charity One Voice. Women from different faiths attended the event and many said they found the event extremely powerful and moving and that it gave them a great deal of food for thought.

Many thanks to Robi and Seham for their hard work during the visit – and to all who hosted and helped to organise events.

Watch the film at www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GZxLcGSCow

Visit www.bloodrelations.org for more information and to virtually donate blood in support of the project.

UK Friends of the Bereaved Families Forum (FBFF)

16 Lynmouth Road, London N2 9LS • Tel 07966 145098 • www.FamiliesForum.co.uk

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