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Blood ties: how grief could unite the Middle East

Palestinian Ali Abu Awwad and Israeli Robi Damelin have been brought together by the deaths of their family members

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"I was 10 years old. I remember visiting my mother in prison and feeling so angry. I couldn't hold her and couldn't touch her. I knew my mother was not a thief, not a criminal, not a killer. She had done nothing wrong. She was a hero to me because she was fighting for my rights," explains Ali Abu Awwad, a West Bank former revolutionary. "From the start this was a personal violation for me more than something political. Later, both of us were in the prison in Hebron. I was arrested at 15 under an Israeli military law and sentenced to four years. My mother, a well-known PLO activist, was in the women's prison there but I saw her only once."

While he was in prison Ali received an extraordinarily high level of political education. "Every day there were different discussion groups — management, negotiation, education and security committees — organised by the other prisoners."

In 1994, released as part of the Oslo agreement, Ali was exactly the sort of well-connected, angry young Palestinian radical the Israelis might have feared would resort to further violence.

And yet, now 37, he is travelling with an Israeli grandmother, Robi Damelin, 65, who has become one of his closest friends.

Before seeing me, they had both had tea with the Chief Rabbi and their plans for the week include a visit to a church, a mosque and a discussion with students at the University of London. They are trying to show, even as the Middle East conflict still rages, that grief can bring people together, if you listen to each other's pain. They believe that politicians will never create a lasting peace until both sides know and understand each other.

What happened? Shortly before his release from prison, Ali led a hunger strike lasting 17 days, demanding better conditions. It worked, and it taught him the strength of non-violent opposition.

But a few years later his adored older brother, Yussef, 32, was shot and killed during an argument with Israeli soldiers. Yussef had been trying to stop kids from throwing stones. "Yussef was the angel of our family. He gave up his own school studies to support our family when my mother was in prison. He worked for an Israeli charity. He was like a mother to me, making sure I always had sandwiches and didn't go hungry at school."

What stopped Ali seeking retribution for his brother's death was a phone call his mother received from an Orthodox Jew, Yitzhak Frankenthal, asking to visit. Frankenthal had recently established Parents Circle-Families Forum (PCFF) after his son Arik, 19, was kidnapped and murdered by Hamas activists.

The forum aimed to help families who had lost loved ones in the conflict to work together towards reconciliation. Frankenthal was determined from the outset that Palestinians must be equally represented at every level. Even a cheque from the charity requires both an Israeli and a Palestinian signature.

Ali recalls: "I was shocked that my mother agreed to invite Frankenthal and his family to our home as well as several other Palestinian bereaved families that we knew. I don't want to give the impression that that first meeting was all peace and light. We still have our differences. But after 30 minutes everyone was crying. It was the first time I had seen Israelis cry, the first time that I had encountered Israelis other than in

uniform ordering me about. We realised then that the other side can feel your pain and can even help work for your future. Revenge? What for? It does not bring anyone back."

Robi too heard about the parents circle from Frankenthal after her son David, an officer in the reserves, was killed by a Palestinian sniper, Taer Hamad. David, 28, studying for a master's degree in philosophy of education at Tel Aviv University, was part of the peace movement and did not want to serve in the occupied territories.

"Suddenly I realised that a bereaved Palestinian mother feels exactly the same pain when she goes to sleep as I do," says Robi. "I closed down my PR office even though I had worked for a number of coexistence projects. Nothing else seemed to matter as much as stopping the consequences of this madness. I was emphatic: 'You may not kill anybody in the name of my child.' I started working for the parents circle 24 hours a day. I will talk to anyone — even the Devil — if it helps."

Later I listen to Robi, a South African-born idealist Jew, and Ali telling their stories in public as part of an interfaith project. This is not, Ali insists, just about hoummos and hugs — a line he must have repeated in many countries. But tonight he hugs Robi as he says it. Not because they have established a mother-son relationship — that is too simplistic, they insist. But after five years he knows how much she is hurting merely uttering the name Taer.

Robi insists that she will, urged on by her older son Eran, go on writing and explaining about David to her son's killer in prison. "Perhaps this is the beginning of a new dialogue. I am not going to let this turn me into a victim," she says.

Today the organisation — also known as the Israeli Palestinian Bereaved Families Forum — comprises more than 500 families. Much of their work is in schools and the forum runs more than 1,000 classroom dialogues every year, where a Palestinian and Israeli member of the forum speak together to either Israeli or Palestinian classes. They tell Israelis about the Nakbar, Palestinians learn about the Holocaust. Usually there are speakers from both sides, many of whom, like Robi and Ali, travel the world spreading the message.

But the logistics of meetings are complicated, as Israelis are not allowed to visit Palestinian towns and villages, and Palestinians need a permit to enter Israel. They can overcome the logistical difficulty by applying for permits, which mostly happen, but not always. It can be frustrating when a joint programme is prepared for Israeli and Palestinian students to spend a weekend seminar together, and some of the Palestinians are refused entry.

The PCFF does not just address moderates. Forum members, including Ali, have spoken to al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade in Jenin as well as to Jewish settlers in Gaza (before the withdrawal) and Israeli army officers. This week they are in London, partly sponsored by the Jewish Film Festival for the screening of an episode from Good Intentions, a hugely popular drama series on Israeli television based on the work of the PCFF. The show follows two women — a Palestinian and an Israeli — who develop an intimate bond.

Ali describes himself as following a dream."I'm not naive; I know there must be a political solution to resolve the situation. But I am not sure that we can live in one state. Perhaps we have to divorce first and then if we get married again it will be by agreement — it's like a couple arguing over whether or not they have children before they decide to get married. The first condition is to want peace. Peace is to empower the pain for a good future, not for damage."

Ali cares desperately about the future for his own children; Yussef , who is 8, and Rachel, 7. It is obvious who Yussef is named after. But Rachel, I ask? Why does she have a Jewish name? He smiles; "Whenever people ask me that I reply, 'Why not' and so far no one can answer me."

For more information see *familiesforum.co.uk* or *theparentscircle.org*