

Israeli Society very much Needs Remembrance Days. Peace and Reconciliation

A speech delivered on the eve of Alternative Remembrance Day of Combatants for Peace

By [Rami Elhanan](#)

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Shalom and good evening,

My name is Rami Elhanan. Thirteen years ago, on the afternoon of Thursday the fourth of September 1997, I lost my daughter, my Smadar, in a suicide attack on Ben-Yehuda street in Jerusalem. A beautiful sweet joyous 14 year old girl. My Smadar was the granddaughter of the militant for peace, General (Ret.) Matti Peled, one of those who made the breakthrough to Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. And she was murdered because we were not wise enough to preserve her safety in Matti's way, the only correct and possible way - the way of peace and reconciliation.

I do not need a Remembrance Day in order to remember Smadari. I remember her all the time, 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, 60 seconds a minute. Without a pause, without a rest, for 13 long and accursed years now, and time does not heal the wound, and the unbearable lightness of continuing to exist remains a strange and unsolved riddle.

...

But Israeli society very much needs Remembrance Days. From year to year, like clockwork, in the week after Passover, it is drawn into the annual ritual: from Holocaust to the Rebirth of the nation, a sea of ceremonies, sirens and songs - an entire people is swept into a whirlpool of addictive sweet sorrow, eyes tearful and shrouded; mutual embraces accompanied by `Occupation songs` and sickle and sword songs [1] against the background of images of lives that were cut short and heart-rending stories ... and it is hard to avoid the feeling that this refined concentration of bereavement, fed directly into the vein, is intended to fortify our feeling of victimhood, the justice of our path and our struggle, to remind us of our catastrophes, which God forbid we should forget for a single moment. This is the choice of our lives - to be armed and ready, strong and resolute, lest the sword fall from our grasp and our lives be cut short.[2]

And when all this great sorrow is dispersed with the smoke of the barbeques, [3] when Israelis return to their daily routines, I am left enveloped in great sorrow. I miss the old good Land of Israel that never existed, and I have feelings of alienation and estrangement that keep increasing with the passage of years, from war to war, from election to election, from corruption to corruption.

And I think about the stations of my life, on the long journey that I have taken on my way to a redefinition of myself, of my Israeliness, of my Jewishness and of my humanity. About the light-years that I have travelled, from the young man who 37 years ago fought in a pulverized tank company, on the other side of the Suez Canal, from the young father who 28 years ago walked the streets of bombed Beirut, and it did not at all occur to me that things could be otherwise. I was a pure product of a cultural-educational and political system that brainwashed me, poisoned my consciousness and prepared me and others of my generation for sacrifice on the altar of the homeland, without any superfluous questions, in the innocent belief that if we did not do it, they would throw us – the second generation after the Holocaust – into the Mediterranean Sea.

Nearly 40 years have passed since then, and every year this armour of victimhood continues to crack. The self-righteousness and the feeling of wretchedness keep dissipating, and the wall that separates me from the other side of the story keeps crumbling.

When Yitzhak Frankenthal recruited me to the Bereaved Families Forum 12 years ago, for the first time in my life I was exposed to the very existence of the other side – to this day I am ashamed to say that for the first time in my life (I was 47) I encountered Palestinians as normal human beings, very much like me, with the same pain, the same tears and the same dreams. For the first time in my life I was exposed to the story, the pain and the anger, and also to the nobility and the humanity of what is called “the other side.”

The climax of that journey was the meeting between me and my brother, the “terrorist” who spent seven years in an Israeli prison, the peace-warrior Bassam Aramin, who wrote to us, among other things, the following moving words:

“... Dear Nurit and Rami. I wanted to express my identification with you as a brother on this sad day, the anniversary of the death of your beautiful and pure daughter, Smadar. There is no doubt that this is one of the saddest days, and from the moment we met I did not have the courage to write to you about it, for fear of adding more sorrow and pain to your hearts. I thought that time would likely heal that deep wound. But after I myself drank from that same bitter cup that you drank from before me, when my daughter Abir was murdered on 16 January 2007, I understood that parents never forget for a moment. We live our lives in a special way that others do not know, and I hope that no other human beings, Palestinians or Israelis, will not be forced to know ...”

Today my perception of the two sides is completely different from what it was 40 years ago.

For me, the line that separates the two sides today is not between Arabs and Israelis or Jews and Muslims. Today the line is between those who want peace and are willing to pay the price for it, and all the rest. They are the other side! And today, that other side, to my dismay, is the corrupt group of politicians and generals that leads us and behaves like a bunch of mafia dons, war criminals, who play ping-pong in blood among themselves, who sow hate and reap death.

But this evening I want to talk specifically to those who are in between, who are sitting on the fence and watching us from the sidelines, I want to talk to the satiated Israeli public that does not pay the price of the Occupation, the public that sticks its head in the sand and does not want to know, that lives within a bubble, watches television, eats in restaurants,

goes on vacation, enjoys the good life and looks after their its own interests, shielded by the pandering media that help it to hide from the bitter reality that is concealed only a few metres from where they live: the Occupation, the theft of lands and houses, the daily harassment and oppression and humiliation, the checkpoints, the abomination in Gaza, the sewage on the streets of Anata ...

On this evening, especially, I want to address the Left public in all its shades, those who are disillusioned and angry, those who are afflicted with apathy, with despair and weakness, those who enclose themselves in the bubble of themselves and grumble on Friday nights, but are not involved with us in this hard war against the aggressive pathogen of the Occupation that threatens to destroy the humanity of all of us. And on this evening, the evening of Remembrance Day for the dead on both sides, I want to ask them to join us in our war against this fatal affliction! I want to tell them that to be bystanders is to be complicit in crime! I want to tell them that there are many who are not willing to stand aside, who are not willing to be silent in the face of evil and stupidity and the absence of basic accountability and justice!

And I want to tell them about the true anonymous heroes of our dark age!

About those who are willing to pay a high personal price for their honesty and decency, those who dare to stand in front of the bulldozers with rare and amazing courage, the refusers who say no to the omnipresent militarism, the combatants for peace who discarded their weapons in favour of non-violent resistance, the resolute demonstrators who crush against the terror of the police and the army in Bil'in, in Ni'lin, in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan every weekend, the lawyers who struggle every day in the Ofer camp military Court, and in the High Court of Justice, the heroic women of Mahsom Watch, the dedicated peace activists from abroad, like the late Rachel Corrie who gave her life, and also the those who blow the whistle on crimes and conspiracies, from Anat Kam to Gideon Levy and Akiva Eldar, and also the peace organizations of both peoples, and especially the bereaved Palestinian and Israeli families who are bringing about the miracle of reconciliation despite their tragedies.

The darker the sky gets, the more visible are these stars gleaming in the darkness! [4] The more the oppression becomes opaque and evil, the more they, with their heroism and their noble struggle, save the honour and the humanity of all of us!

And today we desperately need to expand the circles of non-violent opposition to the Occupation! This evening I call on you from here and from the bottom of my heart: get out of your bubble! Join the mosquito that buzzes unceasingly in the ears of the Occupation, [5] that annoys and irritates and harasses, and does not let Filth prevail in silence! [6] Don't let the other side steal the future of all of us! Don't let the other side continue to endanger the security of our remaining children.

Thank you.

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Translated from Hebrew for [Occupation Magazine](#) by George Malent

Notes

[1] The sword and sickle songs of the singing company of the Nahal (a brigade in the Israeli army). <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/2/2f/Nahal2.jpg>

[2] Moshe Dayan's Eulogy for Roi Rutenberg (April 19, 1956).

www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Quote/dayan1.html

[3] Israelis traditionally have barbeques on the eve of Independence Day.

[4] Martin Luther King

[5] Ali Abu Awad

[6] Ze'ev Jabotinsky: Betar Song. www.saveisrael.com/jabo/jabobetar.htm

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