

Listen to the Heroes of Israel

By [John Pilger](#)

Global Research, February 26, 2010

Johnpilger.com 25 February 2010

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I phoned Rami Elhanan the other day. We had not spoken for six years and much has happened in Israel and Palestine. Rami is an Israeli graphic designer who lives with his family in Jerusalem. His father survived Auschwitz. His grandparents and six aunts and uncles perished in the Holocaust. Whenever I am asked about heroes, I say Rami and his wife Nurit without hesitation.

Soon after when we met, Rami gave me a home videotape that was difficult to watch. It shows his daughter Smadar, aged 14, throwing her head back, laughing and playing the piano. "She loved to dance," he said. On the afternoon of 4 September, 1997, Smadar and her best friend, Sivane, had auditions for admission to a dance school. She had argued that morning with her mother, who was anxious about her going to the centre of Jerusalem. "I didn't want to row," said Nurit, "so I let her go."

Rami was in his car when he turned on the radio to catch the three o'clock news. There had been a suicide bombing in Ben Yehuda shopping precinct. More than 200 hundred people were injured and several were dead. Within minutes, his mobile phone rang. It was Nurit, crying. They searched the hospitals in vain, then the morgue; and so began, as Rami describes it, their "descent into darkness."

Rami and Nurit are two of the founders of the Parents Circle, or Bereaved Families Forum, which brings together Israelis and Palestinians who have lost loved ones. "It's painful to acknowledge," he said. "but there is no basic moral difference between the [Israeli] soldier at the checkpoint who prevents a woman who is having a baby from going through, causing her to lose the baby, and the man who killed my daughter. And just as my daughter was a victim [of the occupation], so was he." Rami describes the Israeli occupation and the dispossession of Palestinians as a "cancer in our heart." Nothing changes, he says, until the occupation ends.

Every "Jerusalem Day" – the day Israel celebrates its military conquest of the city – Rami has stood in the street with a photograph of Smadar and crossed Israeli and Palestinian flags, and people spit at him and tell him it was a pity he was not blown up, too. And yet he and Nurit and their comrades have made extraordinary gains. Rami goes to Israeli schools with a Palestinian member of the group, and they show maps of what ought to be Palestine, and they hug each other. "This is like an earthquake to children who have been socialized and manipulated into hating," he said. "They say to us, 'You have opened my eyes.'"

In October, Rami and Nurit sat in the Israeli High Court while the state counsel, "stammering, unprepared, and unkempt," wrote Nurit, "stood like a platoon commander in charge of new recruits and refuted ... the allegations." Salwa and Bassam Aramin,

Palestinian parents, were there, too. Tears streaked Salwa's face. Their ten-year-old daughter Abir Aramin was killed by an Israeli soldier firing a rubber bullet point-blank at her small head while she was standing beside a kiosk buying sweets with her sister. The judges seemed bored and one of them remarked that Israeli soldiers were rarely indicted, so it would be best to forget it. The state counsel laughed. This was normal.

"Our children," said Nurit at a rally last December to mark the anniversary of the Israeli assault on Gaza, "have learned this year that all the disgusting qualities which anti-Semites attribute to Jews are actually manifested among our leaders: deceit, greed, and the murder of children ... What values of beauty and goodness can we squeeze into such a sophisticated apparatus of brainwashing and reality distortion?"

Rami now tells me the High Court has decided to investigate the case of Abir Aramin after all. This is not normal: it is a victory.

"Where are the other victories?" I asked him.

"In America last year, a Palestinian and I spoke five times a day in front of thousands. There is a big shift in American public opinion, and that's where the hope lies. It's only pressure from outside Israel – from Jews especially – that will end this nightmare. People in the West must know that while there is a silence, this looking away, this profane abuse of Israel's critics as anti-Jew, they are no different from those who stood aside during the days of the Holocaust."

Since Israel's onslaught on Lebanon in 2006, its devastation of Gaza in 2008-9 and Mossad's recent political murder in Dubai, the criminality of the Israeli state has been impossible to disguise. On 11 February, the influential Reut Institute in Tel Aviv reported to the Israeli Cabinet, which it advises, that violence had failed to achieve Israel's ends and had produced worldwide revulsion. "In last year's Gaza operation," said the report, "our superior military power was offset by an offensive on Israel's legitimacy that led to a significant setback in our international standing and will constrain future Israeli military planning and operations ..." In other words, proof of the murderous, racist toll of Zionism has been an epiphany for many people; justice for the Palestinians, wrote the expatriate Israeli musician Gilad Altzmon, is now "at the heart of the battle for a better world."

However, his fellow Jews in Western countries, particularly Britain and Australia, whose influence is critical, are still mostly silent, still looking away, still accepting, as Nurit said, "the brainwashing and reality distortion." And yet the responsibility to speak out could not be clearer and the lessons of history — family history for many — ensure that it renders them culpable should their silence persist. For inspiration, I recommend the moral courage of Rami and Nurit.

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