

## **How Can We Hear The Other?**

In 2006, I was a delegate for the World Assembly of Religions for Peace in Kyoto, Japan, representing Religions for Peace, USA. I was warned it could be a challenging experience for an American Jewish woman, given the upset, particularly in the Muslim world, over the Iraq war, and Israel-Palestine. Being a female religious leader among dominant male religious leaders could also be challenging. In fact, when I was introduced to Israel's Ashkenazi chief rabbi at a luncheon for the conference's tiny Jewish contingent, he would not acknowledge me.

There were several hundred people attending, and so one evening I decided to *not* sit at the one kosher table at the front of the room. There was a room full of interesting people to meet. I went instead to the vegetarian section at the back of the room. I decided to sit next to a Muslim woman whom I had noticed to be keeping to herself. She went everywhere with another woman and a man beside her. Determined to extend friendship, I began talking with them lightheartedly, and we discussed the similarities between kosher and halal foods. That led to a discussion of the similarities between the Qur'an and Jewish teachings; it was an interesting and fun connection. The mysterious woman wore a black cape over the entirety of her clothing and her headscarf, in a very stately way.

She delighted in discussing Islam with me and asked if I had ever studied it. I told her of my studies and that I was a co-teacher of a Jewish-Christian-Muslim intensive course at Hartford Seminary. She and her companions were pleased with my interest in learning about them. As the air warmed, I

finally introduced myself. The female companion to the woman in black asked me if I knew of this woman sitting next to me. No, I didn't. "Have you had ever heard the name Rafsanjani?" she asked. Of course, I had. My new friend, it turned out, was Fatemeh Hashemi Rafsanjani, the daughter of the former of president of Iran. Deep breath! I told her how pleased I was to meet her and asked her about her family, and we shared stories of each of our three kids, and I inquired of her father. Her companion told me that Fatemeh is a leader of Muslim women in Iran. I continued to ask her about her work and her life.

After about 30 minutes of friendly relationship-building, the conversation suddenly shifted. Fatemeh's male companion, whom I now realized was her bodyguard, sat forward and said, "You seem like such an open-minded lady. So, can you tell us, why did the Israelis have to slaughter all those women and children in Lebanon?" This was August 2006 -- weeks after the last Lebanon war.

I realized that I had a split second to make the critical choice between dialogue and argument. Where would argument lead us? So, choosing dialogue, I took a deep breath, and I said, "I feel heartbroken for all the suffering on both sides." She asked me why no one was speaking out about the death of innocents and I told her that plenty of people are and added that we all want justice. I calmly asserted that if we could just listen to each other's stories and hear each other's pain, we mothers could make peace. This answer pleased them and so we talked for a long time, during which I found the need to repeat this mantra several times during the conversation: "If we could just listen to each other's stories and hear each other's

narratives, we could set conflict aside and make peace.” They told me that they too want peace. As I listened intently to them I understood that this is often the way it begins. It takes time to build trust, and I had an opportunity I dared not squander. And so it went on, and we talked for another an hour.

They claimed to not oppose Israel -- supporting its right to exist, but they oppose *Zionism*. They told me that they work with the Jewish women in Tehran in joint social service projects, adding that they have discussed the issue of Zionism with them and that the Jewish women in Iran are not Zionists. They were under the impression that most Jews outside of Israel are not Zionists. They asked me if this is indeed the case with American Jews. “No,” I said, “Israel is a nearly inseparable part of our *being* as Jews; we have yearned for 2 millennia for a return to our homeland.” I told them that *I am a Zionist*, that *Israel is a part of me*. Perhaps they could explain what they meant by the word, “Zionism?” This proved valuable – they told me that they are opposed to the “Zionist attitude.” This, they explained, is “the belief that you can take any part of anybody’s land that you want and occupy it to expand your territory.” “Oh, let me set the record straight,” I quickly replied, “American and Israeli Jews would not support that attitude. Please understand that we are Zionists, because for us, Zionism is about the right for Israel to exist.”

“So, do you speak out about the occupation?” they asked. I replied that “many of us have different feelings about what is best, and we are trying to work together for justice.” This pleased them as I repeated my mantra about hearing each other, to make peace. Emboldened, they proceeded to

lob accusations about Israel and America my way, at times confusing the two. For example, they asked, “how you could stand for soldiers raping women.” I said, “What are you talking about? Israeli soldiers aren’t doing this.” “But the Americans have in Iraq.” In the interest of avoiding argument, I chose simply to urge them to separate Israel from America. They voiced many more grievances about America’s occupation of Iraq as I persistently urged them to consider that we should *listen to each other’s narratives*, so we could learn to set aside arguments to make peace. We all remained calm and respectful and there was warmth and kindness among us.

Then Fatemeh said to me, “OK, this is very nice, but it’s just a conversation and just words unless we continue it. So when will we talk again? Where can we meet?” I thought, “OMG, what am I getting myself into?” After I paused she suggested we hold a meeting in Cyprus. Though we exchanged niceties along with our business cards as we left the table, I knew that would never happen. We were the last to leave the giant hall, hurrying off to the next conference session.

That hour plus had felt like years. It was both painful and uplifting; and utterly exhausting, as if someone had drained the marrow out of my bones. I entered the next conference session and spotted another conference friend in the back row – Ela Gandhi and I had shared dinner on two prior evenings, and I was very fond of this unique and special woman. As I melted into the seat next to her, she looked at me with concern. I told her that I had just spent an hour with Fatemeh Rafsanjani. She understood immediately and threw her arms around me in a much-needed hug, as I

wept. Ela Gandhi knew what it was like to feel such weight of on your shoulders. She and I spoke at length about her work on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. She talked of the lessons she learned from her grandfather, Mahatma Gandhi, and how she was continuing his work.

I have thought about this experience many, many times. In the Jewish world's painful divide regarding Israel, too often differing views are shut down. In a deeply divided nation and troubled world, it is a painful tragedy that we have lost the will and the skill to *listen to challenging views*.

I have thought many times of how I wish I could have continued building friendship with Fatemeh, seeking mutual understanding. I wrote to her, but never heard back. God only knows what dangers lurk there.

In my years involved with interreligious peace projects I came to understand that *listening* comes first. The challenging effort to remain calm and present for difficult conversations is worth it; it is how we achieve understanding. But it takes more; it is crucial to set aside our need to *always be right*; that is never a good place to start. We have a better chance of getting somewhere in dialogue when we do not presume that our opinions are sufficient. Our opinions should rest on *knowledge*, along with openness to listening to others who have experience or learning beyond our own. We cannot presume to stand in another's shoes. *Listening* is the first step -- without ego or hubris.

The poet Yehuda Amichai captured this with a poem:

## **The Place Where We are Right**

Yehuda Amichai<sup>1</sup>

*From the place where we are right  
Flowers will never grow  
In the spring.  
The place where we are right  
Is hard and trampled  
Like a yard.  
But doubts and loves  
Dig up the world  
Like a mole, a plow.  
And a whisper will be heard in the place  
Where the ruined  
House once stood*

This past July while attending the Rabbinic Torah Seminar at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, an Israeli friend invited me to join her at the “Mother’s Tent” across the street from the Knesset. The Mother’s Tent is a project of *Women Wage Peace*, a movement started by Israeli women, including my friend Roni, to build connections with Palestinian women, and others from different regions and religious backgrounds. It was inspired by movements in Northern Ireland and Liberia, where women of different faiths had united to help resolve violent conflicts. They also drew inspiration from *the Four Mothers movement* which influenced Israel’s military withdrawal from South Lebanon. *Women Wage Peace* encourages peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, while affirming the “important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “The Place Where We are Right” by Yehuda Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*. University of California Press. 1996.

<sup>2</sup> UN Resolution 1325, October 2000, on Women, Peace and Security

*Women Wage Peace* now boasts more than 20,000 members and supporters. When my friend Roni told me about this in its infancy four years ago, she was very excited about their plans for a women's march from Northern Israel to Jerusalem, ending with a rally at the Prime Minister's residence. Israeli women of all faiths, mostly Jewish and Muslim, began meeting to form relationships and to talk peace. Their mantra was that no more mothers should have to send their children to the army or risk other violence. They'd had enough-- enough loss, enough fear, enough pain!

***Women Wage Peace*** has built a grassroots, politically unaffiliated movement, promoting a non-violent, respectful, and mutually accepted solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within a limited time.<sup>3</sup> *They recognize the need for diverse voices, building a movement where all members are equal.*

Their first major event was in 2015, a 50-day fast and encampment outside the Prime Minister's residence in Jerusalem, on the anniversary of the previous year's Gaza war. Three hundred people took turns fasting at the Mother's Tent. A week later, four members of the movement were invited to a formal meeting with PM Netanyahu to discuss the possibility of renewing peace talks with the Palestinians.

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<sup>3</sup> From the website: <http://www.womenwagepeace.org.il>

Then, in October 2016, over 3,000 Israeli and Palestinian women participated in the march from Northern Israel to Jerusalem. Among the speakers at the rally was [Leymah Gbowee](#), a Liberian peace activist and [Nobel Peace Prize laureate](#). I recommend the YouTube video of Canadian-Israeli singer [Yael Deckelbaum](#) and the women singing the theme song she wrote for *Women Wage Peace*, "***Prayer of the Mothers.***" It prays, "*From the north to the south, from the west to the east, hear the prayer of the mothers, bring them peace, bring them peace*"

The movement has continued to grow, holding frequent events around the country. In March 2017, at an International Women's Day reception in Tel Aviv, more than a dozen foreign *female* ambassadors pledged their support for *Women Wage Peace*. In May 2017, members of *Women Wage Peace* met in Tel Aviv in advance of President Trump's visit to Israel, creating a human chain that spelled out "ready for peace."

This July, I twice joined Roni at the Mother's Tent, which stood aside the Knesset for 70 days. Decorated inside with photos from their many events, the tent symbolizes the home the diverse group of women share. They have become like family.

On my first visit, a group filled the tent, about the size of our OZ yurt, and listened to a prominent journalist discuss his perspectives on peace at this time. He talked about patience and perspective; with so few victories it can be easy to be discouraged. But he encouraged them to celebrate what they have built while they continue on.



The women pledge to *not stop without an agreement*. During the 70 days opposite the Knesset, they visited the Knesset regularly. They have adopted a uniform -- wearing white with turquoise scarves, and other turquoise accessories. It was a brilliant idea -- they are clearly noticeable. They have met with many members of Knesset, advocating for politicians to prioritize peace talks.

At the end of the 70 days, they marched again to the Prime Minister's residence; there they continued to call on their leaders to prevent escalation and work towards a political agreement.

My second visit to the Mother's Tent was a profound experience. The large group of women sat in a circle outside the tent. We listened and cried as one woman very slowly, detail by detail, told the story of her son's near-fatal injury sustained in Gaza and how it has felt to her. Another woman spoke of her son's injuries, and then another told of the loss of her son. Quietly, softly, each shared their pain. A woman with a flute played a healing melody as everyone sat in silence. It occurred to me at that moment -- in a wave of understanding, that it is simply not possible for anyone who does not have children in the throes of the conflict there to know what these women are feeling and why they have become activists. Too often we are quick to form opinions and speak as if we *know* -- when we don't. If we have not stood in these family's shoes, we cannot be authorities on what must happen. The suffering of the people caught in this horrible cycle of violence calls us to be *humble*.

Listening can be very difficult, but listen we must. Later this summer I had the opportunity to speak with a local Vermont activist advocating for the Palestinian cause. I was pleased by his outreach to me, but I intuited from his comments that he thought he'd find a kindred spirit with me. Indeed, I have dialogued with Palestinians and traveled with coexistence and peace organizations to the West Bank. I have sympathy for the suffering of Palestinians who are caught up in a cycle of violence around them while they are just trying to live their lives. I sympathize with the enormous challenge of checkpoints, impeding travel in the West Bank. But I understand why there are checkpoints. Among my 32 trips to Israel, I was there during intifada and rockets barrages from the north and the south. And I pray for a day when checkpoints are no longer needed, when Israelis and Palestinians live side by side in peace.

I recalled how Israel went to the negotiating table several times with significant offers in exchange for peace. Sadly, these have been rejected. I shared how, while studying the peace process, I have learned with some of the key negotiators themselves.

But despite my sharing of my extensive learning about the region and my personal experiences there, my dialogue partner was not accepting of my views. It became clear that he had not come to dialogue. He had little knowledge of or interest in the conflict's history. There was no listening. Finally, he admitted that he does not believe in Israel's right to exist. All I could do was to recommend that he read Yossi Klein Halevi's book, *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*. I only hope that helps.

Sadly, this conversation with a local activist was even more difficult than my hour with Fatemah Rafsanjani. I pray that we can find a bridge across this great divide. And mostly, I pray that this coming year we can model and teach the art of *listening*. With open hearts, may we gain greater perspective.

***Perspective***

By Rabbi Karyn Kedar<sup>4</sup>

*As you travel a path*

*Toward a goal,*

*A goal you deem worthy and essential,*

*And you suddenly hit a wall,*

*What you do next depends on your perspective.*

*The wall is a challenge and you climb.*

*The wall is failure and you dig a hole to crawl beneath.*

*The wall is an obstacle, you bang your head.*

*Or*

*Upon the wall there is a sign which beckons you to detour.*

*You turn your head sharply to the left and go another way.*

*Perspective is the eyesight of your mind.*

*It is how you choose to look at the world, events, and possibilities.*

*I have seen lives transformed*

*When people make the choice*

*To see things a different way.*

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<sup>4</sup> Karen Kedar, *God Whispers, Stories of the Soul, Lessons of the Heart*, VT. Jewish Lights Publishing. 1999