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Abstract

Despite the ongoing conflict and the general neglect by the media, power brokers, and the public, grassroots organizations in the Middle East persist in their dedication to “people to people” diplomacy between Israelis and Palestinians. The Parents Circle-Families Forum is a bi-national NGO committed to peacebuilding and reconciliation between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians from East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Its most distinctive features are its membership, composed of 300 families from each side who have lost a close relative to the conflict, and its use of storytelling to connect the two sides. Bereaved individuals develop the capacity for empathy and moral responsibility beyond their own people by encountering “the other” via personal stories of loss and suffering. In pairs, Palestinian and Israeli members then share these stories with students in each society, modeling compassion and human solidarity, in an effort to bring about social transformation. This paper, based on ethnographic research recently conducted in Israel and the West Bank, considers the moral dynamics of these encounters and presentations, and their potential contribution to reconciliation and conflict transformation.

Keywords: *bereavement, conflict transformation, identity, Israelis, Palestinians, peacebuilding, reconciliation, social transformation, storytelling*

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Peacebuilding between Israelis and Palestinians***

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Despite the ongoing conflict and the general neglect by the media, power brokers, and the public, grassroots organizations in the Middle East persist in their dedication to “people to people” diplomacy between Israelis and Palestinians. The Parents Circle-Families Forum is a bi-national NGO committed to peacebuilding and reconciliation between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians from East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Its most distinctive features are its membership, composed of 300 families from each side who have lost a close relative to the conflict, and its use of storytelling to connect the two sides. Bereaved individuals develop the capacity for empathy and moral responsibility beyond their own people by encountering “the other” via personal stories of loss and suffering. In pairs, Palestinian and Israeli members then share these stories with students in each society, modeling compassion and human solidarity, in an effort to bring about social transformation. This paper, based on ethnographic research recently conducted in Israel and the West Bank, considers the moral dynamics of these encounters and presentations, and their potential contribution to reconciliation and conflict transformation.

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Introduction

In the last week of June, 2012, a surprising image graced newspapers throughout the world. The photograph, taken in Belfast, showed a smiling Queen Elizabeth II shaking hands with an equally cheerful Martin McGuinness, once the commander of the Irish Republican Army and currently Northern Ireland's deputy first minister. This gesture of reconciliation between formerly bitter enemies symbolically put to rest the decades-long bloody conflict between the Protestant Unionists and the Catholic Republicans (Cowell, 2012). Does this image offer hope for the resolution of other seemingly intractable conflicts, such as the one

between Israelis and Palestinians? The situation in the Middle East looks so discouraging at the present time that it is difficult to imagine anyone there feeling hopeful about peace. Yet despite the bleak outlook, there are grassroots organizations that continue to persevere in their commitment to peace.

The Parents Circle-Families Forum (PCFF) is just such an organization: a bi-national NGO committed to peacebuilding and reconciliation between Israeli Jews and Palestinians from East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Its most distinctive features are its membership, which consists of 300 families from each side who have lost a close relative to the conflict, and its use of storytelling to connect people across the divide.

In recent years, storytelling has received attention as an important method used by adversaries in reconciliation work across the globe, usually in situations following violent conflict. Less is known about groups' use of this approach in the context of *ongoing* conflict and asymmetrical power dynamics, as is the case in Israel-Palestine (Maoz, 2011); this is precisely the focus of this paper.

An American social ethicist, I recently spent two months in Jerusalem doing qualitative field research with the PCFF. I attended several presentations in English given to visitors from abroad by one Palestinian and one Israeli PCFF member and conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews (typically lasting between one and two hours) with twelve members in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Beit Jala, including the then Israeli and Palestinian co-directors of the organization. Interviewees were selected by the PCFF staff based on members' availability and English competency and were evenly divided between Israelis and Palestinians. Working with a schematic interview protocol and probing for deeper responses, I asked study participants about their views of and involvement with the PCFF: what drew them to the organization; in what ways they felt connected to its mission, values, and methods; their views of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and of the "other"; the role the organization has had—if any—in effecting a change in their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward the other; their involvement in the organization's activities; and their view on the role that transformation at the personal level, an important goal of the PCFF and of person-to-person diplomacy, can have on the social level. I gleaned further data about the PCFF and its members from the organization's extensive website (Parents Circle Families Forum) and videos it has produced (Parents Circle-Families Forum, *It Won't Stop until We Talk*).

In this paper, I explore the unique contribution to reconciliation and peacebuilding made by the PCFF built around bonding through storytelling about loss and bereavement. While the PCFF sees itself as an educational organization as opposed to a political one, I argue that its methods are profoundly political, as they challenge and help transform each side's received cultural knowledge about itself and about the other.

Encountering the “Other”

After his brother Yusuf was killed by an Israeli soldier at the entrance to his village in the West Bank, Jewish coworkers called Khaled to offer condolences, and to apologize. But he refused to talk with them. From the start, his anger flared up, feeding his hatred even for those Israelis he had known before, because “everyone on the other side is guilty of what has happened to your brother.” Having lost his direction in life, he stopped working and spent most of his time sitting at home, thinking. This took place in 2000, the year the Second Intifada broke out.

Two years later, Khaled's little brother Sayed, fourteen years old, was shot dead as well. Sighing wearily, Khaled says to me now, head in his hands, “It's like that, again and again, the same drama.” This time, members of the Parents Circle-Families Forum (PCFF), at the time an exclusively Jewish Israeli organization, hoped to meet with Khaled and his family and provide them with some comfort. Once again, his first reaction was refusal, because they were “the enemy, from those who killed my brother.” But “those people are talking about peace,” argued his mother. “Everyone wants peace,” retorted Khaled, skeptical. “All the people are talking about peace. They are lying to us. They are killing our children.” Yet she insisted, arguing that these were bereaved families, “like us.”

Eventually, Khaled relented, largely because he was driven by curiosity: “I had a question, ‘Are [PCFF members] crazy people? Have they lost their minds?’” He could not fathom a rational connection between the reality of losing a loved one and the desire to meet the other. “They killed your brother, and they're interested in meeting the other side, the perpetrator?” So he opened up his home, and they came and told stories of their own relatives' deaths. Khaled listened attentively to each story, remaining silent himself, and “in the story of every one of them, I found my story.” He could feel in these speakers the same kind of pain now familiar within himself. And then, not knowing exactly how this happened, he said, “I also have a story like every one of you.’ And I started talking about Yusuf and Sayed, for the first time.” And when he finished his story, Khaled announced, ‘I think I

belong to this group, I want to be in this group. I think we should bring peace, we should have peace here.’”

At the time of my interview with Khaled Abu Awwad in 2010, he was the Palestinian co-director of the Parents Circle-Families Forum, whose Palestinian office is located in the town of Beit Jala in the West Bank, some six miles south of Jerusalem. (Actual names are used for PCFF's staff members, while names given to other study participants are fictitious.) How do we explain Khaled's seemingly sudden determination to engage with members of the PCFF, given his previous resistance to meet with Israeli Jews? What motivates bereaved families to embrace the other and to join together in shared peacebuilding? Why does the work of the PCFF work? And what can the PCFF teach us about storytelling, reconciliation, and peacebuilding efforts in such a fraught environment? These are central questions I address in this paper.

Peacebuilding and Challenges to Identity

It is a well-known fact that identity issues are often located at the core of conflicts such as this one (Lederach, 2003; Volkan, 1997). While the PCFF tries to create a safe space for meeting the other, it takes a good deal of courage to enter that space since one's identity is likely to be challenged on a variety of fronts. First, the trauma of the loved one's death engages difficult emotional and psychological responses that may vary from one person to the next, since each has a distinctive way of handling loss. Undoubtedly, all come to the table with a major sense of vulnerability about revealing their personal pain, as mourning in general, but especially given traumatic circumstances, can be a lonely, private, and isolating process. Several study participants told me how painful telling the story of their loss was for them, particularly at the beginning of their PCFF involvement. For Tzvi, for example, “It was very, very difficult ... to speak about my father, to call myself a bereaved son.... The Parents Circle gave me the ability to personally deal better with what happened in my family.” This is in no way surprising, for, as anthropologist Michael Jackson (2002) argues, “Every place of violence and social suffering becomes, for a time, a place of silence.... At such times, traumatic experiences tend to be salted away in subjectivity, too painful and personal to be told” (p. 132). Some experience the telling of their stories of bereavement as leading to profound healing from a seeming abyss, as a bereaved Israeli father in a PCFF produced video poignantly puts it: “Meeting bereaved parents gave my life meaning. Meeting with them gives me a reason to get up in the morning” (Parents Circle-Families Forum, *It Won't Stop Until We Talk*). Yet others say it took them years before they were

willing or able to join and to engage in this kind of deeply painful revelation. These individuals may have been wisely self-protective, for in telling traumatic stories, there is always the risk of becoming traumatized once again (Bar-On, 2006, p. 41).

Existential concerns also accompany traumatic events such as the death of loved ones in the context of violent conflict. After all, to use the language of religious studies, death is a fundamental *limit situation*, one that challenges our sense of self, questions the predictability of our world, and brings home the reality of our own mortality. In addition, in the context of the Middle East conflict, ongoing fear acts as a profound threat to self, family, and nation in the experience of both Israelis and Palestinians.

Finally, social identity is dramatically challenged when adversaries choose to meet the purported enemy with peace and reconciliation as central goals. Group-based identities tend to be essentialized, built on the constructed binary of “us/good” versus “them/bad” (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008, p. 127); these constructions populate collective narratives, markedly so in contexts characterized by long-term conflict. Therefore, to enter a space where PCFF members encounter the other side involves a challenge to that secure national narrative that informs personal identity and aligns it with that of one's fellow countrymen. Openness to the other's suffering becomes a subversive activity of sorts: the assumptions of the witness to such suffering—or to the storytelling about it—are thereby challenged when encountering what some scholars call “dangerous memories” (Metz, 1972; Ostovich, 2002; Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008). The term, originally coined by Walter Benjamin, may be used to interpret the PCFF's work of exposing members and other audiences to the experiences and suffering of the other, which are mostly kept hidden from the populace by master narratives, that is, those internalized dominant cultural storylines that form the blueprint of national consciousness (Andrews, 2004, p. 1) and shape social identity.

Khaled recalls a situation that, in addition to his own experience, represents an illustration of dangerous memories and their impact. When the PCFF first became binational, it organized a meeting in the village of Deir al-Hatab, near Nablus, to invite bereaved Palestinian families to join the organization. A couple of Israeli parents talked about the loss of their sons, after which one of the Palestinian men said in response,

You know, before we met you, we were very happy whenever we heard that an Israeli soldier had been killed; but now, after meeting with you—the parents—it will be harder for us to have this kind of happiness when we hear something like this, because we know that they are your sons, just like we

have sons. We know now that you are suffering, and that the pain that you have is the reason for your loss of soul. It will not be easy any more for us to hear, or to be happy with, such news.

Khaled offers me the following commentary on that father's declaration: "For me, I think this is the point of our work. And this is what we try to bring to the people." This perspective goes hand in hand with the characterization of PCFF members as "messengers of reconciliation" offered by Nir Oren, the then Israeli co-director of the PCFF, whom I met in the Israeli office of the PCFF, located in a suburb of Tel Aviv. In effect, the Palestinian father's realization that Israeli parents suffer when their soldier children are killed provides an example of an exposure to a dangerous—or disruptive—memory; in this case, the Israelis' telling of their painful losses intrudes into the Palestinian's worldview. Such exposure to dangerous memories leads to the recognition of the existence and legitimacy of alternative narratives and has an important influence in reshaping one's view of the other, especially in contexts where strategies that elicit empathy are put in play.

Not surprisingly, participants in PCFF dialogues run the risk of social marginalization from their own communities through accusations of being "traitors" in the case of Israelis, or possible collaborators engaged in "normalization" in the case of Palestinians, that is, participating in activities with Israelis despite the continuing occupation; after all, these are perceived as culturally and politically dangerous activities. While this possibility does not materialize across the board—most participants in fact told me they receive support from their families for their PCFF work—everyone is aware of such risks.

Not all participants are initially sure that the non-violent commitment of the PCFF is congruent with their views, as some, at any rate, experienced impulses toward revenge soon after the death of a relative. Others are not certain when they first attend a meeting that it is peace they are fundamentally after, or that it is possible to make peace with the other side. For example, Robi Damelin, an Israeli bereaved mother and long time PCFF staff member, is featured in a PCFF video approaching a Palestinian woman who attends her first PCFF gathering (Parents Circle-Families Forum, *It Won't Stop Until We Talk*). The woman looks anxious and suspicious and soon expresses anger about the Israeli policies that cause her people suffering. Robi looks into her eyes and gently tells her, "I see your pain. I know what it is." The camera cuts to another scene as the women embrace. Robi's recognition and acknowledgement of the woman's suffering allows the latter, at least temporarily, to suspend her political stance, set her anger aside, and accept the empathy extended to her.

Empathy and Moral Inclusion

Palestinians have ample cause to hate Israeli soldiers, given the latter's role and actions as safe-keepers of the Israeli occupation, akin to Israelis' hatred for suicide bombers and for those Gazan organizations that regularly send rockets into the Israeli city of Sderot, targeting civilians. Yet in the course of an hour or two, we have seen what might be called "conversion" experiences taking place on the part of bereaved Palestinians. What do we learn from such poignant responses to the suffering of the enemy communicated through storytelling? Empathy is clearly at work here, insofar as seeing the suffering of the other opens up the possibility of identification with and compassion toward the other's pain, a dynamic that has received a great deal of scholarly attention in what some call, referring to the present time, the "age of empathy" (de Wall, 2009; Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003). This dynamic seems to be operative in this context in rather extraordinary circumstances in at least three ways. First, empathy is extended across enemy lines in the course of *continuing* conflict, in contrast to the more common post-conflict efforts at reconciliation *following* ethnic or nationalist discord. Second, empathy develops across a highly asymmetrical political reality, given the Israeli occupation of the Occupied Territories and its consequences for the Palestinian population. And third, empathy emerges between parties who have been traumatized through the loss of their children, parents, or siblings, suffering not due to illness, old age, or natural disaster, but perceived by each side to be the result of morally indefensible acts of violence.

Empathy is thus a critical emotional response operative in PCFF dialogue encounters, encouraging bonding across the divides. We may view the *content* of the exchanges—the sharing of dangerous memories—that take place within the auspices of the PCFF as the raw material for empathy to do its work, with empathy as the internal affective change allowing for a significant shift in perspective about the other, including elements of personal experience and collective realities.

Participants' courage and willingness to engage in dialogue set the stage for the possibility of personal and social change. Finding commonality in suffering becomes a transformative moment in these encounters. As Pam Kleinot (2011) suggests, each side is able to withdraw its hatred by witnessing each other's suffering, which mirrors one's own (p. 106); she adds that "[a]cknowledging each other's pain replaces blame" (p. 108). Perhaps this is the beginning, as well, of a shift away from righteous victimhood, a theme we will return to. When the Palestinian father asserts that he will no longer rejoice when an Israeli

soldier is killed, he is in fact engaged in a form of moral conversion of the sort Kleinot addresses. In addition, through shared storytelling about their experiences of loss and pain, he has found commonality and bonded with members of the other side, and in so doing he has expanded his circle of moral responsibility from a position of exclusion of Israelis to one of inclusion, initially of those of his acquaintance. Randa also reveals a commitment to greater moral inclusivity when she tells me that through her participation in the PCFF she feels strongly that “I can’t let one of my people hurt one of them,” referring to the Israeli friends and colleagues she has made through the PCFF: “They are now part of my reality.” A new kind of “we” (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008, p. 148) has emerged for Randa and for other members as their taken-for-granted assumptions have been contested via their exposure to their former enemies.

The broadening of moral responsibility we see here may well have a necessary antecedent, as Michalinos Zembylas (2006) suggests: “Witnessing is above all a practice of reconceiving the Other as a subject” (p. 316). For as is well known antagonism and conflict are triggered and sustained through the stereotyping and vilification of the perceived enemy. Before attitudes can change, the other must be perceived as a human being “just like us,” that is, with a distinct personality, a history, and a life. Face to face encounters that reveal the suffering of the parties involved decidedly facilitate this kind of recognition. Witnessing of this sort involves more than being a spectator to the other's experience; it involves learning to “see differently when one confronts others’ suffering,” resulting in the widening of one's memory “to include the Other's memory” (Zembylas & Bekerman 2008, p. 145). Such process has the capacity to develop trust in and solidarity with the other.

This shift in moral attitude takes place among Israelis as well as Palestinians, as demonstrated by Nir when, some years ago, he attended a parents’ meeting following his son’s participation in the PCFF's summer camp for bereaved families, which served as Nir’s introduction to the organization. Largely unacquainted with Palestinians at the time—not unusual for many Israelis—Nir, a social worker by training, felt ashamed when he met bereaved Palestinian parents who were his professional counterparts—doctors, government officials, corporate managers—realizing they did not fit his image of the Palestinian peasant working on his field. Hence began his openness to meeting the other and expanding the range of his moral imagination; soon thereafter he attended a PCFF weekend retreat, which he found to be a “euphoric” experience, as he was able to tell of his mother’s death several

years earlier during a suicide bombing with the feeling that the other side was “containing my story,” that is, listening attentively, without judgment or angry retort.

Empathic Listening

Nir raises here the important role that listening must play if storytelling is to be a productive tool of reconciliation. This approach only works when the storyteller can count on an audience that listens with respect and an absence of contestation, at least in the short term. Empathic listening is taught to PCFF members so they can hear the other’s narrative, even if they disagree with the perspective of the speaker, a difficult but essential exercise if trust is to be developed. (See Furman, 2009-2010, for an analysis of compassionate listening in the service of reconciliation.) Yehudit, an Israeli bereaved mother, tells me of the time when a mixed group of PCFF members went to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum located in Jerusalem. Seeing photos of Nazis with dogs in one of the exhibits, a Palestinian bereaved mother declared, “This is exactly like Israeli soldiers with dogs in Nablus.” This association was difficult for Yehudit to hear, since for her the Israeli army uses dogs to find explosives and is, therefore, not comparable to the Nazis’ genocidal motivations. “But that’s the way she sees it; that was her impression.” So provisionally Yehudit let the woman’s interpretation stand as an expression of her experience. “It is important to listen to it from their point of view, and then it brings empathy.” For the sake of the other, Yehudit did not argue, as “one has to be open to recognizing the other’s right to have a different narrative.” This view is consistent with the practice of compassionate listening (Furman, 2009-2010). In the long run, Yehudit and others believe that “If you are part of the Forum, you have to be encouraged enough to tell yourself to say the way *you* see things, and to listen to the way *they* see things. I think otherwise you cannot be together.”

Unlike some groups committed to coexistence whose work focuses exclusively on finding commonality across the board (Maoz, 2011), the PCFF does not shy away from addressing disagreement, both at the leadership and membership levels. The organization is said to have become binational, in part, because the Palestinians “gave the Israelis an ultimatum in 2003, noting that either the organization became a joint organization and they started to share the work more evenhandedly or they would leave the organization” (Gawerc, 2012, p. 207). Since that time, the PCFF has had to address challenging issues calling for greater symmetry and equality within the organization, including the equitable distribution of staff, salaries, and authority for the Palestinian and Israeli administrators and their respective offices. In addition, there is a recognition that each side is fundamentally concerned about

different things—Palestinians with seeking justice and freedom from the occupation, Israelis with pursuing security—with the PCFF representing a sort of microcosm of the conflict as a whole (Gawerc, 2012). But, as Michelle Gawerc (2012) argues in regards to the PCFF and other Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding organizations, “These groups may have been reflections of the macrocosm, but unlike the macrocosm, they were still talking when others were not, trying to build trust, and trying to deal constructively with the discord” (p. 152). As a result, according to both Khaled and Nir, trust has been largely achieved within their organization.

At their organization-wide meetings, members characterize their exchanges in images suggesting lively and emotional debate. “Very clashing,” Nava tells me. Full of “loud arguments,” recounts Marwaan. More expansively, Lev says, “We see things from different angles.... We don’t agree immediately on things, and sometimes the shouting goes up, right up to the ceiling.” Yet he concludes by saying that “after a very heated discussion ... we come out even more convinced that we need to work together to put an end to the bloodshed.” Nir informs me that in a large member seminar in 2006, members of both sides were told to “ask the difficult questions” of one another. Some people became alarmed, afraid that this approach would “ruin us.” But questions, sometimes provocative ones, were asked, such as, “How come you don’t reject the suicide bombers?” “How come you send your son to the army?” Early in the seminar, an argument arose as to whether or not “to continue in this vein or continue [exclusively] trying to find mutuality.” Members concluded that “the Parents Circle was strong enough to start fighting.... We believe we don’t just want to have *hummus* and *hibukim* [hugs],” shorthand for superficially good relations that avoid deeper disagreements. What this account suggests is that while the PCFF begins with the painful task of bonding individuals through their stories of personal and familial suffering, the method does not stop there. As Maoz (2011) opines, the story-telling model “combines interpersonal interaction with interaction through group identities, subsequently combining the formation of personal ties with discussion of the conflict and of power relations” (p. 120). There is a move that takes place, therefore, from exposure to the other to the challenging engagement with political realities affecting—typically differentially—those on each side of the divide.

Recognition

Much has been made in the scholarly literature of recent years of the significance of recognition as a moral value. Beyond the more generalized philosophical and existential

meanings that recognition may embed, there are important local meanings that deserve attention in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both populations, as is the case in other ethnic or nationalist conflicts, suffer from dehumanizing, denigrating characterizations by the other side. Palestinians feel that the condemnation leveled at suicide bombers is unjustly extended to them as a matter of course by the Israeli populace in general, shaped by the mainstream Israeli media and, especially in recent times, by right wing government officials. As a result, there is a palpable and urgent desire among the Palestinians I interviewed for the recognition of their humanity. Randa, a mother of five whose two brothers were killed by the Israeli Army, reveals this sentiment whenever she tells her story. Constructing an imaginary message to the soldier who killed her favorite brother, she says:

If I face you, I will never cut you to pieces, I will never be a monster like you. I will invite you to live with my family for two days, where you will find that we are human, that we deserve to live exactly as you do.... If you give me a chance to show you that I'm here, that I'm not an animal, that I'm not with horns, then I think I will succeed [in showing you my humanity.]

The Israelis that I talk with have been deeply informed by egalitarian commitments, even before joining the PCFF, but their sensitivity to Palestinian suffering has been significantly expanded through their joint dialogues and activities. Israelis, in my view, seek a parallel kind of recognition from their Palestinian counterparts in the PCFF. They wish to be reinstated as moral human beings, to be rehabilitated, if you will, from the Palestinian characterization of all Israelis modeled after soldiers assigned to the West Bank, whose actions are perceived as vicious and humiliating toward Palestinians. They too want to be seen as individuals worthy of respect, as those who disagree with the occupation and who affirm respect for human life and dignity, Israeli and Palestinian alike. So the dialogue functions as a context for the mutual recognition of both suffering and moral character for both sides of the divide, facilitating the understanding of one another as embodied *persons*, not simply as the grand abstraction that *the other* typically connotes (O'Connor, 1998, p. 211).

Equivalence of Suffering?

Openness to the other at PCFF gatherings is shaped for many members by perceptions of equivalence when it comes to their losses, despite the asymmetry of political locations between Israelis and Palestinians. A central shared value seems to be the sacredness of human life, which likely derives from humanistic, liberal values, but also from each of the

three Abrahamic religions represented in the conflict. Yehudit, an Israeli woman who lost her son in 1997, for example, explains the bonding among PCFF members as “being part of the same sorrow and the same grief and the same feeling.” Jamal, a Palestinian who lost his son to the conflict, argues, in turn, for the moral leveling of suffering when he tells his West Bank village that bereaved Israelis “are suffering, not from the checkpoints and not from the occupation; but they suffer from the terrorists, whose acts don’t differentiate between whites or blacks, Arabic or Jewish, American or Swedish.”

Not all study participants express this attitude, however. For example, Layla, a Palestinian woman whose brother died while in an Israeli prison, recalls a time when she addressed Israeli members of a PCFF’s women’s group, who of course are also bereaved:

“I admit that you are hurt. I admit that you are in pain. But your pain is not equal. It can never be equal to my pain. I want you to imagine that you are sleeping in my house [in a West Bank refugee camp], and to see how the [Israeli] army used to break our doors and come into our houses and take us all. Or to be at the check points and to see what they do to us—the way they humiliate us, the way they call us names.”

Similarly, Hadassah, an Israeli Jew who lost her son while he served in the army, expresses great frustration about the “conventionality” of some Israeli PCFF members. Reporting on a joint meeting of the organization, she remembers how a Palestinian woman had told what happened when her son was killed, and about all the terrible things she had endured. “And one of the Israeli girls says, ‘I tried to understand you, but you are not trying to understand us,’ and I almost died when she said that.” Pointedly addressing the asymmetry of the conflict, reflected as well in the PCFF membership, Hadassah asks rhetorically, “What do they have to understand, with all the luxury, with all the democracy [available in Israel]? When your son dies here, you are recognized for your whole life as a bereaved family and financially supported.”

Transcending Victimization

Intractable ethnic and nationalist conflicts typically lead to feelings of victimization on both sides, sometimes manifested in competitive ways, as in claiming that “We are more victimized than you are.” In fact, Vamik Volkan (1985) uses the term “egoism of victimization” to characterize situations in which “there is no real empathy for suffering experienced by a group’s traditional enemies, although it may be as severe as that of the group itself—or even worse” (p. 222). In this particular Middle Eastern locale, both the

Holocaust and the Nakba (the “catastrophe” of 1948 for Palestinians) act as the historical antecedents for more recent losses, thereby justifying for each side claims of greater victim status, typically based on ignorance about the adversaries' pain. In the absence of communication across the divide, people often remain immobilized by their grief, by their anger, and by this self-definition as victims.

According to both Palestinian and Israeli members, encountering the other results in a shift of self-perception and relief from the experience of being victims. For example, during a public lecture, Saleh declares assertively, “I cannot live in the [refugee] camp and be a victim all the time,” hence rejecting that label. Nir captures this sentiment as well, and expands on it, when he tells me that during his first three-day seminar with the PCFF, “I could hear their [Palestinian] story without fighting about who is the greater victim.” He came to realize that “I don’t want to be a victim anymore. Although I am a ‘registered victim,’ I don’t want to act upon it as if I am a victim. I can define what I’m doing, not according to the situation, but according to what I want to achieve.” In short, participation in the PCFF moves members like Nir and Saleh from the experience of victimhood to one of empowerment and agency as they commit to a mutual cause, namely, working for peace.

Seeking Reconciliation: Turning Personal Pain into Social Ends

The Parents Circle-Families Forum believes that a process of reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis needs to be developed if peace is to be realized between the two peoples. This position is shared by other grassroots organizations whose approach fits under the category of “people to people” diplomacy; their view is that peace agreements are only pieces of paper unless supported by an infrastructure of trust by people on both sides of a conflict. Therefore, a key to the PCFF's mission, according to the organization's website, is to “influence the public and the political decision makers to choose dialogue and the path of peace over violence and war in order to achieve a just settlement based on empathy and understanding” (Parents Circle-Families Forum, Our Mission Statement). Furthermore, members believe that if people who have lost so much can talk to the other side, so can everyone else. It is not surprising, therefore, that a favorite PCFF slogan is “We won't stop until we talk.”

Over the years since its original founding in Israel in 1995, the PCFF has engaged in a variety of activities designed to achieve this goal. Its chief public activity has consisted of presentations given by members in various venues, including schools, community groups,

and visiting foreign delegations. This section of the paper will be dedicated principally to a discussion of this activity, particularly as it is carried out in Israel.

Early on, the PCFF began conducting “lectures” in Israeli high school classes, with the permission of the schools' principals. These are storytelling presentations of loss and bereavement collaboratively conducted by a Palestinian paired with an Israeli member: “Our most important ongoing work on the ground is conducting dialogue meetings in schools. They allow us to reach more than 25,000 students every year. We speak to 16- and 17-year-old Palestinians and Israeli students who, for the most part, have not met anyone from ‘the other side.’ Coming into a classroom of Jewish-Israeli students with a Palestinian partner who tells his or her personal story and journey to reconciliation opens their eyes to the humanity and narrative of the other side” (Damelin, 2011).

Fundamentally, the PCFF sees itself as educational in nature and the lectures, by extension, as having an educational purpose. As Tzvi puts it, it is critical “to convince Israelis of the basics that Palestinians and Israelis are not monsters.” So the method used in dialogues between Israeli and Palestinian PCFF members is extended to the classroom, where storytelling exposes the suffering of the bereaved individual and becomes a tool of humanization. For this process to be effective, it is critical, at least initially, to see the individual qua individual, that is, beyond usual stereotypes and perceptions defined strictly via national categories. As Nir puts it, the goal is to see the person as both an individual and a member of a group:

When I see this Palestinian in front of me and I talk with him, he is a Palestinian, but he is also a person.... Now you are standing in front of an individual, and now he is human. You find humanity.

Considering that each side has been socialized to perceive the other in a negative light, this strategy of humanization, if successful, is no small feat.

Reconciliation as a Moral Imperative

All PCFF members that I met identify reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians as the main goal for their involvement in the schools project, thereby taking a teleological moral position. For example, Jamal offers a beautiful set of metaphors to communicate the PCFF's work in the schools, which for him is key to changing deeply entrenched antagonism between the two peoples:

Our purpose is to open the minds of young people of the next generation. We build the columns, we prepare the lands for them, we plant small trees for

them. We start all of this from our tears after losing our relatives.... If we continue in this way, they will benefit from the food, and they will taste it.

I also noticed some Israeli members' unmistakable use of deontological, or duty-based, language to characterize their ongoing commitments, language that reveals their moral sensitivity to the injustice of the occupation and to the power differentials between the two sides. For example, as an Israeli, Gad feels responsible for the unjust actions of the Israeli government in the Occupied Territories. "I prefer being responsible than ashamed. I feel obligated" to do something, he claims, even if it does not change the situation. In addition, through the lectures in the schools, Gad believes he is setting right what his deceased father did wrong: As an architect working for the government, he designed settlements in the West Bank at a time when neither he nor the society as a whole thought about their long-term implications. Lev's involvement devolves from his desire to represent his dead son who at a young age "felt obligated, committed, responsible." Several Israelis are impelled by their perceptions that the Israeli government's actions toward the Palestinians are "anti-Jewish." In regards to the "siege" of Gaza, for example, Yoni says, "It is not human; it is not Jewish. We have an obligation as Jews" to be just. For Nava, the settlements are the central ethical issue in the conflict. "Jewish ethics," she declares, teach us to "be good to others as you are to yourself. But the current government does not do it; they do the opposite, and that kills me." Finally, Lev quotes the prophet Amos in his lectures when his Jewish "consciousness" is questioned by some Israeli students: "'Let justice roll down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream.' That is my outlook. That is Judaism.'" Then, quoting Hillel's famous dictum, he adds, "'This is the Torah: What is hateful to you, don't do unto others. All the rest is commentary.'"

The ultimate goal for all of these PCFF members is to reach a just and peaceful resolution to the conflict so that others will be spared the grief they have known through the untimely death of their children, parents, and siblings. Individuals from both sides also tell me in anxious tones how important it is for them to protect their own children and grandchildren from future harm. By sharing the stories of their losses, they hope to use their pain for the sake of social transformation.

Awakening the Public

PCFF members are of course aware of the general ignorance and distrust that characterizes Israelis' and Palestinians' attitudes toward one another. Hadassah believes that "the Israeli public is completely numb . . . living with a closed mind." The PCFF's job,

therefore, is to “awaken the public” to the Palestinians’ experience under the occupation. Khaled finds it most rewarding to see the impact of the lectures at Israeli schools, as “they give students a new picture of the Palestinian people.” Following these lectures, “we see students coming to us and hugging us and telling us that we've opened their minds, that we've opened their eyes, that we are bringing them hope. This is not the Palestinians that they know.” Nava's view is that before the lectures, “Israeli students think that Palestinians have horns and tails, and I don't know what else. From my point of view, it is very important that they see that the Palestinian speaker is a real man, not a terrorist, and that he wants peace, like me.” Students' exposure to flesh and blood Palestinians and their suffering removes social blinders and expands their moral imagination, as Lev reports about some student responses: “They will say after a lecture, ‘We've never heard it put that way. We never thought that Palestinian families also weep for their children.’” So it is precisely the storytelling nature of these events—as opposed to presentations of facts and statistics—that enhances the possibility of transformation, for “it is in narrative description that we gain a sense of the moral impact” that the conflict has had on people, argues social ethicist June O'Connor (1998): “It is in the detail that our moral imaginations are stretched and our constructive moral thinking challenged” (p. 212). In other words, because the communication transmitted during these lectures involves principally emotional experience as opposed to didactic or intellectual information and interpretation, audiences are more likely to open up to the other. As anthropologist Marc Howard Ross (2007) suggests, “Reconciliation ... is about changing the relationship between parties in conflict both instrumentally and emotionally in a more positive direction so that each can more easily envision a joint future” (p. 84). Not infrequently, in response to the lectures, I am told, some students will write, “What can I do to help? I think that I have to become active.”

In presenting the central purpose of the PCFF's work, Lev quotes the writer Amos Oz's recommendation, “‘Try to take out stones from the wall of hatred between the two peoples,’” and concludes, “and that's what we are trying to do.” The paired nature of the school presentations undoubtedly functions to model for students empathy and the possibility of reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis. Gad is well aware that most bereaved Israeli families are not part of the PCFF; instead, they tend to be nationalistic and right wing. Through lectures, he says, “I have to show another possibility ... an alternative reaction to the loss.” Presenters make no secret of their trust in and fondness for one another. When paired with Yoni, for example, Khaled tells classes that he has lost two brothers to the conflict, but

that in Yoni, “I have gained a brother” (Parents Circle-Families Forum, *It Won't Stop Until We Talk*). Noor says that she often hosts visitors from abroad, but that she is not able to have Lev, who is her “neighbor,” visit her at home—given travel restrictions across the border—and that this pains her. Speaking in a lecture context, she says that it was only through PCFF dialogues that she came to understand that:

There is a human side to Israelis, because what I knew about them before was through the soldiers only.... I didn't know that there is a very big human heart in those people. Now I have a lot of Israeli friends. I'm not talking because I want to make it like a movie. No. I'm talking from my heart. Really, I love them; they are my friends.

Conquering Fear, Modeling Agency

Not surprisingly, students' fears regarding the “situation” surfaces during these events. Randa believes that understanding the other “conquers fear,” hence the urgent need for the PCFF's reconciliation work:

Fear is the true enemy. I will bring peace if I believe that my enemy is not a soldier, but that my enemy is his fear. How can I make an agreement with someone who feels afraid of me, or I feel afraid of him? Before anything, we should destroy this monster between us. [My enemy] should understand me, should know me, so that knowledge and understanding lead us to make this big difference.

Lev reports that Jewish students often express profound fear, challenging him in this way:

“How can you contemplate sitting down with those people who send their kids to blow themselves up in shopping malls and bus stations? How can you think of sitting down with them? We've had our Holocaust. And we're entitled to do everything not to repeat that experience. We are afraid. And we have to look after ourselves.”

A Holocaust survivor himself, Lev responds, ““You are afraid? Not more than me—not so much for myself, but for my family and for my grandchildren. You speak of the Holocaust, but where will fear lead us? What will we do?”” Palestinian students also respond by listing their fears and grievances about the way they have to live under Israeli occupation, and Lev counsels them thusly:

“Look, I know what it is to feel without being able to control your future. I've been a little refugee boy without the ability to know what to do, how to get on.

I know what it is to feel like that. But I ask you, will another bomb or another stone bring you your homeland—your *suffering* homeland—any nearer? That’s not the way. We have to dry up that spot of despair, and think of another way.” And then they say, “OK, tell us. What’s the other way?” So I say, “I just want you to know that the way of thinking involves the idea of compromise.”

Both sets of students express a sense of powerlessness about what they can possibly do to change the situation. They ask Lev, “So what do you want from us?” “We are youngsters. Even our parents have no real say in these things. These things are decided way up – presidents, prime ministers. There’s nothing we can really do.” Lev responds to them by saying,

“No, no. Important things require a two-way movement. Obviously, there has to be movement from above, but there has to be movement from the grassroots. That’s how it was in South Africa, that’s how it was when the United States was involved in Vietnam. There has to be a grassroots movement.”

“And I tell them, ‘I believe that you have sense to know, to choose an aim, a worthy aim like peace, and you have the power to work for it, to get it. And you have to be active.’” He adds,

“In a few years you’ll be starting your own families. So will you be prepared to lean back and wait for somebody to bring peace down for you? You have to be active. Talk to your friends, your family, your parents, your neighbors. You have to go out and be active.”

It is clear that in this account of a classroom encounter, Lev uses the pain of his own experience—as a bereaved father, as a Holocaust survivor—to empathize with the students’ fears, grievances, and sense of powerlessness. But he does not stop there. He also models for students a way to work for peace in the midst of the conflict by providing them with a kind of embodied way to make a difference— talking to people, addressing the conflict head on, being active in the pursuit of peace.

Like every other PCFF member I encounter, Lev rejects revenge as an appropriate course of action, as “revenge leads to revenge, a vicious cycle of blood that goes on and on. There must be something else.” Some members concede that they felt driven to revenge when their loved one was first killed but rejected this option on rational grounds, much as Lev does. Others may well have chosen to strive for reconciliation, instead, via a

“substitution of values,” to use Michael Jackson's term (2002, pp. 165-166), by giving up vengeance in exchange for the support, recognition of their suffering, empathy, and healing they have received as PCFF participants. Yet others were never inclined toward revenge. For example, Nava says that she and her husband joined the PCFF after their son's death precisely to stop the ongoing conflict, which is often fueled by acts of revenge and retribution. These attitudes against revenge are shared with student audiences on a routine basis.

Storytelling and the Truth of Lived Experience

Since the PCFF relies on storytelling as a major method of reconciliation, there are two questions that require some attention at this point. The first pertains to how the story is delivered so as to avoid communicating the moral superiority each group typically assumes about itself. A major strength of the PCFF's approach is its engagement in personal storytelling regarding each speaker's family experience rather than locating the experience of loss within a specific ideological interpretation. Suggesting that not all stories will do, Bar-On (2006) argued for the importance of the “good enough” story, which may well be “a story that members from both sides [can] emotionally identify with” (p. 138). It needs to be presented “in a way that both groups [can] contain, emotionally and cognitively, despite the continuing struggle between them” (p. 202).

The second question pertains to factual accuracy in storytelling. Are bereaved individuals' accounts of the loss of loved ones empirically accurate? Is their storytelling credible? It is generally known that memoir and other autobiographical expressions interpret historical events through specific and selective lenses, since memory is not reliable when it comes to the recollection of facts. Perhaps if one focuses on the question of the truth of lived experience as such, this question ceases to play a central role (Gobodo-Madikizela 2003, pp. 86-87). In listening to a PCFF member speak, what becomes evident to an audience is the authenticity of bereaved people's loss and grief. As an example: I talk to a Palestinian woman I call Fahima. She tells me that her son was shot by an Israeli soldier six years earlier while serving as a pallbearer at a funeral for a friend killed by the army. She immediately turns to her large purse, prodding and pushing its contents around, until she finally retrieves her iPhone and proceeds to look at the screen with great concentration. She passes the iPhone to me, pointing to a video image of a funeral procession, of a group of men carrying a coffin through a crowded street. The scene soon becomes turbulent; I first see some jostling, then, very quickly, jostling turning to chaos. The factual details of this event are hardly clear.

But the next scene reveals a young man on a hospital gurney, naked from the waist up, diaphragm moving rapidly up and down. That was her son as he lay dying, Fahima informs me. And that observation seems credible to me, especially given the continuing grief evident in her face, in her voice, in the way she labors to swallow at times, in the clenching of teeth, in the occasional avoidance of eye contact as her gaze moves to some indeterminate point on the horizon. Fahima is attesting to her son's death, and we, the listeners, become witnesses to her truth, which we experience emotionally, in our hearts, so to speak. And what she is sharing, of course—as so many PCFF's stories do—are dangerous memories, capable of communicating to an Israeli audience aspects of their army's behavior typically unavailable for public viewing.

When students or others witness Fahima's and other PCFF members' stories, the palpable, authentic suffering communicated by these storytellers may well evince empathy, encourage in listeners an openness to multiple narratives and moral inclusion, and create “new solidarities without forgetting past traumas” (Zembylas & Bekerman 2008, p. 128). Hence, for Jewish students, the collective trauma of the Holocaust is not erased by witnessing a Palestinian's pain; neither does the Nakba or the occupation disappear for the Palestinian audience of a Jewish bereaved storyteller. So it is not that “the unjust past and the suffering . . . are being forgotten” in this scenario. Rather, “it is the anger and the hatred that are being forgotten, so as to enable space for reconciliation” (p. 139). In some cases, “memory interrupts fixed historical narratives by acknowledging the powerfulness of human suffering. All human beings as subjects are located in suffering; thus, through the memories of suffering—that is, *dangerous memories*—the taken-for-granted narratives are interrupted” (p. 130). These interruptions may lead us to “remember events in the past [in ways that] question our consciences and assumed horizons” (p. 131). In drawing her listeners into her experience of loss and suffering, Fahima's story intrudes into—*interrupts*—the way Israelis might usually interpret their identity and social location. Thus memories like hers propel “individual consciousness into a new process of narrativization. Re-claiming forgotten connections with others involves acts of compassion, self-criticality and resistance to the status quo” (p. 131).

Perhaps, then, the PCFF's program in the schools may be understood in part as a “pedagogy of dangerous memories” or of counter-narratives that function precisely to question the received historical narratives of each people, challenging listeners to deconstruct received assumptions and reconstruct more complex, multiple, and inclusive narratives. Such

pedagogy was also at work when a large group of PCFF families—70 from each side—participated in a visit to Palestinian villages destroyed in 1948 where some members were raised as children. Yehudit recounts how moving it was “to see them coming to the place, touching the ground, taking the soil and touching it,” her voice fading as she concludes, “And they could describe every place: here was the mosque, here was that....” Seeing the Palestinians’ emotional response, Yehudit felt she could hear and validate their story. For Lev this visit pressed him and his fellow Jews to “try and see and feel what our friends went through.” The experience was similar in important ways for Palestinians who accompanied Jewish members to Yad Vashem.

Undoubtedly, one of the reasons for the PCFF's reputation and credibility (the organization is the recipient of numerous international peace awards) among its various audiences is the cultural capital garnered by its members because they have suffered disproportionately for the sake of their respective peoples. Ironically, for individuals who now reject war and exclusivist nationalist strivings because they have lost so much and wish to spare others their unspeakable pain, they are honored by their countrymen because of the perceived sacrifice their dead relatives have made to each side's cause. Hence, because bereaved families are beyond suspicion, PCFF members are situated in a particularly good location to influence public opinion, one lecture at a time.

Educational vs. Political Goals?

As mentioned earlier, the PCFF sees itself as an educational institution, and therefore as non-political in orientation. The non-political characterization may well be strategically based, grounded on a rather narrow definition of the meaning of politics. (See Furman, 2011, for a discussion of the strategic use of “non-political” by another Israeli peacebuilding organization.) I believe that the “educational” designation is seen as a more acceptable, less controversial term, and hence likely to draw more members, especially on the Israeli side. Also, the educational label allows access into Israeli high schools, now with the blessings of the Ministry of Education. When members tell me that the PCFF is non-political, they mean that it does not take public positions regarding the way in which the conflict should be resolved, nor are members involved *as members* in what is more typically considered political work, that is, publicly advocating a particular party or policy, or demonstrating for a particular cause. While the PCFF's website supports this perspective, it also concedes that some political values are shared by its members:

Although the PCFF has no stated position on the political solution of the conflict, most of its members agree that the solution must be based on free negotiations between the leadership of both sides to ensure basic human rights, the establishment of two states for two peoples, and the signing of a peace treaty. (Parents Circle-Families Forum, Introduction)

My definition of political action is broader, as it includes any challenges to reigning power dynamics, which of course involve cultural as well as social and more traditional “political” relationships. From this point of view, as I have argued, a good deal of the PCFF’s work is decidedly political, as members are willing to expose themselves to “dangerous memories” in their dialogue with those from “the other side” and to engage in a pedagogy of dangerous memories with students and others in their presentations. In keeping with Zembylas and Bekerman’s (2008) argument, such exposure interrogates accepted master narratives, expands the boundaries of received identities, and leads to solidarity with the other.

In contrast to Israelis, Palestinian members engage in traditional political discourse as a matter of course when addressing Palestinian audiences in the West Bank. As Khaled explains to me, the approach is different from the one used in Israel, given the different situations involved, alluding to the power differential involved in the Israeli occupation of the Occupied Territories. As in Israel, lectures are given to young people, but in universities and youth clubs, not in high schools. Depending on the zone, security issues, and the general climate, sometimes Israeli members are able to join their Palestinians counterparts. Instead of telling stories of suffering and loss, as is typical in Israeli lectures, in the West Bank Palestinians must project a strong persona “in order to make the people trust you and be ready to listen to you.” Essentially that means providing bona fides regarding the speaker’s standing as a Palestinian:

I am only Khaled the Palestinian. I am Khaled who lost two brothers. I am Khaled who spent one and a half years in jail. I am Khaled whose son has been injured by the Israelis. I am Khaled whose son is in an Israeli prison until now. I am Khaled whose brother was shot down by a soldier. I am Khaled whose brother spent seven years in an Israeli prison, and his other brother also seven years, and his mother six and a half years.

These realities situate Khaled squarely in the Palestinian narrative as a point of departure and furnish him with the legitimacy needed to “open doors,” to convince his audience that the

PCFF is a trustworthy organization. Judging by the success of Palestinian families' joining the PCFF—300 to date—this strategy has worked.

A number of Israeli members would like to see the organization engage in more conventional political work, such as public action and resistance, including demonstrations, joining with other organizations in protecting Palestinian land from Israeli expansionism, shielding Palestinians from settler violence, and assisting Palestinian farmers harvest their olive trees. The differing social locations of Israelis and Palestinians give rise, at times, to tensions about how to proceed in light of the PCFF's non-political self-definition. A case in point is the time of the Gaza War of winter, 2008-2009, when Palestinians members' impulse was to withdraw from the organization as a way of registering their response to the power asymmetry between the two sides, manifested particularly by the massive use of force used by the Israeli army in Gaza, sometimes against civilian targets. It was hard for people to meet during that time, both because of different views on the war and because it was difficult to find a location where Palestinians and Israelis could safely gather; they finally settled on a gasoline station where both sides could get to, on the way from Jerusalem to Jericho, near the Dead Sea.

During that war, some Israeli members participated in a protest watch in Be'er Sheva against the war on behalf of the children of both sides. More recently, another gesture of public solidarity with Palestinians and resistance to Israeli government actions was made by the PCFF by honoring a member who took part with Israelis and Palestinians in boarding a boat headed for Gaza in opposition to the Israeli blockade. A couple of Israeli interview participants take exception to the political nature of such actions in the name of the PCFF, arguing that this kind of activity violates the agreed upon non-political status of the organization. These members, unsurprisingly, also feel that the PCFF sometimes bends over backwards to address Palestinians' identity needs, while neglecting the Israelis'. One of these members believes, for example, that "at the Forum, there seems to be a general black and white perspective, where the Israelis are 'black' and the Palestinians are 'white.'" As a facilitator in a women's group following the Gaza War, she made sure to give the Israeli women the opportunity "to express what they feel, so the Palestinians would see also the other side. It is much more obvious for the Israelis to see the other side than the other way around." Another member tells me that were the PCFF to become more politically active, she would participate less but still remain a member. These views suggest that the PCFF

enjoys a strong commitment from its members, even when they have substantial disagreements with the organization.

Reconciliation, Not Forgiveness

On one thing there seems to be widespread agreement, however, and that is the role of forgiveness in the reconciliation process between Palestinians and Israelis. No doubt because of the powerfully influential model offered by South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), reconciliation and forgiveness are often joined at the hip in conflict resolution discourses. As is well known, the TRC was headed by Desmond Tutu, the charismatic Anglican archbishop whose vision of reconciliation was, naturally enough, deeply shaped by his Christian understanding of forgiveness as a major key in the healing of conflict. Any number of PCFF members told me that forgiveness is not necessary for reconciliation, that they are not willing to forgive, or that they had no right to forgive, as they themselves had not been the direct targets of violent action, a position consistent, certainly, with a Jewish perspective on forgiveness, though this view was not limited to the Jews I interviewed.

An interesting dynamic arose following a PCFF presentation to a visiting group of American Evangelical Lutherans that illustrates this point of view. The visitors' leader self-assuredly declared that people of faith take forgiveness very seriously, at which point Yoni, the Israeli speaker, interjected that the PCFF is not a religious organization, and that it is not interested in questions of forgiveness. "One cannot forgive the killing of innocent people," Yoni asserted, "but one can try to understand what happened: the origin of the violence." Saleh, the Palestinian presenter, agreed with Yoni, saying, "I don't have the right to forgive the killing of my father." He concluded by extending to the group a request frequently heard from PCFF members: "Don't be pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian. Try to bring rights, justice, and peace to us all." Likewise, Nir supports that point of view when he declares that the PCFF's approach is to be "pro-dialogue, pro-reconciliation, pro-solution," so he routinely asks his Jewish audiences, "Please don't be pro-Israeli." To me, all of this points to the importance of understanding the local context and its concomitant meanings and assumptions when interpreting approaches to reconciliation and peacebuilding, a view widely supported by scholars of conflict transformation (Lederach, 1999).

Conclusion

I was first introduced to the Parents Circle-Families Forum through the film *Encounter Point* (Avni, Bacha, Rous, & Rukab, 2006). I was immensely impressed by the

courageous and generous work of this organization, for it demands that its members deploy their most personal, wounded experience of loss and grief in the interest of peace and reconciliation. This kind of work remains largely hidden from public view because the contemporary media across the globe typically choose to focus on stories of conflict and destruction, of hatred and vindictiveness, and not on accounts that provide us with models of the best that human beings are capable of. Exposure to members of the PCFF is thus an ennobling and inspiring experience. I am most grateful to have had the opportunity to speak face to face with its members and co-directors, to have been gifted with their time and personal stories of suffering and hope.

In this paper, we have seen that the PCFF is invested in the development of trust, empathy, and bonding between Palestinians and Israelis, even in the midst of the continuing conflict, lest more people on each side continue to suffer the immeasurable loss of loved ones, as they have. While I have focused here principally on PCFF's peacebuilding work in the schools, it is important to note that in more recent times the organization has also designed successful projects intended to connect Israelis and Palestinians in a variety of ways in order to facilitate their contact, communication, and mutual understanding. For example, "A Crack in the Wall" is a virtual project using social media whose goal is to break the wall separating the two peoples, encourage sharing and understanding across the divide, and contest the status quo. In "History through the Human Eye," the PCFF has brought together hundreds of people to share personal and national narratives of Israeli and Palestinian university students, young political leaders, grandmothers, and other groups. Perhaps some of these initiatives will address a continuing challenge for the PCFF, namely, how to grow the organization by appealing to a broader swath of the bereaved population on both sides. The most ambitious project to date consists in the recent development of a reconciliation center, which now includes the above mentioned narrative project, a resource center, and activities intended to engage politicians in processes of reconciliation leading to peace (Parents Circle-Families Forum, Reconciliation Center).

The last initiative is a recognition that the PCFF's efforts—and those of other grassroots organizations in the region—on behalf of reconciliation and peacebuilding, as successful as they are, are not sufficient to end the conflict, as a major partner is missing, namely, each side's policy makers; these, after all, are the social agents with the power to put in place major structural processes aimed at conflict transformation (Lederach, 2003). The late Israeli psychologist and peace educator, Dan Bar-On (2006), argued that it is very

difficult for a society to adopt psychosocial perspectives—such as those that PCFF members develop through their dialogues and lectures—in the absence of “parallel, top-down political change into which [their] activities and understanding can fit.... An important component of a successful peace process,” he believed, “is positive mutual acknowledgement and synchronization of top-down agreements and bottom-up peace-building activities” (pp. 206, 219).

What is needed now is political will on both sides, so that one day newspapers throughout the world will surprise their morning readers with photos of Israeli and Palestinian leaders smiling broadly as they shake hands, marking, finally, the beginnings of sustainable peace and reconciliation between their two peoples.

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