

Robi Damelin - "A Chain of Change"

I came to Israel from South Africa in 1967; I came as a volunteer after the Six Day War, thinking I'd be here for about six months. I really wanted to leave South Africa because I'd been active in the anti-apartheid movement and it was getting very pressured and ugly. I actually wanted to live in the States, then I came here and I've had this sort of love-hate relationship with this country ever since. I went to a Hebrew language program, got married and had two kids, worked for the Jerusalem Post, and then with immigrants to help them find employment. After I got divorced I came to live in Tel Aviv.

I brought up my children in a very tolerant and loving liberal way; David and Eran, it was kind of like a triangle – the three of us. David went to the Thelma Yellin School of the Arts because he was a very gifted musician. Out of his whole class he was probably the only one who went to the army. I was really surprised when he chose that, but I think you can't take responsibility for somebody else's life, even if it is your child. Even in his regular army service David was torn because he didn't want to serve in the Occupied Territories. He became an officer and was called to go to Hebron. He was in a terrible quandary and came to me and said, "What the hell am I going to do? I don't want to be there." I said, "If you want to go to jail I'll support you, but are you going to make a difference if you go to jail". Because basically, if he were sent to jail, when he got out they'd put him somewhere else [in the Occupied Territories]. It's a never-ending story. If it would have created a huge noise then maybe that would have been the right choice; but you can also go [to your military post] and lead by example, by treating people around you with respect.

I saw the scars in both of my children after serving the military, from having to be in the first intifada. They grew up in a home that never made any fuss over one's creed or color; we just liked people. All through this army service that was what happened all the time [debating whether to serve in the Territories], and then this group was formed of officers that did not want to serve in the Occupied Territories and David joined and went to all the demonstrations; he was also part of the peace movement.

After the army David went to Tel Aviv University and studied philosophy and psychology and then started to do his Masters in Philosophy of Education. He was teaching philosophy at a pre-military program for potential social leaders and he was also teaching at Tel Aviv University. Then he got called up for reserve duty [milu'im] and the whole issue came up again: he doesn't want to go, if he goes he doesn't want to serve in the Occupied Territories. If he doesn't go he's letting his soldiers down, what kind of example is it for these kids who are going to be inducted into the army in two months, if he goes he would treat anybody, any Palestinian, with respect, and so would his soldiers by his example. I said, "Maybe you are setting a good example [by refusing to go]" and he said, "I can't let my soldiers down and if I don't go someone else will and will do terrible things." I keep telling everybody that there isn't really black and white.

David went to his reserve service and I was filled with a terrible premonition, of fear I suppose. He called me on that Saturday and said, "I have done everything to protect us. You know I love my life, but this is a terrible place, I feel like a sitting duck." He never shared that kind of stuff with me, ever. My kids never told me what they were doing in the army. They always told me ridiculous stories thinking that I was going to believe them. The next morning I got up very early and ran to work hours before I had to be there. I didn't want to be at home, I had a very restless feeling.

David was killed by a sniper, along with nine other people. They were at a checkpoint, a political checkpoint, near Ofra. Two days after he was killed it was pulled down; they removed the checkpoint. I suppose all of my life I spoke about coexistence and tolerance. That must be ingrained in me because one of the first things I said is, "You may not kill anybody in the name of my child." I suppose that's quite unusual, an unexpected reaction to that kind of news.

It is impossible to describe what it is to lose a child. Your whole life is totally changed forever. It's not that I'm not the same person I was. I'm the same person with a lot of pain. Wherever I go, I carry this with me. You try to run away at the beginning, but you can't. I went overseas. I went to India, I came back again, but it just goes with you wherever you go. I had a PR office and I was working with National Geographic and the History Channel and had clients I did food and wine for and all the good things in life, as well as with coexistence projects with Palestinian-Israeli citizens. I wasn't particularly politically involved, it was much more on a social level: animal welfare, children, coexistence projects. I always did a lot of volunteer work; I put a lot into those kinds of things, it's always been a part of who I am. But my work began to lose all joy for me. My priorities changed completely. To sit in a meeting and decide whether a wine should be marketed in one way or another became totally irrelevant to me; I couldn't bear it. I was just very lucky, I had wonderful girls working with me in the office and they really ran the office for me for a year until I decided I couldn't bear it anymore, and I closed the office.

Yitzhak Frankenthal had come to speak to me; he was the founder of the Bereaved Families Forum. I wasn't sure that was the path I wanted to take, but I went to a seminar. There were a lot of Israelis and Palestinians from the group there and I didn't really feel convinced yet. But the more time went by the more I wanted to work somewhere to make a difference. It was the beginning of understanding how not to be patronizing; that's a really easy trap to fall into in this kind of work: "I know what's best for the Palestinians, let me tell them what to do." It took me time to understand, to look at the differences in temperament, in culture, in all these things, to be much less judgmental than I'd always been. I think David was a much more tolerant person than I am, or a less judgmental person. I learned a lot of lessons from him, and the pain created a space in me that was less egocentric, that I know what's best for everybody.

David was killed on March 3rd 2002. On October 2004 the sniper who killed David was caught, which for me was a huge step. That was really the test. Do I actually mean what

I'm saying or am I just saying it because... That is the test of whether I really have integrity in the work I'm doing. Do I really mean what I'm saying when I talk about reconciliation. I wrote a letter to the family. It took me about four months to make the decision, many sleepless nights and a lot of searching inside myself about whether this is what I really mean. I wrote them a letter, which two of the Palestinians from our group delivered to the family. They promised to write me a letter. It will take time; these things take time, I'm waiting. It could take five years for them to do that. They will deliver the letter that I wrote to their son who is in jail. So in my own personal development, this was the big milestone for me. When he was caught I didn't feel anything; not satisfaction, except maybe satisfaction that he can't do it to anybody else. There is no sense of revenge and I have never looked for that.

These past years have been an incredible experience for me. I've learned such a lot for my own personal growth, apart from the work I'm doing, which is almost the reason I get up in the morning, actually. It's something I feel almost duty-bound to be doing; it's not a favor that I'm doing for anyone else but a personal mission almost. I know this works. I believe removing the stigma from each side and getting to know the person on the other side allows for a removal of fear, and a way to understand that a long-term reconciliation process is possible. That's also based on my background as a South African person, seeing the miracle of South Africa and how that all happened and that it was actually possible.

On David's grave there is a quotation by Khalil Gibran that says, "The whole earth is my birthplace and all humans are my brothers."

The letter:

This for me is one of the most difficult letters I will ever have to write. My name is Robi Damelin, I am the mother of David who was killed by your son. I know he did not kill David because he was David, if he had known him he could never have done such a thing. David was 28 years old, he was a student at Tel-Aviv University doing his masters in the Philosophy of Education, David was part of the peace movement and did not want to serve in the occupied territories. He had a compassion for all people and understood the suffering of the Palestinians, he treated all around him with dignity. David was part of the movement of the Officers who did not want to serve in the occupied territories but nevertheless for many reasons he went to serve when he was called to the reserves. What makes our children do what they do? They do not understand the pain they are causing your son by now having to be in jail for many years and mine who I will never be able to hold and see again or see him married, or have a grandchild from him. I cannot describe to you the pain I feel since his death and the pain of his brother and girl-friend, and all who knew and loved him.

All my life I have spent working for causes of co-existence, both in South Africa and here. After David was killed I started to look for a way to prevent other families both Israeli and Palestinian from suffering this dreadful loss. I was looking for a way to stop

the cycle of violence, nothing for me is more sacred than human life, no revenge or hatred can ever bring my child back. After a year, I closed my office and joined the Parents Circle – Families Forum. We are a group of Israeli and Palestinian families who have all lost an immediate family member in the conflict. We are

looking for ways to create a dialogue with a long-term vision of reconciliation.

After your son was captured, I spent many sleepless nights thinking about what to do, should I ignore the whole thing, or will I be true to my integrity and to the work that I am doing and try to find a way for closure and reconciliation. This is not easy for anyone and I am just an ordinary person, not a saint, I have now come to the conclusion that I would like to try to find a way to reconcile. Maybe this is difficult for you to understand or believe, but I know that in my heart it is the only path that I can choose, for if what I say is what I mean it is the only way.

I understand that your son is considered a hero by many of the Palestinian people, he is considered to be a freedom fighter, fighting for justice and for an independent viable Palestinian state, but I also feel that if he understood that taking the life of another may not be the way and that if he understood the consequences of his act, he could see that a non-violent solution is the only way for both nations to live together in peace.

Our lives as two nations are so intertwined, each of us will have to give up on our dreams for the future of the children who are our responsibility.

I give this letter to people I love and trust to deliver, they will tell you of the work we are doing, and perhaps create in your hearts some hope for the future. I do not know what your reaction will be, it is a risk for me, but I believe that you will understand, as it comes from the most honest part of me. I hope that you will show the letter to your son, and that maybe in the future we can meet.

Let us put an end to the killing and look for a way through mutual understanding and empathy to live a normal life, free of violence.