



[Home](#) | [Calendar](#) | [Articles](#) | [Archives](#) | [Code of Ethics](#) | [About Us](#) | [News Links](#) | [Advertise Here](#) | [E-mail Us](#)

Archives

Jewish and Palestinian Women in Circle

BY JALAJA BONHEIM

The conflicts of the Middle East often seem irreconcilable, but occasionally there are transcendent moments, glimmers of light. During the 1978 Camp David Peace Talks between Egypt and Israel hosted by President Jimmy Carter, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin threatened to withdraw over the wording of a side letter on the status of Jerusalem. President Carter responded indirectly, autographing pictures for Begin's grandchildren. This gesture—and Carter's sincere commitment to peace—so moved the Prime Minister that he agreed to accept a new draft.

Jalaja Bonheim, returning longtime OPEN EXCHANGE lister, offers Circlework Leadership Training for Women. Here she describes her work with Palestinian and Israeli women.

The greatest gifts of leading circles in Israel are the many extraordinary women I have met. I think of Janette, a beautiful, large, Arab woman who would now and then burst into song, softening the guttural sounds of Arabic with her gentle, husky voice; of Aida, our Bedouin translator, a fiery sprite with a deep passion for social justice and transformation; and of Aura, a Jewish community leader who inspired us all with her strength, wisdom, and integrity.

Today, people everywhere are realizing that either we will learn to get along, or our species will self-destruct. Yet in Israel, perhaps more than any other place I have worked, they recognize that Circlework is not just about personal healing. They understand that nothing could be more important or urgent than learning to overcome our apparent inability to co-exist peacefully with members of our own species.

War and violence are realities of which one is constantly reminded. Military planes fly constantly over our hotel in Nazareth, loud, low, rattling the windowpanes. A young woman in the circle tells of arriving at a well-known café just five minutes after it had been ripped apart by a bomb, and being overwhelmed by the awful smell of burned human flesh. A mother tells me her six-year-old daughter suffers from post-traumatic stress after their neighbor's house was hit by a bomb. "It is because of her," she says, "that I am doing this work. I need to do this."



For Arab women, it's especially difficult to leave home for days at a time, as they must in order to participate in my retreats. Their husbands may not approve, and their culture holds that a woman's place is in the home, especially if she's a mother. Simply showing up is a powerful sign of courage and commitment.

Yet they do show up, as do the Jewish women, because they're determined to stop the tragic cycle of war. Both tell their stories, not to cast blame, but because they have found that the most effective way to heal pain is to share it. They have seen close-up what unhealed pain can do. They have watched it fester, become inflamed, and explode in acts of violence. They have seen it reproduce, like the demons of certain myths whose every drop of blood begets a hundred more of their own kind. They know that there is only one alternative to violence: communication. And so they communicate, even against enormous odds.

Many are mothers who want a better future for their children, and most are involved in some form of political or social activism. But that alone, they understand, is not enough, for the roots of the suffering they witness around them lie within: if the world is to change, the human psyche must change. At one point, a Jewish mother says, in a voice filled with sadness and passion:

I don't know what the solution to our problems is. But one thing I see clearly: we must overcome the illusion of separation. Even though it seems like we're on opposite sides, we're really playing a game. I am you, and you are me!

In this moment, she speaks for all of us. We all recognize the truth of her words, and yet, it's an extraordinary statement, coming as it does from the mouth of someone who lives in the midst of one of the world's most bitter conflicts.

Many of the women in the circles I led in Israel want to lead circles of their own and have requested that the Institute for Circlework offer the Circlework Training in their country. Provided we are able to raise the necessary funds, we hope to launch the first training in Israel next Spring. It would be time, energy, and money well spent, for despite the vast resources spent on trying to resolve the conflict between Israel and Palestine, and between Israeli Jews and Arabs, the situation has not improved.

In my opinion, one of the main reasons is that most people are focusing exclusively on external changes. These are of course important, but they won't bear fruit unless fundamental inner changes occur in the way people think, feel and relate. Circlework is a powerful tool for inspiring these changes. It's a healing process and a spiritual practice that simultaneously provides the kind of education that we will all need in order to become planetary citizens in the global era. Today, we must find new ways to join forces, for as solitary individuals, we can no more accomplish the work that lies ahead of us than a solitary bee can create a beehive brimming with sweet honey.

Most attempts to improve Jewish-Arab relationships focus on dialogue. In contrast, Circlework holds that true reconciliation cannot occur as long as people's hearts are closed to each other. Therefore, Circlework includes many non-verbal elements, such as music, movement, touch, and other tools that prepare participants to relate in an entirely new way.

In my circles, I begin by slowing people down and guiding them out of their heads into their hearts. For unless enemies are willing to open their hearts to each other, there is no way for them to overcome their conflicts. Therefore we begin by connecting, not as Jews or Arabs, but simply as human beings. We sing together, we dance, we laugh and cry. We share food and stories. In the age-old ways, we weave a basket that can hold whatever emotions need to be held.

In the circle, both Arab and Jewish women deal with powerful feelings of anger, resentment, fear, guilt, and shame, not to mention the discomfort that arises when we expose ourselves to the "other." Yet I never cease to be amazed at their capacity for forgiveness, for reconciliation, for self-liberation. Nothing could be more inspiring or hopeful than to witness how the realization of our oneness ceases to be a mere mental concept and instead becomes a visceral, embodied knowledge that changes lives.

FEEDBACK: Do you have a comment or reaction to this article? Give us your feedback by [clicking here](#). We'd love to hear from you. We will post/publish interesting comments.

[Top of Page](#)



Please tell our listers, "I saw your listing at www.openexchange.org".

[Home](#) | [Calendar](#) | [Articles](#) | [Archives](#) | [Code of Ethics](#) | [About Us](#) | [News Links](#) | [Advertise Here](#) | [E-mail Us](#)

© 2009 OPEN EXCHANGE • P.O. Box 7880, Berkeley, CA 94707
(510) 526-7190 • openexchange@earthlink.net