

Grief work: A Palestinian and an Israeli in conversation

by [David M. Denny](#) in the [January 29, 2008](#) issue

Two men from two different worlds, separated by a street, a checkpoint, a wall and, until recently, a worldview. One was a tall, slim young Israeli Ashkenazi Jew named Guy. On this night he entered the Old City of Jerusalem through Jaffa Gate the way an American walks into a familiar neighborhood in Boston or Chicago.

The other man was a middle-aged physician named Omar. He felt less confident entering the Holy City. Until 1995 he knew Israelis only as enemy soldiers or as settlers who took lives and land that he loved. At each checkpoint on the way to Jerusalem he had to present a pass, like a student's permission slip, indicating when he could enter and when he had to depart.

Guy and Omar traveled to the Lutheran Guest House in Jerusalem as representatives of the Parents Circle-Families Forum, a grassroots organization of bereaved Palestinians and Israelis. Omar spoke first. He recounted having been displaced from Hebron to Bethlehem to Ramallah, where he now lives and works. In 1972 his father was killed by the Israel Defense Force. Omar's school principal did not inform him of his father's death. He simply sent Omar home to his mother, six sisters and 11 brothers. Two days later, Israeli troops demolished his house. The family spent the next three years in a refugee camp.

In following years, one of Omar's brothers was killed by Israeli forces. But five of his sisters went to university and six siblings became doctors. Two other siblings became pharmacists, one an engineer and one a businessman. Omar went to medical school in Romania, but the Israeli government prevented him from returning home. He spent 20 years in exile in Jordan, where he volunteered in a refugee camp. After returning to Israel he was imprisoned in the Sinai and then released. During one Ramadan, soldiers burst into his home while his family was feasting and placed Omar under house arrest, which lasted for two years.

Disillusioned with political leadership, Omar concluded that hope lay in conversing with the enemy. Through conversations rooted in a common bereavement, he discovered his Israeli neighbors' humanity. On this night, he did not talk about his emotional response to the deaths of his father and brother and his own years of exile. He struck me as weary, reserved, melancholy. But his words and gestures also radiated a physician's compassion and wisdom forged from profound darkness.

When Guy spoke, he revealed that ten years earlier, when he was 18 and newly recruited into the Israeli army, a suicide bomber killed his sister. Guy became convinced that his sister's death was the result of Israeli policies toward Palestinians. Guy decided that fighting in Lebanon might help him become "normal" again. Maybe killing Arabs would be consoling. But Guy's mother had the right to prevent her only surviving child from going into combat, so Guy was denied this path.

After he left the military Guy spent five years outside Israel. He lived in the U.S. and France. In France he met Palestinians and North Africans and realized that he was a Middle Easterner, not a European. After earning a diploma in France, he returned to Israel and learned Arabic on the streets of East Jerusalem. Then he discovered the Parents Circle.

Guy said he believes that just as violence begets violence, "dialogue begets dialogue." He complained of the way the Israeli Defense Department "adopts" those who have lost loved ones to terrorists, offering them financial support and later informing them when government forces have avenged the family's loss. Guy's family rejected such offers, refusing to believe that vengeance heals.

After telling their stories, Omar and Guy began to articulate their common concerns. Omar lamented the media's focus on violence. He urged Americans to press the U.S. government to promote peace and stop the sale of arms. He reported that through more than a thousand lectures to over 25,000 students in Israel and Palestine, the Parents Circle has shown families how they may use their experience of suffering to stop the cycle of revenge. Hope, Guy said, lies "in human contact with the human face of the 'other.'" Then he added, "We don't die of listening."

As Israelis and Palestinians begin another tentative round of peace talks, I thought about Omar and Guy heading home through the narrow streets of Jerusalem that night. Omar's and Guy's dead remain dead. Other soldiers have replaced Guy. Omar still presents his pass to a soldier.

The late Palestinian scholar Edward Said said that peace would be possible only when Palestinians and Israelis could sit together, listen to each other's grief, and trust that the other is telling the truth. We don't die of listening. I pray that these two men do not die before their listening bears fruit.