

“We will try a thousand times more to bring peace”

Interview with Yael Treidel from Israel

Yael Treidel has been working for many years in Israel for understanding between Jews and Palestinians and for a lasting peace. Our contributor Mike Kauschke spoke with her about the current situation in Israel and whether she can retain hope for peace in the face of terror. Her views present her own reflections and do not represent the perspective of the organizations she is working with.

How do you perceive the atmosphere in Israel among the people?

There's generally all over the population a very deep grief and shock. This kind of attack hasn't happened since the founding of Israel. It stirs up the collective trauma of this nation. There's a lot of frustration about the dysfunction of the state that is failing in any possible way. At the same time, the citizens are amazing. People do everything to help each other, they organize, they take in people who were evacuated, and feeding them. Therapists are volunteering all over the country to help people who are traumatized. There are big restaurants that are preparing thousands of hot meals a day to distribute to both people who are evacuated and soldiers. There are also organizations of Jews and Arabs coming together to support each other.

How is the situation of Arabs living in Israel?

I spoke with an Arab friend yesterday and asked her, “How are you doing?” She said, “We just lay low and wait for the whole thing to be over. If I put something on Facebook saying that I'm aching for the children of Gaza, I can lose my job.” Arab people in Israel have been fired, were suspended, were taken to the police to be investigated. In the general atmosphere, many call for revenge and to wipe out Gaza. This sentiment is also coming from government. And there are those of us who are saying, many of the casualties in Gaza are also civilians. We don't have any compassion for Hamas members, but a lot of compassion for the people of Gaza. They live in a horrible situation for years. So, it's a mix. We're in the middle of it and nobody knows how it will end. To me, that's the scariest thing. This war can last for a very long time, and I don't know how many people will die and suffer until it will end. And when it ends,

then what? We've seen these cycles of violence so many times. This one is worse, but it's just another one. There's a continuous cycle of violence.

How do people deal with this constant sense of insecurity that this cycle of violence causes?

Generally, between eruptions of violence, many people just block it off and live their normal life and don't think about it too much. But the sense of security of Jews and Arabs in the country is the lowest ever. People were under horrific attack, and it took hours and hours until they received help. That's a feeling that you're really not safe. We are supposed to be the strongest military in the Middle East, and for hours nobody saved them. This will have to be restored over time.

Is there something that gives you hope in this terrible situation?

I'm a peace activist, and the fact that I'm doing something to change our reality helps me to keep a sliver of hope. I meet more people like me who think there is a chance for peace. Three days before the massacre in the South, we had a huge event of Women Wage Peace and a sister movement in Palestine called Women of the Sun with women from the West Bank and Gaza. Diplomats came and spoke. For example, the Irish ambassador, gave a speech and said that nobody believed there could be peace in North Ireland, it's not possible. And she said, it's not possible until suddenly it's possible. So, we just have to keep trying. After the massacres on the 7th of October, the leader of the Palestinian group Women of the Sun sent us a message saying: "We were trying to bring peace to this area. We didn't succeed. But we will try a thousand times more until it eventually happens."

I also work for another organization that drives patients from Gaza and the West Bank to hospitals in Israel. We hear that some of the patients we drive died from bombing or from not being able to receive treatment. Some of our volunteers also died or were abducted by Hamas. I have I lost my connection with people from Gaza, but I'm in contact with people from the West Bank. We continue to drive patients from the West Bank. Not as many as we used to, because they only come if they absolutely have to. And hospitals now are full of people who are injured.

If you know people on the other side, then you can't demonize the whole collective. But most people don't have this connection with people on the

other side, then it's easier to see all of them as killers. Palestinians see Israelis as people in uniforms and guns who come to arrest them or kill them. And people from Israel see all Palestinians as terrorists who come to murder them.

Do you see a hope in that there are more ways of that kind of meeting and connecting that maybe change something in the long run?

I think hope can come from two places. One is more and more encounters and getting to know each other. Because there is so much fear when you don't understand the language. But when you get to know people, you can sit together as people. You don't even have to agree politically, but there is a person, a mother on the other side. In Women Wage Peace it's a lot about mothers that want to protect their kids on both sides of the fence.

The other hope is that the world stops interfering in the wrong way and start interfering in the right way. We have become a playground for other powers. America gets involved, because they don't want that Iran gets more power, and Hamas and Hezbollah are supported by Iran and Russia. Each superpower sends their weapons to somebody else or sometimes to all of us, and we just fight each other.

“There is never a real security unless there is some kind of peace”.

Do you see do you see a change in the relationship of Israeli people to the government? I heard commentators saying that Netanyahu's policies weakened the institutions and the state and divided the people even more. Is there a sense that with this government something is not working?

That's an understatement! This government was elected in last November and immediately they started to work on policies that the government can override the Supreme Court, which means that the government has absolute power. That caused an intense and amazing protest. Every single Saturday evening, hundreds of thousands of people were protesting.

Today, even people who voted for this government withdraw their support. They did some surveys showing that the number of people who still support this government is really low. When government officials were visiting hospitals, they were expelled.

I hope it will stay like this, but I'm not sure because the war is going to be long, and we'll see what happens.

“It's much harder to do peace than to do war.”

How will you continue in the peace work with Women Wage Peace?

With Women Wage Peace, whenever something happens, there is a lot of discussion about the next step. We support the people who've been attacked. All of us lost people. One of the women who co-founded our organization is abducted in Gaza. We don't know what her situation is. A lot of the people in the South who were kidnapped and killed are from Kibbutz's and villages in the south near the border with Gaza, in which there are a lot of peace activists. In the other organization that I'm working with, some of our drivers were killed, or abducted, some lost their sons. We have a lot of volunteers in that area of the country. A lot of people are very traumatized. At this time, we come together showing support. And then we will be discussing what will be the next step.

What do you expect to happen in the near future in this conflict?

I have no idea what will happen. There are people in government who want Gaza to be reoccupied, which will be a disaster. They want to annihilate Hamas, but that would mean you have to send troops in.

In the last two decades, nobody tried to have some kind of political agreement here. You have to be stupid to think that violence is the solution. Just look around the world, it never is. There is never a real security unless there is some kind of peace. We don't have to love each other. We don't even have to have open borders. People, like the Palestinians, cannot be under occupation for so long.

Nobody has tried to find a solution and maybe this situation creates the pressure to find it. But at this point it seems like for many people some kind of action involves violence. Or is there an alternative?

There is an alternative. If you look around the world you see that very long conflicts have been solved in the end, like in Ireland, or Liberia. But our leaderships have been lazy, they relied on the Army. Because it's much harder to do peace than to do war. In war you take all your big guns and shoot at each other. But in order to do peace, you have to really listen, you have to really

care, you have to think together. This is why we keep saying that you have to have women at the table.

A lot of the people in the government now come from settlements in the West Bank. They feel that they are entitled as Jews. They live surrounded by Palestinians who do not have the same rights as them, which means that there's apartheid in the West Bank. If you have democracy, it must be for all. If you don't have it for all, it's not a democracy.

How do you find the trust to continue working for that possibility of a solution?

It's very hard. I was always very optimistic. I know that eventually there will be some kind of solution because the conflict is not manageable, but I'm not sure anymore that I will get to see it. I hope I will.

It seems psychological hard to have compassion for the other side in processing. what happened in in these attacks. Even when I read some of the stories I felt, it's just beyond anything you can really comprehend. How do you think people can deal with this kind of trauma or find a way to heal?

People here went through the Holocaust and obviously it didn't heal completely, but time and therapy can help. Sometimes I think that we should have some kind of a celestial therapist to do some trauma treatment for the whole region, because continuous trauma of all sides is at play here.

Why do you think women can change the conversation or should be more included?

Women are less prone to start wars and women work together better. Women and children are the main people who suffer in conflict. Women have a perspective on the price of conflict that men don't.

There is research that shows, when women are part of the negotiation team, then the agreement is achieved faster and the peace holds longer and everybody is happier, it's more equal in terms of the two sides. And in places where women were involved in negotiations, when men were ready to throw the towel and say, it's not happening, the women would insist to continue. So, women both bring perspective and a level of listening and a level of willingness to not give up and to insist on finding a way that men maybe don't. I know, it's

a generalization, but most of our leaders are men and we are not in a good place.

Yael Treidel, author and translator, has been involved as a political and social activist for many years. She is currently active primarily in the Women Wage Peace movement and the NGO The Road To Recovery. Her novel, “When the Water Rises”, was published in 2022.

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