

As a recent alumna of Hands of Peace (Summer '22), I have spent the last few months continuing to process the impact that this past summer's program has had on me. The friendships that developed with my Palestinian, Israeli, and American peers, the lessons on conflict resolution, and the transformative power of truly listening are all things that I gained this summer that will stay with me for the rest of my life.

I have also been amazed by the organization's dedication to involving past participants in constructive dialogue, peace-building activities, and community circles virtually. With the recent news cycle reporting disturbing stories of continued violence impacting Israelis and Palestinians, I was eager to rejoin the Hands of Peace community and focus on continuing to build bridges and to engage in productive dialogue.

Most recently, I participated in the Parents Circle/Families Forum virtual discussion where Yigal Elhanan, a Jewish Israeli who lost his sister in a suicide bombing, and Mohamed Abu Jafar, a Palestinian whose brother was killed by the Israeli Defense Forces, were panelists. The men poignantly shared their thoughts and experiences with loss and reconciliation. Their stories were heartbreaking and brought me back to the conversations I had over the summer with fellow Israeli and Palestinian program participants who had lost loved ones due to acts of violence. Both men found that by actively communicating and sharing their stories with others, they were able to heal and process their loss in a more productive manner.

During the discussion, I posed the question whether they had ever felt hatred toward Palestinians or Israelis, respectively, as a whole for the loss of their siblings. Mr. Abu Jafar responded by explaining that he has made a conscious decision to let go of hate and instead channel his anger and sadness toward actively working to create a more positive outcome for the future. He has done this by partnering with peace building organizations, educating family members and friends, and creating deep connections with Israelis and Palestinians who stand for peace. Mr. Elhanan similarly stressed the importance of not stereotyping an entire group of people based on the actions of a few, which is why he believes many Israelis and Palestinians are distrustful of one another.

Despite these traumatic experiences, I was moved by the men's commitment to viewing one another as allies in the struggle to achieve peace. When asked whether he believed peace in this conflict was attainable, Mr. Abu Jafar said, "Yes, peace is achieved through believing in the possibility of a peaceful future. As long as we do not give up on our fight for peace, we will achieve it." His hopeful words reminded me that although Israelis and Palestinians have a long history of distrust and violence, the majority of people from both nations ultimately want the same outcome—to live in peace. Mr. Elhanan stressed that at the end of the day, we are all human, and as such, we are all deserving of fair and equal treatment, including the right to live in peace.

My biggest take-away from this discussion and my summer with Hands of Peace is that if my generation wants to achieve palpable progress in this centuries-old conflict, we must listen to one another with open minds and hearts. With patience, understanding, and assuming good faith in others, we can accomplish positive change.

