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**The Peace Activists
Divided by Oct. 7**
By Susan Dominus

“I feel betrayed on such a deep level.” Tamar Shamir read the message on her phone in surprise. Another followed: “I just want to puke.” Shamir, a 53-year-old peace activist, was at her home not far from Haifa, in northern Israel, on Oct. 8, the day after Hamas’s deadly attack. Already half-mad from grief, Shamir grew agitated as more angry messages streamed in, and other recipients signaled their agreement by adding heart emojis. Shamir was checking in on a WhatsApp group of young adult Israelis, members of a program Shamir often worked with called Young Ambassadors for Peace. Many of them had attended a summer camp that Shamir co-directs for teenagers from Israel and the West Bank, some of whom have lost loved ones to the decades-long conflict. They had compared sunburns at the beach, belted out songs from “Frozen” on karaoke night, stayed up late laughing, weeping and sharing stories of their respective losses. Now the Israeli WhatsApp group was awash with hostility toward their Palestinian friends.

Shamir chain-smoked and paced around her house, phone in hand, forcing herself to follow the conversation. “I really don’t know how I can continue being in contact with those people,” she read. On social media, a Palestinian in the program had reposted a widely shared image of a Palestinian flag, alongside the date, Oct. 7, and a message in Arabic that translated to: “Officially the greatest day in the life of all of our generation.” One of the Israeli young ambassadors informed Shamir that she had seen an Instagram story from another Palestinian in the group with a visual of a flaming tank and an Israeli soldier dead beside it, accompanied by a laughing emoji. She told Shamir she was appalled.

Shamir could not bear the sense of finality of the messages. “It destroyed my heart,” she says. “I didn’t know what to do with it.” These were not just any friendships that were imploding; they were particular, carefully cultivated bonds. They were small and private, but they had been exceedingly rare footholds of mutual understanding. The project she held dear now seemed to be on the brink of collapse.

Her phone was also pinging with messages that brought her some solace — Palestinian friends expressing concern for her safety, including, in his own way, her co-worker, Mohamed Abu Jafar, with whom she ran the weeklong summer camp as well as the regular reunions that continued throughout the year. “I know you are OK,” he wrote, “because you are a northern girl.” Shamir and Abu Jafar lived far from the attacks on the southern border. “Stay safe,” he wrote. His text wasn’t effusive, but it reflected their shared dark humor, their inside joke that they were both survivors. Abu Jafar had endured years of military violence in Jenin, the city in the West Bank where he lived; Shamir, a far-left activist in Israel, had been tear-gassed, kicked, spit on.

That night, Shamir and Abu Jafar attended an emergency Zoom meeting called by the Parents Circle-Families Forum, the nonprofit that runs both the Young Ambassadors for Peace program and the summer camp. The forum, founded in the mid-1990s, brings together Palestinians and Israelis, most of whom have a family member who died in the conflict, to share their stories and their common humanity and to provide a model of reconciliation. A slogan for one of its campaigns was “It won’t stop until we talk.” The group had a regular staff meeting scheduled for the next morning, but leadership did not want to wait even that long to bring the Israeli and Palestinian colleagues together, to remind one another of their shared mission before strong feelings escalated.

The Zoom call was tense and emotional. Everyone felt confusion and also some dread, fearing unprecedented reprisals from Israel in Gaza and the West Bank. The Israelis were grieving, stunned by the brutality of the attacks, the extent of which they were all only starting to grasp. It would prove to be the single deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust: About 1200 Israelis, mostly civilians, were killed, and roughly 240 were taken hostage, according to Israeli officials. But on the 8th, the full scope of the attack was not yet clear, especially to the Palestinians. Some of the Israelis on the call shared that, in addition to mourning, they were also feeling personally wounded — hurt that their Palestinian co-workers had not reached out to them in solidarity or to make sure they and their loved ones were OK.

Abu Jafar, who had reached out to Shamir but not others, was taken aback. On the 7th, he was not thinking about the nonprofit; the world had been turned upside-down, and he had no way of knowing how severe the Israeli military’s reaction would be. That

day, as he took in the news on his phone, alone in his bedroom, his feelings were mixed. He was a peace activist, but he was also a Palestinian whose brother, at age 16, was shot and killed outside his high school by the Israeli military during an incursion in 2002. In the months leading up to Hamas's attack, the Israeli Army had escalated its raids to root out militants in Jenin's sprawling refugee camp, bringing in drone-fired missiles and ground troops and causing civilian casualties. In time, Abu Jafar would understand that many Israeli civilians had been killed on the 7th, but on the day itself, he was seeing only footage of Hamas attacking the Israeli military, and he had a lifetime's worth of reasons to hate the I.D.F.

Abu Jafar was in charge of quality control for the health ministry of Jenin, and by the 8th, he was already busy trying to accelerate plans to build emergency clinics in anticipation of Israeli retaliation. So no, he had not stopped to text the 10 or so Israeli staff members. At the meeting, he made clear he was affronted — he felt they were reading something sinister into his silence. "I told them they were in shock," Abu Jafar says. He found it hard to understand the attack the way many of the Israelis did — as an existential threat, an unprecedented, barbaric assault that had decimated whatever precarious sense of security the country had previously had. Abu Jafar was struck that in all the years he'd been with the forum, years in which Palestinians had suffered attacks, lost innocent loved ones, had homes bulldozed, no emergency meeting had been called.



"The Israelis would talk about peace with urgency, not as a luxury, because now they see how the war is painful,"
Mohamed Abu Jafar says. Ahmed Abu Jafar

For the most part, the staff members on the call heard each other out with empathy and respect, as they typically did. Palestinians and Israelis who collaborate in peace organizations regularly confront tensions and differences in their perspectives, which they talk through or simply let lie, in order to continue their work. But it was clearly painful and frustrating for each side to try to understand the other's response, especially as the facts were still so unclear. In the weeks after Oct. 7, deep divides would emerge at many coexistence groups in the region, leading to explosive exchanges. Though the forum operated under the principle that open dialogue was the first step in reconciliation, the staff agreed that they needed to temporarily abandon their usual approach. They would pause the conversations in which they brought together small groups of Palestinian and Israeli members. Talking, they decided, had the potential to do more harm than good.

Over the next several days, Shamir picked up the phone and called many of the Israeli young ambassadors, including those who seemed to be severing their bonds with their Palestinian friends, and urged them not to give up. She knew it was too early for what the group called a binational meeting, a meeting of Palestinians and Israelis, always the ultimate goal of the forum. She encouraged them instead to have one-on-one conversations, which were less likely to turn ugly than group calls that might devolve into tribalism.

She tried to explain to them that Palestinian news sources were not emphasizing the brutal images of Israeli victims that were flooding Israeli media; instead, their Palestinian friends' social media feeds were already filling with images of Gazan victims of the Israeli bombing campaign. "They are not seeing what you are seeing on Israeli TV, and you are not seeing what they are seeing," she told them.

On Oct. 7, in the West Bank, jubilant rumors were flying: Crowds in the streets of Bethlehem were shouting for joy because they believed a false rumor that Palestinians had been liberated from the Shikma prison in Ashkelon, an Israeli city near the Gaza border. Videos went viral of Hamas fighters who purported to be caring for small Israeli children on Oct. 7 — propaganda that appalled Israelis but was persuasive to many Arabs in the region. Word of a massacre at the Tribe of Nova music festival was not widespread among Palestinians for several days, according to Nadine Quomsieh, the Palestinian co-director of the forum, and even then, she said, the event was presented in Palestinian media as a "party for soldiers."

Shamir explained this media gap to the Israeli young ambassadors. "I think they understood," she says. "But it took time." A massive role reversal happened on Oct. 7, she told them: The Palestinian kids were steeped in a longstanding story in which they were the victims; making the shift to seeing Israelis as vulnerable would not be easy.

Abu Jafar, meanwhile, was exchanging messages with Palestinian young ambassadors, who were also angry and shocked. They felt attacked by their Israeli friends, some of whom accused them of sympathizing with terrorists because of their social media posts. Abu Jafar emphasized what he saw as the essential divide: The Israeli young people were unable to fully grasp the misery the Palestinians felt under occupation. If the Israelis had been able to understand that, he thought, they might not have been surprised that what their Palestinian friends believed to be a smackdown of the Israeli military would be cause for celebration. "I told them you can post what you want," he says. "But if you don't want to hear from them, don't share it with them."

Forum leadership also encouraged Shamir and Abu Jafar to talk to the younger kids — the 14-to-18-year-olds affiliated with the summer camp — to remind them of their commitment to its values and to hear how they were feeling. When Shamir gathered the Israeli group for a Zoom, she was struck by how different their response was from the young ambassadors: The teenagers just wanted to get in touch with their Palestinian friends, to hear how they were and also to discuss their respective feelings about Oct. 7.

Abu Jafar initially resisted holding a similar meeting for the Palestinian group, saying that the timing wasn't right. He understood that the Israeli kids needed to process what just happened, but the Palestinian kids in the West Bank were still actively experiencing the fallout. The Israeli military had stepped up its raids there. Some of the kids in the group had family in Gaza. "It's a scary situation," Abu Jafar said. "If someone has been beaten, you don't go to the emergency room when he's in pain and start to ask him about his feelings."

On Oct. 16, just over a week after the Hamas attack, Abu Jafar decided the Palestinian kids were ready. On their video call, they echoed some of the young ambassadors' complaints, but some also said they were eager, more than ever, to meet up with their Israeli counterparts by Zoom. In the words of a participant, it was one thing for "spoiled kids from Tel Aviv" to come talk about reconciliation while their counterparts were struggling under occupation; maybe now, after the attack, their Israeli friends would be even more motivated to fight together for peace. Abu Jafar understood: The Israelis might now "talk about peace with urgency, not as a luxury," he said, because "they see how the war is painful."

Shamir and Abu Jafar agreed that it was too soon for a binational Zoom of the summer-camp kids, especially, Shamir felt, in light of the tone of the messages from the young ambassadors. "They were naïve," Shamir says about the younger kids who'd asked for such a meeting. She was afraid of what those teenagers would hear, of what they might say back in response. If trained adults struggled to maintain the peace in their staff discussions, she and Abu Jafar feared, these teenagers might quickly find themselves swamped by emotion and recrimination.

In the following weeks, Abu Jafar had little time for the forum, drained by his obligations with the health ministry. The Israeli Army had escalated the violence with which it was bearing down on Jenin, whose sprawling refugee camp was a known stronghold of militant resistance. On Nov. 9, the Israeli Army launched another assault on the camp, ultimately killing at least 14 people, according to the Palestinian Authority. The military presence was so overwhelming in the city that later that evening, Abu Jafar's fiancée, who was visiting from out of town, was too terrified even to come out of her friend's building so that Abu Jafar could pick her up. That same day,

Abu Jafar suddenly received a call from the hospital that demanded his attention: His nephew had been shot in the leg.

In the aftermath of Oct. 7, peace organizations across Israel had to decide how to react. The Palestinian and Israeli board members of the forum failed to agree on a single joint statement that they could circulate to the staff, but the group's directors, Nadine Quomsieh and Yuval Rahamim, published the following message on the homepage: "We express our deepest and heartfelt condemnation of the ongoing violence in the region." The language, in any other moment, might have sounded anodyne; at the time, it was nothing short of radical in Israel, where even many members of the left were "getting sober," a term that came to mean waking up to the urgency of protecting Israel, of making a show of strength to its Arab neighbors. The forum condemned the violence of Hamas but stopped short of calling for the group's demise; it also implicitly criticized Israeli violence in Gaza, defying the sentiments of a vast majority of Israelis, who felt military action was essential for self-preservation. Even some members of the forum felt this way. "Almost no one in Israel is calling for a cease-fire, because I mean — you have to fight Hamas," Mia Damelin, a 19-year-old young ambassador, told me in mid-November. "You can't just not do anything." Several Israeli members of the Forum resigned after the Oct. 7 attack, Quomsieh reported.

The decision not to single out Hamas for condemnation was important to Abu Jafar, so important that he thinks he probably would have quit had they decided otherwise. "We condemn violence on both sides. We are bereaved families. We always take the human side, not the political side." He did not always find it easy to work with the forum — to collaborate with people who had served in the same military that took his brother's life, that inspired fear in him at every checkpoint he passed. The group's commitment to acknowledging violence on both sides, however, made it possible for him to keep going — that, and some of the relationships with co-workers that sustained him. When his nephew was shot by the I.D.F., Shamir was one of the first people he called. The shooting brought back memories of the killing of his brother — the two young men even had the same name, Ahmed — although his nephew recovered quickly from his wound. Shamir checked in from time to time to hear how his nephew was doing.

Shamir also supported the statement that the forum made on its homepage. She was more committed than ever to nonviolent solutions to the conflict, even as peace activism was becoming not just more controversial but also more personally risky. After her divorce, Shamir used to joke that to choose a good photo for her dating profile, she need only ask the Israeli security forces, as they surely had scores of images of her to choose from. But now, for the first time, she felt cautious. She was reserved on social media. Following Oct. 7, she said, two Israeli friends of hers lost their jobs because of social media posts that their employers thought implied the attacks were justified. Another Israeli friend of hers, a teacher who posted statements

over the years that sympathized with Palestinians who resorted to violence, was arrested on suspicion of treason; his case is pending. Shamir wondered if her phone was being tapped.



“They are not seeing what you are seeing on Israeli TV, and you are not seeing what they are seeing,” Tamar Shamir told a group of Israeli young people about their Palestinian friends. Yoss Stybel

Her reconciliation work was also changing — it had never been more emotionally challenging. In meetings, she felt that some of the Palestinians were too credulous of their own media sources, refusing to question them; they had a certainty about their facts that could be, to her, deeply frustrating. Abu Jafar felt the same about the Israelis — that they had been brainwashed from a young age to revere the military, with that mind-set reinforced by their service in the I.D.F. Forum staff members had a charged WhatsApp exchange after an Israeli implied that Hamas sometimes used children as human shields in Gaza, which, to many Israelis, was an incontrovertible fact, but to most Palestinians was propaganda the I.D.F. relied on to justify civilian deaths. In late November, after Hamas started releasing Israeli hostages, the conversations reached a new pitch as the group debated how the hostages had been treated. “Everyone went crazy on everyone,” Quomsieh, the forum’s Palestinian co-director, told me.

Some Palestinian staff members, including Abu Jafar, were startled by a side of their co-workers they hadn’t seen before. Even someone like Shamir, who risked much for the Palestinian cause in the past, was clearly distraught over the loss of Israeli life in a way that seemed to them unmatched by pain she expressed about the attacks in Gaza, the thousands of civilians who were dying. In their meetings, something as small as the

choice of a particular word had the potential to trigger deep resentments and feelings of alienation. In order to prevent conversations from turning contentious, members of the staff, for example, had always agreed to avoid the word “terrorist” in favor of “militant.” Abu Jafar and other Palestinians on staff, however, sometimes referred to the Israeli bombing campaign in Gaza as a genocide. As far left as she was, Shamir balked at the use of the term. “This is a difficult word for me,” Shamir says. The bombing of Gaza is a disaster, she told me, “but it’s not genocide. Genocide is when you design a plan to destroy everybody.”

I asked Abu Jafar how his Israeli colleagues in the forum responded when he used that word. “They say nothing,” he responded. “They know it is genocide.” Rahamim, the group’s Israeli co-director, agreed that the language of genocide was generally left uncontested, but not for the reason Abu Jafar assumed. Sometimes simply listening, rather than reacting, was the only way to keep conversations going. “We have gone through hell the last two months,” Rahamim said, in mid-November. “We pay a price to be here. You have to bear something from your peers, your partners, that you don’t have to do in any other organization.” But the group remained intact, he said. Much of the forum’s project was about helping Israelis and Palestinians understand that they would never entirely agree on the facts; sometimes the most they could do was simply understand what the other side considered the facts to be. “We try to limit the scope of the conversation,” Rahamim said. “We’re not trying to blame each other. We don’t do that.”

On Nov. 19, Shamir and Abu Jafar had a conversation unlike any other they had had, one that forced them to confront the chasm that divided them. The conversation started out on safe territory — they were talking about their feelings. Shamir had just watched some interviews with family members of kidnapped Israelis and was feeling gutted. She told Abu Jafar that she really, really hated Hamas, hated all fanatics. He asked her if she believed everything she’d been told about the extent of the atrocities on Oct. 7 — and Shamir said that she did. The conversation turned to the subject of rape. Shamir said she believed that Hamas fighters had raped Israeli women; she had heard an eyewitness account and analysis on the news that were persuasive to her. Abu Jafar asked if she could send him video evidence.

Oh, God, she thought. *I don’t want to look at videos. But OK, let me find videos.* Without watching them herself, she sent him various videos that her ex-husband had sent her. They depicted young Israelis at gunpoint, bloodied and gravely injured, being piled into the back of a truck; women, children and old people being kidnapped; a 19-year-old being taken out of a jeep packed with young men, the back of her sweatpants dark with what looked like blood. “No raping videos,” Abu Jafar wrote back to Shamir. He agreed, when she asked, that the videos were horrible — but he was trying to make a point about propaganda. He and Shamir both believed that the I.D.F. often lied — why

was she trusting them this time? How could she be offended by his asking for evidence?

What Shamir took away from the exchange was a feeling of despair, as if a knife had torn some protective membrane that had previously allowed her optimism to remain intact. Now the air was leaking out; the buoyancy of hope was collapsing. She was reeling from the callousness she perceived in Abu Jafar's response to the videos. Forensic evidence of rape was hard to come by, because the recovery of dead bodies was so chaotic; as for firsthand accounts, those who could provide them might not have survived. The two of them had irreconcilable standards of proof. "For the first time, I am pessimistic," she told me that day. "It really breaks my heart." She could not find in herself, at that moment, the understanding she had urged on the young people she was asking to open their hearts to their Palestinian friends. "The majority of Israelis, and the majority of Palestinians, aren't acknowledging each others' pain," she told me. "I wanted to do a binational meeting, but I know if someone — and most of them — won't acknowledge the pain of what happened on the 7th, it will explode. I don't know what's going to happen. How we are going to manage."

In turn, it pained Abu Jafar to grasp how little Shamir still understood about his experience. "Don't watch the videos" from Oct. 7, she had told him. "They will traumatize you." It was intended as a protective gesture, but he worked in a hospital in the West Bank; didn't she realize he saw death and disfigurement every day, too often because of violence from the Israeli military?

As hopeless as it felt some days, the goal was still, eventually, to bring the young people from both regions together for a careful conversation. There were even signs that some of them might be prepared to have one. One young Israeli woman who had expressed fury toward the Palestinian young ambassadors had recently traveled to Hiroshima, and she reached out to Shamir after visiting the city's peace memorial, which gave her a new perspective. "Even from a crazy disaster like an atomic bomb, people recover," she said in a video message, "and the world keeps turning, and things settle down with time."

Shamir and Abu Jafar decided they would have the groups of Israeli and Palestinian summer-camp kids work together to write letters addressing the students on the other side of the war. Abu Jafar and Shamir sent them a list of questions they would have to think about. What do you want to hear from them? What are you afraid and not willing to say to them? What do you expect to hear from them? And what do you fear you will hear?

On Nov. 26, Shamir checked in with Abu Jafar about how the planning was going for the letter that the Palestinian kids would write. "I'm working on it," he responded. He attached two emojis, one of a letter, one of a letter with a heart on it.

Before Oct. 7, Abu Jafar was sometimes able to travel to Israel, and he and Shamir would occasionally meet at a cafe, talking honestly and openly, at length, about how they perceived the conflict, sometimes agreeing, sometimes disagreeing. Now, their exchanges were generally more superficial — Abu Jafar was busy, but they also seemed to sense the limits of what they could safely discuss with each other. “If I said the truth,” he says — *his* truth — “it would be hard for her. I will take the long road. She will heal with time.”

The day of their harsh exchange about allegations of rape, Shamir says, “I swallowed my ego.” She believed that someday in the future, who knew when, the two of them would meet up again and spend hours over coffee. But that day, she did not try to make him see how she felt; it was not the right time, she understood, and she did not have the heart to carry the conversation further anyway. When she finally wrote him back later that day, it was about scheduling and logistics. They had work to do, and they would keep doing it.

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