

# “Please be on the side of humanity”

The fighting in Gaza is thank goodness over. There can be no doubt that it has been a human tragedy. Both sides have been sharply criticised for their conduct; Hamas for its prolonged, persistent and indiscriminate rocket attacks on civilians in southern Israel, in line with its charter which seeks the annihilation of the Jewish state; Israel for the ferocity of its response, for some of the weaponry it has used and for the large number of civilian casualties and suffering which it has caused. Meanwhile for the wounded and bereaved of both sides the pain continues. I pray for a cessation of calls for the destruction of Israel, an end to the misery of the people of Gaza, a lifting of the blockade and the opening of talks. In the meantime, the ordinary people of Gaza are bearing much of the worst of the suffering. They, like everyone else in the region, need hope, opportunities, a vision that looks beyond the despair of yesterday and today, and the sense that it will be possible to get on with ordinary human life.

What finally brought the fighting to an end? On the political plane, the decision by Israel to stop operations and the brokering of a ceasefire has been linked with the incoming of the Obama administration. No doubt there were many urgent diplomatic moves behind the scenes. But it has also been suggested that the tragedy of Dr Ezzeldeen Abu al-Aish had an enormous impact in Israel. Three of his daughters were killed when, in a terrible error for which Israel subsequently apologised, their home was shelled. Dr al-Aish speaks fluent Hebrew and practises as a doctor both in Gaza and in Israel. His appeals for help and the news of his tragedy reached the Israeli, and the international, media. I heard him interviewed on the radio; I listened with a pained and astounded heart to his words of humanity and understanding: “I have two options – the path of darkness or the path of light. The path of darkness is like choosing all the complications with diseases and depression, but the path of light is to focus on the future and my children. This strengthened my conviction to continue on the same path and not give up.” (From a report by

Amos Harel in Haaretz). Dr al-Aish also expressed his appreciation for the investigation of the incident, and spoke of how “the love that I’ve received, from people I knew and people I didn’t know, gave me strength”.

I have many friends in Israel, and Palestine, deeply involved in endeavours to work for peace and justice throughout the region. Several have lost children or close family members in the violence. One couple, whose daughter was killed by a suicide bomber in Tel Aviv on her fifteenth birthday, gave me Dr Ezzeldeen Abu al-Aish’s phone number. “Try his mobile”, they said. I called, with great trepidation! We have spoken several times since. “We must remember our common humanity”, he

said: I can think of few moments in my life so morally grounded and so utterly humbling as listening to these words. They teach us that the desperate situation in the region also brings urgent, if often tragic, opportunities for contact between Israelis and Palestinians, and between Jews and Muslims worldwide.

One of the organisations with the most powerful message is the Parents Circle - Families Forum. This remarkable group of people is composed of Israeli and Palestinian bereaved families, mainly parents who have lost a child. They have joined together to support each other

and to teach their respective communities that there can be no future in violence, only in talking, creating peace and seeking a political solution. Their message is as simple as it is powerful; if they, who have paid the ultimate price, can speak with one another, then how dare the politicians fail to do so. They are active in education and the media in the region and are spreading their message throughout the world. At a recent event, Ali Abu Awwad, who lost his brother, and Robi Damelin, who lost her son, said together: “Please, don’t be just on the side of the Palestinians. Please don’t only take the side of the Israelis. Please be on the side of humanity.” Sadly, the group has recently been joined by Dr al-Aish. We must pray that this remarkable and courageous organisation should grow no larger, but that its voice should be heard, and hearkened to, by more and more people.

It is important that we realise that it is not the case that there is nothing whatsoever we can do. We are not simply powerless bystanders from afar. We have a responsibility to support such essential work. Extraordinarily and in spite of everything there are still many groups working for understanding, dialogue, peace and justice.

Here in Britain too, we must not imagine that there is nothing we can do. We need to ensure that tensions in the Middle East do not determine the course of Jewish Muslim relations in this country. Even during the fighting there were

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courageous public initiatives by leaders on both sides calling for consideration of the sensitivities of the other. We must bring imams and rabbis, as well as organisational leaders together to reduce tensions, dispel ignorance and struggle against anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

But this alone is not sufficient. It seems to me that we can and should go further. There is often a level of fear, and anger, on both sides. We tend to view each other through the lens of our different narratives. We may read not only the conflict in the Middle East, but much else in world history, rather differently. But we can also find common ground in our core religious and ethical values. The key issue on which we should stand together is that of human dignity. Human dignity is indivisible. This is taught in the sacred texts of both our faiths and the importance of this basic truth is the most essential lesson of the horrors of the Holocaust and the terrors of Srebrenica. The dignity of all human life, whether in Gaza or in Israel or anywhere else on the face of the earth, is a basic principle which we can and must affirm together, with an agenda and activities which cross the boundaries of nationality and religion. The task is urgent and we must have the courage to undertake it.

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Please see: [www.theparentscircle.com](http://www.theparentscircle.com) and [www.familiesforum.co.uk](http://www.familiesforum.co.uk) for further information on the Bereaved Families Forum

From:  
*The Diameter of the Bomb*  
By: Yehuda Amichai

*The diameter of the bomb was thirty centimetres  
and the diameter of its effective range about seven meters,  
with four dead and eleven wounded.  
And around these, in a larger circle of pain and time, two hospitals are scattered  
and one graveyard. But the young woman who was buried in the city she came from, at a distance of more than a hundred kilometres,  
enlarges the circle considerably,  
and the solitary man mourning her death at the distant shores of a country far across the sea  
includes the entire world in the circle.  
And I won't even mention the crying of orphans  
that reaches up to the throne of God and beyond...*

*Translated by Chana Bloch*

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Cited: [www.familiesforum.co.uk](http://www.familiesforum.co.uk)*