

Interview with Khaled Abu Awwad and Roni Hirshenson*

Khaled Abu Awwad is the General Manager of the Israeli-Palestinian Bereaved Families Forum. Roni Hirshenson is the Forum's president and one of its founders. Established in 1995 with an Israeli office in Tel Aviv and a Palestinian office in A-Ram (north of Jerusalem), the Bereaved Families Forum is a grassroots organization of Palestinian and Israeli families who have lost family members to the violence in the region. These families have united in a joint mission to prevent further bereavement by working for peace and reconciliation. The Forum has received several international awards in recognition of its work, including the Eisenhower Medallion, the Three Cultures Award, the Solidar Silver Rose Award and the Common Ground Award. More information about the Forum is available at www.theparentscircle.com.

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Can you tell us about your loss?

Khaled Abu Awwad (K.A.A.): The immediate tragedy that brought me to the Forum took place on 16 November 2000. My brother Youseff was killed by the Israeli military. A soldier shot him in the head and he died on the spot. The incident occurred in the village of Beit Omar where Youseff had been living with my family and where I continue to live with my family to this day.

On that day, Youseff had been driving his car in the village. A group of six or seven soldiers had entered the village, as part of the military policy at that time [*the beginning of the Al-Aqsa intifada – O.S.*], to demonstrate to the villagers who was boss. They erected a checkpoint in the village, stopped all the cars and inspected them. The village youth greeted the soldiers with stones. It was their way

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of sending a message to the soldiers that they were not welcome guests in the village.

The first car that was stopped at the checkpoint was Youssef's. His car was caught in the middle between the stone throwers on one side and the soldiers on the other. At one point Youssef exited the car and appealed to the stone throwers, 'Stop, can't you see that we're caught here in the middle?' In effect Youssef was asking this of his neighbours, of the children of the village. All the stone throwers knew who he was – in the village everyone knows each other. His words had an effect. The youth understood what Youssef had said and what he had requested and they desisted.

One of the soldiers was apparently insulted by the ease with which Youssef had ended the stone throwing, and he began to throw stones at Youssef's car. Youssef again exited the car and said to the soldier, 'You asked me to pull over and I pulled over. I asked the boys to stop throwing stones at you. Why are you throwing stones at me?' This set off a verbal fight between the soldier and Youssef, with Youssef asking the soldier to settle down. Ultimately the soldier said to Youssef, 'I'll kill you.' The soldier put the weapon to Youssef's head and pulled the trigger, and Youssef fell and died on the spot. Immediately following the gunshot a riot broke out in the village – everyone ran in the direction of Youssef. It was a very difficult sight. Everyone understood that there was a possibility that Youssef had been killed. The commanding officer started to shout at the soldier, 'What have you done to me? What have you done to me?' The military forces hastily dismantled the checkpoint and immediately departed the village. The residents took Youssef and began to drive in the direction of Al Ahli hospital in Hebron, where he was pronounced dead.

I came to the hospital. I was on my way back from work – Youssef was supposed to have picked me up on the way to take me home. Youssef was five years younger than me. He was 31 years old when he was killed. He had two small children, a daughter and a son.

I heard that this was one of five fatal incidents that the military wanted to investigate. We learned that the army did conduct an inquiry which revealed the identity of the soldier who killed Youssef, but no-one was made to stand trial. This is despite the fact that the soldiers and the officer and obviously many residents of the village witnessed the killing. Those who were present told me that the officer had taken the weapon away from the soldier immediately following the incident, so the officer certainly knew what the soldier had done. The army asked us to prove that the soldier had committed a criminal act, but they refused to investigate and to seek witnesses. I brought Youssef's body to the coroner and he determined that the distance between the rifle and Youssef's head had been less than one metre.

Another brother, Sa'ed, was shot on 26 February 2002. He was a young boy, fourteen-and-a-half years old. He had returned home from school and gone outside to play with a friend in the village, near his home. The friend owned a convenience store across from my mother's house. A sniper bullet was shot from the military tower on Road 60, which is about 600 metres from the home, and hit Sa'ed in the head. Sa'ed died on 6 March 2002 in Al-Mukassad hospital in

Jerusalem, after having been on a ventilator for 10 days. He had been right at the entrance to the convenience store when he was shot. The spot where the bullet hit the entryway of the convenience store is still visible today.

Roni Hirshenson (R.H.): On 22 January 1995, a suicide bomber exploded near a group of soldiers at Beit Lid junction. Eight soldiers were killed in the explosion and several others were injured. My son, Amir, who had been dispatched to patrol the junction, was a paratrooper – a new recruit who had been serving in the army for three months. Amir was rushing to help his friends when the second suicide bomber struck, detonating himself and killing Amir. In total, twenty-one soldiers and one civilian were killed.

Regrettably, this was not the only tragedy. The first soldier to fall in the Gaza strip at the beginning of the second *intifada* was David Biri. David was the best friend of my younger son, Elad, who was also a soldier at the time, serving in Galey Tzahal [*army radio*]. Three weeks later Elad put an end to his life. He left a letter in which he wrote that he couldn't bear the sorrow and pain of losing his brother and losing his best friend, who was also like a brother to him.

How did you come to join the Forum?

K.A.A.: It all began at a meeting with people from the Forum in Beit Omar in July 2002. At the meeting I discovered many others who were like me. Before the encounter, owing to the tragedies that had befallen me, I had been strongly opposed to meetings with Israelis. I felt very bad after the two incidents. I understood that the situation was not improving. I didn't want to see anyone from the other side. The encounter with members of the Forum enabled me to meet other victims of the occupation. Everyone told their stories and I felt an immediate connection with them. I felt that I was part of them. I felt that these people had experienced painful emotions that were similar to mine. I spoke about my anger and pain for the first time, and I spoke about how the occupation and the violence must end.

I joined the Forum in 2002 and I started to become active. But the occupation and my family's tragedies did not end as a consequence of my involvement in activities promoting peace between the peoples. In 2004, while I was at a lecture by the Forum together with an Israeli friend, I received a telephone call – in the course of a lecture to Israeli youth – that my son, Mo'ayed, had been seriously injured. He had participated in a demonstration on the day of Arafat's funeral. Earlier that day there had been a clear instruction to the Israeli military not to enter the Palestinian cities and villages. The demonstration was inside the village. Despite this instruction two border patrol jeeps entered the village and started shooting at the youth. One of the youths was killed and my son Mo'ayed was seriously injured. Mo'ayed was 16 years old. He was treated at Hadassah Ein Karem hospital for over two months. Afterwards he was transferred to the Beit Jala rehabilitation centre, where he stayed for another six months. Unfortunately, he continues to be seriously handicapped to this day and it appears that his injury will not heal. The

lawyers I spoke to requested a large sum of money to take on the case, so I didn't file a lawsuit. It was the same with the deaths of my brothers Youssef and Sa'ed.

R. H.: A few months after Amir died I was walking down the street and saw an advertisement showing photographs of all the Israeli casualties since the beginning of the Oslo peace process. It was published by the extreme right, which was then called the *Match Ma'amatz*. Beneath the photographs of my son and others they had written, 'This is a consequence of the Oslo Accords and of the activities of a regime of blood.' At that moment I understood that I must stand up and do something. You can't go and take the memory of my son in order to ram the peace process.

Itzhak Frankenthal, who lost his son Arik in the Hamas attack in July 1994, asked me to join a group of bereaved parents who supported the Oslo process. During this time, there were attacks on Itzhak Rabin, primarily by bereaved families, calling on him not to conduct negotiations with the enemy. They even came to the Nobel Peace Prize Award Ceremony to demonstrate against the Oslo process, and in effect they appropriated national bereavement to themselves. Initially, when Frankenthal turned to me, we organized twenty-four bereaved families. Very quickly, it expanded to 120. Everywhere we voiced our position in Israel, we were told that we wouldn't find others like us on the Palestinian side, people who had lost their loved ones and who didn't want revenge but rather were looking for a path to dialogue and reconciliation.

From there, through connections we made with Hisham Abdel-Razeq, the Minister for Prisoners' Affairs in the Palestinian Authority, we reached bereaved Palestinian families in Gaza. Very quickly, we saw that we shared with them the same pain and the same desire to end the conflict. Revenge was not on the agenda in any form – not for us and not for them.

What were your thoughts when you first joined the Forum?

K.A.A.: At the initial meeting with Israeli members of the Forum I felt for the first time that I and the Israeli shared the same fate. I felt that all the members of the Forum understood me and understood my motivations and my pain.

R. H.: When the Forum was founded I had the sense that there was a lot to say and a lot to do. You want the whole world to hear you, you want everyone to understand that this battle is futile, and you ask your friends in the Forum what to do. You search for something to do with the pain that wants to break out and cry, 'Enough!' You ask how to make others understand that all of this is futile, that this violent struggle leads nowhere.

The first meeting with people from the Forum signified for me an opening to hope – if not only I think this way, but many others do too, then this message can be passed onward. The message and principles can be disseminated.

How did you initially respond to your loss?

K.A.A.: During the years of the first *intifada* I took part in the struggle, but in the course of the Oslo process I changed and I started to work with Israelis.

I befriended many of them and I felt that they were part of my family and that I was part of their family. When the first tragedy struck, essentially I put all Israelis in the same box. The occupation and the expulsions that befell us, the violations of our rights and the tragedies of Youssef and later of Sa'ed – all these cause me a great deal of anger toward Israelis. After the death of Youssef, many Israeli friends wanted to share my loss. They tried to contact me and talk. I avoided them – I couldn't speak to them.

R.H.: In effect, immediately when Amir fell, I understood that he wasn't killed because of terror but because of a lack of peace. I felt a need and a desire to do everything to end the conflict between us and the Palestinians so that no-one else would experience the pain of bereavement.

My initial response was a desire to prevent others from suffering as I was suffering. I also wanted to seek a way to hasten the end of this conflict. I'm surprised I didn't feel angry – maybe it's a little unpleasant to say this. I understood that the reason a tragedy like this could occur was the existence of the conflict itself. As long as the conflict continues, extremists will carry out unconscionable acts and kill each other – we them and they us. As long as the conflict bleeds, people will be wounded here. I thought, 'Now it has reached me.'

How did your thoughts and emotions develop with time?

K.A.A.: Today I see things differently. The solution will never be achieved through force. A solution through force will bring about more tragedies and will cause more families to experience indescribable personal pain. Tragedy can befall anyone – anyone, Israeli or Palestinian, can become a victim of the occupation. I might have become one of those who adopt violent means, but despite my pain and anger, I chose another path. Not everyone has that strength. Not everyone can even withstand being abused by a soldier at a checkpoint. The thing that characterizes the members of the Forum is that we took the pain inside every one of us and used it to achieve a different goal: to prevent further bereavement. We are prepared to open a new page. Conversely, those who choose revenge are adding fuel to the fire.

R.H.: My suffering caused me to look empathically upon the suffering of the other. Now I look more deeply. I feel more open to listening to the suffering of another. This is true for any suffering, not only for the suffering of Palestinians, but for human suffering in general. What is happening in Darfur speaks to me more because I know what suffering is. The abduction of Gilad Shalit keeps me from sleeping at night, his family's suffering drives me mad.

What role do you think the families of victims play in the conflict? Are these roles different in either society?

K.A.A.: Both societies find it difficult to face up to their bereaved families. No one can say to a bereaved family, 'You don't care about us.' When I became active in the Forum I felt that our opinion was respected. Our terrible tragedies transformed us into people of truth. You cannot be a political person when you are talking

about your brother who was killed. You cannot be political when you talk about the pain you and your family experienced.

The Palestinian people treat families of the *shahids* ('fallen soldiers') in a very respectful way, and likewise in Israeli society. The difference, if one exists, is that in Palestinian society there are many bereaved families. This is the central difference that I sense exists between the two societies. Nonetheless, I wouldn't say that we are not respected as a family of a *shahid* in Palestinian society – even though there are many like us.

R.H.: The role is clear, to make an emotional breakthrough. The co-operation between Israeli and Palestinian bereaved families shows the two societies that people who paid the greatest price in the conflict – the loss of a family member – have hope. The joint action shows that there is a future and that there is hope for ending the conflict because if those who paid the highest possible price can work together, there is no reason why people who have not been hurt cannot do the same, much less the politicians.

There are more similarities between the two societies than differences. In both societies there is great respect for those who have been hurt by the conflict and have paid the price, both here and there – parents of a *shahid* over there are like bereaved parents in Israeli society.

What do you think is the role of victims themselves in your society? Has this changed over the years? Do you think that your society is preoccupied with victimhood, trauma and loss?

K.A.A.: Society can receive meaningful support from us. An important part of the conflict is the prisoners and the victims of the conflict. Sometimes there is also misuse of bereavement. In Israeli society, as a democratic society, the voices of bereaved families who oppose the continuation of the peace process have greater resonance. I don't know Palestinian families of *shahids* whose bereavement is used in this way.

R.H.: Israeli society views fallen soldiers as its protectors – they fell for the sake of the security of the state. The victims are seen as a price that must be paid for security.

The halo surrounding bereaved families is not what it used to be. Today there is a growing sense that the deaths are senseless, especially following the first Lebanon war. People understood that staying there for 19 years was pointless. In retrospect, the withdrawal from Lebanon caused many to feel that the victimization had been in vain. Even though the families themselves find it difficult to admit this, this is the sense in the society.

There is fatigue in Israeli society of the chronic ritual of war followed by a period of quiet, a peak in violence followed by a decline, a ritual that continues without end.

It is difficult for me to say this, but I feel that I am a victim of obliviousness and stupidity. People reach the conclusion to go to war on the basis of faulty data.

Perceptions of the conflict are inaccurate. Decision-makers don't see things accurately, don't read the facts on the ground, don't delve into the issues. They harbour prejudices and make decisions accordingly, without considering facts. Those who are positioned to collect data – security personnel, the military – have personal interests. The data are not objective, and then we go to war.

Do you think victimhood has been politicized in Palestinian or Israeli society? Is this increasing?

K.A.A.: There are Palestinian leaders who say that because of the families who lost their loved ones, compromises cannot be made. I don't understand how statements like this can benefit either society.

R.H.: You might think that in a society where people are victims of bereavement, the natural and correct thing to do, for them, is to seek revenge. This is partly true, but not entirely. People do not change their opinions due to trauma. Behaviour does become more extreme, but a person who is humane by nature in his opinions and principles will not necessarily choose violence as a course of action consequent to his injury. As opinions in society are diverse, they are similarly diverse among those who are affected by bereavement. But people are more willing to listen to a member of a bereaved family.

To some degree, exploitation of victimhood exists in both societies. Not releasing prisoners, for example. Not releasing prisoners reinforces hatred.

Do you think there is a competition between the two societies over who is the ultimate victim of the conflict?

K.A.A.: There has always been and always will be competition between the two societies on the matter of victimhood. Each one is of the opinion that his pain is the greater. Maybe at one time things appeared different to me, but today I understand that this competition is an integral part of human nature. This competition will not end unless and until the conflict ends. In most of the activities that we as a Forum conduct in civil society, we come upon such claims as, 'We suffer more.' This is a significant problem, inasmuch as both societies try to prove that they are the victim of the conflict.

R.H.: I agree that such a competition exists between the two societies, but in the work of the Forum we understand that there is no point in creating such a competition. Each society has its pain. I don't think that those who lost one child hurt less than those who lost two children. At the same time, it is clear, objectively, that Palestinian society suffers more on a daily basis. The situation of a person who is not only bereaved but also humiliated at a checkpoint is objectively worse, even though the pain of bereavement is the same.

In Israel, victimhood is periodically used – 'If we release prisoners, how will we look the bereaved families in the eyes?'

Do you think you are perceived as a patriot in your own society?

K.A.A.: I feel that I am respected more because of the history of my family, as a family active against the occupation in the 1970s and '80s. In these decades we became a family of *shahids*. These things together caused Palestinian society to grant my family respect on account of all that we suffered, of our opposition to the occupation and the very dear price that we have paid. Our opinion is perceived as an important opinion in Palestinian society.

R.H.: I think 'patriot' is too big a word. I might be perceived as a person to whom society is important, a person to whom the existence and welfare of the community is important. 'Patriot', in the sense of preserving nationalism – that's not something I have felt.

I think the Forum and my activities make me seem like a strange bird in Israeli society, but people are always willing to listen to me.

What makes you different from other families of victims in your society?

K.A.A.: My family represents a large segment of the families of *shahids* in Palestinian society whose views are not remote from ours. There are people whose opinions are different. There are families who have lost their loved ones whose political views are less firm.

R.H.: I think the more people are involved with themselves, with their own pain and with the narrow scope of their own family, their own temple, the narrower and the more myopic their outlook. This type of outlook is less humane and doesn't allow one to see beyond one's personal pain. People like that can't see the pain of those who are outside their society. They may be local patriots, but not humane people.

Recognizing universal human values, that a human being is a human being: this is the basis of all the principles I lived by, before and during the bereavement and today. The value of human rights, of humaneness regardless of race, religion, or sex, has always guided me.

The Palestinian who killed my son committed suicide. Am I supposed to hate all of Islam because the person who killed my son was Palestinian? Maybe I should hate only the residents of Gaza because the bomber came from Gaza?

What are your thoughts on the use of suffering as a justification for violence? On revenge?

K.A.A.: The first emotion that I felt after Youseff was killed was the desire for revenge. When I returned the next day, I sought the soldier who killed my brother. I started to ask everyone in the village what he looked like. There are also people who come to you and ask to be your right-hand man, to help you take revenge. Today I view revenge as an expression of internal anger. Today I understand that there is a need to behave according to one's wits and not to let ourselves be directed

by anger. Revenge is in essence an invitation to join the conflict's cycle of blood. Revenge will only inflict suffering on more families.

R.H.: Revenge will not bring back my son. Revenge will only intensify the cycle of violence, will accelerate it. Those who take revenge suffer no less than the victim. I have never seen someone take revenge and benefit from it. I don't think that revenge can have a positive influence – not on the victim and not on the avenger.

Can you explain how you have worked to achieve the Forum's ambitious goals of peace and reconciliation?

K.A.A.: The Forum tries to work towards its goals in two ways. First, there is the daily work of members of the Forum who meet with groups in Israeli and Palestinian society to tell their personal stories. The members of the Forum embody a model for proceeding in a different way – not choosing anger but trying to end the conflict. We enlist everyone we meet for the purpose of reconciliation and resolution of the conflict.

In addition, I feel that we assume importance when issues relating to the conflict arise in public discourse, such as our activities for the release of Palestinian prisoners and for the release of Gilad Shalit. We also acted against the war in Gaza in like manner. Unfortunately, some of us – Israeli members – were arrested by the police in Israel on account of these activities.

R.H.: Unmediated encounters between Israelis and Palestinians – our aim is to humanize the conflict. The violent struggle has caused both societies to move further apart from one another, and then an entire generation in Israel grows up never even speaking to Palestinians. All knowledge is received through the media, which by definition means ideas that are bad – a Palestinian is someone who always wears a *kaffiyeh* and an explosive belt. There are people behind the stigma.

The Forum conducts encounters between groups in the country and overseas. Ordinarily, two members of the Forum are present at the encounters, one Israeli and one Palestinian. The encounters are usually very moving to those present. The very existence of the encounter plants hope in their hearts that there is someone to talk to, that human beings are human beings, on the Israeli side and on the Palestinian side. Reconciliation seems possible after such encounters.

We produced a television series, a drama, *Good Intentions*, which was broadcast on the most popular station on Israeli television. Given that at its height the series drew a 13.5% rating, I can estimate that 600,000 or even 700,000 people watched the series. The series included a clear statement about the futility of the violent struggle. Today we are producing a 90-minute movie based on the series, and we have also produced a 45-minute movie on the making of the series. We screen it at conferences and at the Forum's events.

A large project that we are currently planning is to bring Palestinian families to Yad Vashem. We brought 70 Palestinians and 70 Israelis there. Afterwards they visited a Palestinian village that was wiped out in 1948. Becoming familiar with the narrative of the other is a fundamental precondition for

reconciliation. One need not agree, but it is important to be familiar with the facts and with the emotions that people feel regarding the narrative. We want to broaden this project for others in Israeli and Palestinian society. Bereaved families will accompany and organize such groups.

The Israeli and Palestinian societies do not know each other's narrative. There could be activities which will be aimed to overcome this problem. For example, Holocaust survivors can assist in explaining to Palestinians that they arrived in Israel not to expel them but because of what had happened to them in Europe. Palestinians can show Israelis where they lived, where the family's fig tree was planted, and explain that today they live as refugees in a refugee camp. Acknowledging the suffering of the other national group stimulates the desire to be lenient with the other national group. This is a good way to reach compromise and reconciliation. No one has a monopoly on suffering – both nations are sharing the same land and must compromise on their dreams.

How is the Forum viewed by members of your society? Why is this so, in your opinion?

K.A.A.: The Forum is a well-known organization in Palestinian society. Many view the Forum with respect but oppose its positions. The daily suffering incurred by Palestinians seriously damages their capacity to sustain hope. The responses we hear are, 'How can you go with the families of the soldiers?' For Palestinians, Israeli soldiers are the ones who take away our freedom. This is the source of all our suffering and anger. Many do not understand how we can make any comparison between the victim and the killer. Despite this, we know that the human connection conveyed by the Forum succeeds in overcoming all these feelings. The Forum introduces Palestinian society to the mothers and fathers and families of the soldiers and this is the secret of our strength.

R.H.: The Forum is very well known among those who work for peace but not necessarily in Israeli society at large. We are not a mass movement. Our projects are well known, but they are not always attributed to us, for example the television series *Good Intentions*.

How do you cope with the risk of re-traumatization, given your involvement in the Forum?

K.A.A.: Today I try not to recount the stories of the tragedies that my family experienced. The stories bring me back to very difficult places. These feelings cannot be expressed in words. I continue to appear before Israeli and Palestinian audiences, but I try to do this only when there is no other option.

R.H.: It is very difficult to recount the story and the losses again and again, but I feel that it is an obligation that I must carry out. It is also in effect a kind of duty to the memory of my children. The only way I can believe that their sacrifice was not in vain is if I carry out an act to foreshorten this conflict.

What are the Forum's sources of strength?

K.A.A.: The Forum represents one of the most important elements in the conflict – the victims. The conflict is about territory but it also stems from the high price exacted to this day from the many victims killed in the course of the conflict.

R.H.: To a certain extent, there is pluralism and openness in Israeli society and the society is able to listen to different views. Whenever something happens, we are called to be interviewed and to speak. For example, there is an exhibit now at the Dvir Gallery entitled *It Won't Stop Until We Talk*. The gallery owners adopted this phrase – one of the mottos that the Forum originated and circulates – as their statement that the purpose [of the exhibit] is to contribute to the cessation of the conflict. I will be interviewed soon on Israeli television and will discuss this.

What is the unique value of the Forum compared with other peace organizations? Can the Forum's activities help to transform the conflict?

K.A.A.: Another important part of the strength of the Forum stems from the fact that we are a joint organization. In Arabic there is an adage: you cannot clap with one hand. There is a need for joint action by both sides, and the Forum is such an organization. Everything in our Forum is done jointly. Moreover, the Forum does not choose its members – fate chooses our members on behalf of the Forum. Therefore we feel that we are of the people. New members join all the time, though not many. We do not actively recruit members, but to our sorrow, the organization is growing. To the best of my knowledge there are about 700 Palestinian and Israeli members listed today.

R.H.: We are unique as an organization in that we are bi-national, Israeli and Palestinian. Most peace organizations in Israel are organizations that operate on behalf of Palestinians. We have a joint bank account, joint management in which all decisions are made by both sides. This is a true partnership – a single non-profit in which both Palestinians and Israelis are members. We implement what should be happening between the two states: full co-operation.

There is agreement to listen to the victims of the conflict and to try to empathize with their views as well as their pain. In other organizations, there is maybe less listening. The Forum does not provide solutions to the conflict, but we provide support to every representative body of the two sides in order to reach agreement. We support the fact of the need to reach agreement.

What have been the Forum's most successful projects? Why were they successful?

K.A.A.: The lectures that we provide are, in my opinion, a most successful activity. Another successful project has been house visits that we arranged in Israeli and Palestinian society. Another successful project, 'Hello Shalom,' was a phone line that connected hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and Israelis, and allowed

them to speak to one another. Today I feel that the peace emissaries project, in which Israeli and Palestinian students meet one another, is a success.

R.H.: The first projects we conducted were to acquaint the public with the Forum – for example, a tent in Rabin Square [*central Tel Aviv*], as well as a display of coffins [*on which Israeli and Palestinian flags were draped to symbolize the victims of the conflict. This was also displayed in New York outside the United Nations building – O.S.*]

Afterwards we conducted a great many lectures in schools. Today we are active in a new area, advancing the creativity of emissaries of reconciliation. The emissaries are students from Jenin and Hebron who meet with students from Sapir College. The students in essence decide what to do in the encounters between them. This project began when we lectured to students, and stems from the enthusiasm of the students and their desire to carry out activities on behalf of the ideas of the Forum. Thus the idea of creating a framework for ongoing activity came about.

The series *Good Intentions* was also very significant for the Forum.

Have there been any failures?

K.A.A.: The attempt to preserve the lack of politicization of the Forum is sometimes problematic to me. In my view sometimes there is no escaping the need to take a clear stand.

R.H.: The greatest failure of the Forum is that the ideas of the Forum are ideas that cannot be marketed like a consumer product. They require Sisyphean work in the field, a lot of money and a lot of time. You make one step forward and then some war comes along and makes you feel like you've been put several steps back. It makes you frustrated. But we don't have the privilege of losing hope. There are two nations living in this country and neither one of them is going anywhere.

What are the barriers and difficulties you experience in each society regarding the Forum's work?

K.A.A.: With regard to Israeli society, one can see that the memory of the Holocaust, at least in some measure, is being used in an attempt to prove to the Palestinians that the suffering of the Jewish people has been greater than their suffering. I feel that the fear of Israelis, which originates in large part from the Holocaust, is what impels Israelis' behaviour toward Palestinians. I am aware that it is likely that few may share this point of view. In this light, the future will not be easy in my view: the state of Israel has become a prison due to the building of the Wall. The only option that remains is to erect a wall in the air, above the state of Israel.

Palestinian society, too, must understand that our reality is not that of 1948. The reality before 1948 was very different to what we know now. At that time there were not millions of Jews living among us in the same land. You cannot keep looking at things according to the relationship that existed then and demand solutions that were appropriate to the situation that existed here sixty years ago.

R.H.: Prejudices in Israeli society and the barricades of the media and politicians who obstruct the truth. People get messages from the media and from politicians – a virtual truth which then supplants the actual truth.

What is required to transform the beliefs and emotions in each society to support a stable and lasting peace?

K.A.A.: The Arab initiative, in my opinion, is a basis for peace. If it was in my power, I would advance the initiative and recruit the thousands of Israelis and Palestinians who already support it today to advance further support in Israel. I feel that a decisive majority of Palestinians supports the Arab initiative.

R.H.: Regarding the change in Israeli society, Obama must talk to us above the heads of our politicians – he should not talk to the leaders but to the people themselves. When Sadat came to Israel, the IDF Commander-in-Chief at the time, Motta Gur, said that when his plane opened the Egyptians would open fire on all who came to receive Sadat [*Israeli government and state leaders – O.S.*]. When Hussein [*King of Jordan*] came to visit the bereaved families following the bombing that was carried out by a Jordanian national, it had a deep influence on Israeli society. Arab leaders must market the Arab initiative directly to the people, not through advertising but through direct conversation with the Israeli people.

Will we see peace between Israelis and Palestinians in our lifetime?

K.A.A.: The moment we lose the hope for peace is the moment of our demise. We must not lose hope. Hope is our ship for crossing the ocean and trying to overcome these soaring waves. Therefore, losing hope is not an option for us.

R.H.: On one hand the possibility of peace is nearly here, just around the corner, and on the other hand it is a matter of generations. The agreement is all but ready, but on the other hand it is still light years away.