

## Moments in a 40-Year Journey to Peace Activism

By Aliza Becker

**1967.** With the Six-Day War, Israel changed forever for me, from a faraway land where my cousins romped in shorts and sandals, to a place everyone seemed to know about and celebrate. I was a young girl at the time, and my brother and I responded in a particularly American way to the news of the Israeli victory: We opened a lemonade stand to benefit Israel a few days after the war ended. We got a lot of praise from our proud neighbors, particularly the men. One gave us a five-dollar bill for a five-cent cup.

I was not so interested in Israel's daring military exploits, which I felt were more of a "boy" thing. But I loved looking at the photo of my great aunt and uncle holding their kibbutz-harvested grapes, and listening to my grandfather talk to a captivated audience of family members around his dining room table about draining swamps, building roads, and planting orange groves in the desert so that Jews might live in dignity.

**1977.** In college one day, I was walking past student organization tables when I saw a poster with a stark, grainy photo of corpses that immediately made me think of the Holocaust – but instead of mourning Jews, I discovered, this group was trashing Israel, in sharp contrast to the heroic stories I had grown up with. How could a student group that claimed to be fighting for justice be so confused about who was the victim? I began to tremble.

Afterwards I allowed myself to wonder if there could be a shred of truth in this leftist group's rhetoric. To learn more, I signed up for an independent study course with an Israeli graduate student. He had me read books of revisionist history that introduced me to a more critical version of Israel's story, including the occupation, but I couldn't emotionally reconcile what I was reading with what I already "knew." I did what was required to finish the course, then tried to forget.

**1987.** I was active in New Jewish Agenda, a progressive Jewish organization, but had intentionally avoided their Middle East peace-related work. When a friend asked me to help her at the first meeting of a Jewish-Palestinian dialogue group, I volunteered, not knowing that I would be drawn in for the next five years. I listened attentively to the Palestinian members, and was painfully struck by the fact that the occupation had fomented among young Palestinians a virulent hatred for Israelis and Jews, whom they saw as one in the same. I struggled with many questions. How could I feel pride as a Jew, for my people and the Zionist dream, and simultaneously acknowledge the Palestinian narrative?

I didn't know what to do with my increasing store of knowledge. It felt good to make friends with my supposed enemy, but like many, I couldn't help but wonder what would happen if we made peace and it turned out to be a trick and they wanted us gone altogether. I had all of this information at my fingertips, yet the existential battle continued to plague me.

**1997.** In an effort to better understand the lives of my extended Israeli family, I visited Israel three times in five years. I was not able to consider making peace activism a priority until I could hold in my heart a great love for my people, develop a deeper understanding of Israeli life, and build confidence in my ability to trust my thinking on a conflict whose complexity can seem overwhelming.

**2002.** I went on a tour of the West Bank as the second intifada raged. We met with Palestinians whose homes were destroyed and olive trees cut down; they pleaded with us as American Jews to do something. At the same time, my young cousin was in a tank in Gaza, doing his compulsory military service. My family was hysterical with concern about his safety, counting the days to his discharge.

Several of us who traveled that spring went on to found Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, hoping to give American Jews a place to work for peace in which we could care about both Israelis and Palestinians. More importantly, it was a place where we could be serious about taking a lead in the efforts to end the conflict. We set out to build a movement that would change US foreign policy, with a systematic long-range plan of advocacy in Washington and grassroots base-building.

**2007.** Five years into Brit Tzedek, we've made enormous progress. I wish we could end today's horror more quickly, but it is slow work winning over allies in the government and among the Jewish community, especially in the context of rapidly changing current events. Yet I know that with persistence we can do it.

From my struggle of nearly 40 years on the road to peace activism, I have learned four important lessons that I believe are critical to our success:

1. We Jews need a place to talk among ourselves, so that we can separate our thinking about the reality of the situation from the emotions that can distort our understanding.
2. We need to reclaim a vision of peace and prosperity for the people of the region, and not simply resign our hopes for present and future generations to "violence management."
3. We have to gain the confidence that we do, in fact, know enough to get involved; we can trust our thinking. There are probably more "experts" on this conflict than any other, yet it rages on.
4. Each one of us can take responsibility to make a difference in ending this conflict. It doesn't matter whose fault it is. What matters is that we decide to resolve it.

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