

The Struggle for Peace: Examining Peace Movements in Israel

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Abstract

Since the formation of the State of Israel in 1948, the Jewish nation has been plagued by wars and conflict. Recently, Israel has engaged in a series of conflicts with Lebanon, with the First Lebanon War occurring in 1982. Following three years of armed conflict, Israel pulled back into a self-proclaimed “security zone”, prolonging the occupation of Lebanon until 2000 when Prime Minister Ehud Barak made the decision to unilaterally withdraw Israeli troops back within the international borders of Israel. This paper analyzes the goals and strategy of a protest group that was founded in response to the drawn out occupation of Lebanon. The Four Mothers Movement: Leaving Lebanon in Peace was formed by mothers of deployed soldiers with the single goal of unilateral withdrawal of Israeli soldiers from Lebanon. The protest group was disbanded not long after its formation because it had achieved its goal due to the purposeful strategizing of its leaders, the immediate time frame of the Lebanon occupation, and the singular, measurable, concrete nature of its objective. This paper explores what factors allow a group to achieve its aims in a few short years as opposed to a multigenerational struggle for success. In contrast to the Four Mothers Movement, The Parents Circle-Families Forum, an organization in Israel that was also established by parents in 1995, has not yet achieved its goals of creating a framework of reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians and fostering understanding with dialogue as opposed to violence to bring about an agreement. My paper will examine why The Four Mothers Movement succeeded and raise questions as to the likelihood of the Parents Circle-Families Forum attaining the changes it seeks to enact within the Israeli and Palestinian communities.

1. Introduction

Imagine seeing a helicopter crash and not knowing whether or not your child was now counted among those who had died because of an ineffective military stalemate. Imagine seeing your child killed because of a conflict that never seems to end. Two non-governmental groups were founded in Israel in the 1990s because families decided to do what they could to prevent these atrocities from continuing to happen: The Four Mothers Movement: Leaving Lebanon in Peace and the Parents Circle-Families Forum. Both of these groups were founded by mothers and fathers who had enough of seeing children put in danger and killed, and these parents concluded that something must be done to stop bloodshed. But that is where the similarities end. The Four Mothers Movement was founded to protest the continued Israeli occupation of Lebanon. The Parents Circle is a self proclaimed “non political” organization made up of bereaved parents who lost their children in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; it seeks to set up a framework for peace and an agreement between the two sides of the conflict through reconciliation and understanding. The Four Mothers Movement was disbanded two short years after its formation because it achieved its objective, while the Parents Circle has been active now for seventeen years with no immediate attainment of their objectives in sight. What allows a movement to accomplish its goal in only a few short years as opposed to a similar group’s generational long struggle? Because the Four Mothers Movement used an effective strategy and a singular goal that had a certain time frame for culmination, the group was able to achieve its purpose within a few short years after the formation of their protest. The Parents Circle has tackled a challenge that is multigenerational; the problem is deep

seated and is at least one hundred years old, and it could be argued, goes all the way back to ancient biblical times. Therefore, the mission of the Parents Circle will take many years and perhaps even generations to enact the change they seek within their communities.

2. The Four Mothers' Movement: Leaving Lebanon in Peace

Before the Four Mothers were formed, there was the First Lebanon War. It began in 1982 on June 6, when Israeli defense force (IDF) troops entered Lebanon. Prime Minister Begin had called a special session of parliament and the attack of specific targets in Beirut and Southern Lebanon was authorized. The government had announced that its objective was to force militant Palestinian groups further northward in the hopes of better securing Israel's northern border; it was originally intended to be only a 48 hour operation and Israel's armed forces were not supposed to go deeper than 40 km into Lebanon. But the army, confident of their ability to advance without much trouble, ended up marching as far as Beirut.¹ Beirut was eventually surrounded with the help of the Christian Phalangist forces, a plan which Sharon hoped would achieve the objective of a Lebanon liberated of Palestinian armed groups, independent of Syrian control and under the authority of the Christian leaders and government led by Bashir Gemayel. It was anticipated that Israel could then sign a peace treaty with Gemayel's government which would bring about "forty years of peace", according to Prime Minister Begin.² Israel began its assault on Beirut, and the PLO forces agreed to leave, and on August 25, 1982, they began to retreat, with Yasser Arafat one of the last ones to leave what had formerly been the PLO headquarters in Beirut.³ With Gemayel elected as president, it seemed as if success and a forty years peace were close enough to touch. But Israeli hopes were shattered when Bashir Gemayel was assassinated on September 14, 1982 in Beirut.⁴ After the assassination the Israeli campaign was riddled with missteps and human rights disasters such as the massacre of the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps by an ally of Israel, the Christian Phalangist militia, while the IDF did nothing to stop them though they were in full knowledge of the militia's actions and intentions. The IDF eventually retreated southward, and the war became increasingly unpopular domestically, leading to the resignation of Begin from the post of Prime Minister in 1983. In 1985 the Israeli government voted to gradually withdraw from Lebanon with the exception of a southern security zone buffering the border of Israel and Lebanon.

2.1 The Founding of the Four Mothers Movement: Leaving Lebanon in Peace

The Four Mothers Movement was formed by Rachel Ben-Dor, Miri Sela, Ronit Nachmias, and Zahara Antavi in 1998 in response to the crash of two Israeli helicopters en route to Israel's self declared security zone in Southern Lebanon, a collision that killed all 73 soldiers aboard.⁵ All of the women had sons serving in Lebanon, and the night of the crash they all began to question the reasons that Israel continued to be embroiled in what seemed like an endless war in Lebanon. As residents of kibbutzim, or communal living centers, and villages in Northern Israel, the women had seen the endless barrage of rockets that continued to rain down upon them from the PLO and terrorist groups, even with the so called "security zone" that was being maintained in Southern Lebanon. The mothers saw that the presence of Israeli troops was not making enough of a difference to justify the loss of hundreds of Israeli soldiers' lives, the lives of the sons and daughters of mothers such as themselves. And so this grassroots group began to take shape; Rachel Ben-Dor contacted a journalist, Eran Shahar, in response to an article he had written called "Mothers in Service of the Army", and he asked to meet with her. She and the other founders met with Shahar to describe their feelings on the situation with Lebanon, and Shahar produced an article on Passover Eve entitled "Four Mothers", an adaptation of a song The Four Sons from the Passover haggadah. The group decided to keep this charismatic name, and the next step would be to devise and implement a strategy.⁶ The protest group's support would balloon in a matter of months, with the singular purpose of unconditional unilateral withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon. The movement was one of the first groups to protest the Israeli presence in Lebanon. The Four Mothers brought the discontent out into the public sphere, and spearheaded a growing discontent with government policies.⁷

2.2 Strategy Assessment of the Four Mothers Movement

In order to effectively achieve their goal, the Four Mothers needed to mobilize public support and resources. As residents of kibbutzim they were able to use the facilities of that community, such as the Kibbutz Center, for staging

discussions and debates with politicians and other leaders that agreed to meet with them⁸. They were able to use kibbutz members for labor in setting up these meetings, and it also allowed the activists time off to attend protest functions⁹. Their first instinct was not to write to the media. They did not see themselves as political activists seeking out the attention of the media; they were simply proclaiming their truths and beliefs. They later came to see how important the role of the media is in enacting political change. They initially wrote to four members of the Forum Kohav Yair, a group of Parliament members who did not support the Lebanon war. To their surprise, one of the members asked to come from Jerusalem to meet with them, and so a discussion was organized at the Kibbutz Center. The co-founders did not alert the media of the visiting MK; there was no publicity for the gathering other than handwritten flyers that Ben-Dor herself had posted within the kibbutz community. It was the MK who let the media know of the meeting; as a result, after the meeting a public relations representative of the Parliament member notified the National Israeli media about the group¹⁰. Media exposure began to snow ball, and each time the Four Mothers were given more media coverage, the more public support they engendered and more volunteers joined their ranks; at one point the group had up to one thousand active supporters¹¹. Other parents were attracted to the Four Mothers because they felt as if it was a support group, allowing them to feel as if they were doing something to save their children¹². But it was not just mothers who were supporters of this movement. Eventually, the group came to include women, men, students, and even ex-soldiers, and in fact the group had about 40% male members¹³. The group was a truly grassroots movement, with only one part-time employee and about one thousand members, but that is what caused it to appeal to many across the political spectrum¹⁴. The group also recruited participation from former intelligence officers, allowing them to present a legitimate, credible criticism of the situation in Lebanon¹⁵. The Four Mothers enjoyed strong support from a grassroots beginning which reached across a broad swath of social and political divisions and included members of the Knesset, and the movement enjoyed significant media support from its earliest days in the kibbutz.

The Four Mothers Movement also made sure that they presented themselves strategically to the public in a way that left no doubt as to their right and their authority to criticize the war in Lebanon, as mothers of soldiers who were fighting in what they perceived as a futile war. A majority of the group members were women, and indeed the leaders who were most often in the public and media spotlight were mothers; no one has more right to protest the danger and death of soldiers than a soldier's mother. And while national culture revered soldiers' mothers, the founders choice of using the name "Four Mothers" also had biblical connotations, recalling the famous matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel, appealing to both secular and religious Israelis¹⁶. However, the group also had to deal with the negative side of using their role as mothers as a position of protest; many military leaders criticized them as grief stricken mothers, illogical in their emotion, women to be pitied¹⁷. In response to such criticism, Ben-Dor purposed to appear as calm and as level headed as possible, presenting both a concerned mother and an engaged citizen, applying rational national security discourse and exemplifying their knowledge and ability to debate on the same level as the military leaders who criticized them, leading to support and recognition from retired army officers¹⁸. They had to know tactical language and be able to keep up with the expertise of the generals and politicians they were debating or refuting. They also capitalized on their identity as citizens of Northern Israel, which many members of the group were. As the ones who had to cope with the rockets and attacks from across the Lebanese border, citizens of the north were able to honestly depict to the broader Israeli public that the "security zone" really was not effective. Those who favored the occupation in Lebanon frequently cited protection of the North as a main reason for its continuation. The movement's leadership was therefore able to disprove this and gain legitimacy because of the region they lived in¹⁹. The group also had to be sure to emphasize their support for the troops. They were protesting the political policy decisions, not doubting the soldiers, their own sons and family members. At many protests, they included signs that read "support our troops" and waved Israeli flags, indicating that they were, in fact, patriotic, and to combat the accusations from nationalists that their movement undermined soldiers' morale²⁰. The Four Mothers used these carefully crafted images of their group to be effective in communicating their message to the Israeli people and to disprove the criticism thrown at them by their opposition.

Media have a known taste for the dramatic and photogenic. At first the group did not approach the media, thinking they would not be interested in what they were doing, but once the Four Mothers understood how essential the media were going to be for the success of their objectives and influence of public opinion, they cultivated connections with sympathetic journalists and editors²¹. Their protests and activities were sufficiently theatrical and visual to merit media coverage. Every time a soldier was killed in the security zone, the group held a vigil outside the Defense Ministry in Tel Aviv, they planted a peace forest at the Israeli-Lebanese border, and they unfurled a green cloth at the international border to symbolize the call to return to the "Green Line" between Israel and Lebanon²². The media's coverage was necessary to garner support, to reach those who might join the group and to help make it socially acceptable to discuss the Lebanon occupation, much less criticize it. The more the media gave the group coverage, the more political power they held. Politicians would begin to support the group because it

would now be advantageous for them, to be seen and portrayed by the media as someone who stood on the side of the movement. The media also put pressure on the government to respond to The Four Mothers position and to reply to any of the contact the group made to a politician²³. The group also had a media consultant, a professional journalist whose close friend had died in Lebanon²⁴.

Political support was vital for the realization of the Four Mothers' goal. From the earliest stages of the movement's development, Parliament member Yossi Beilin had formed an informal alliance with the group, and he was, in fact, the Knesset member that first came to the Kibbutz in response to the group's letter. He provided much of the resources the movement needed to be active and functioning, including transportation for protests. He also alerted them to a faction within Parliament that would be sensitive to their appeal and his public relations assistant gave the group contacts to media outlets after his first meeting at the Kibbutz. This helped kick start the group into national prominence and additional recognition from the media²⁵. He provided crucial encouragement at the beginning stages of the movement, which allowed the leaders to recognize that what they hoped to achieve was possible. There were several other Knesset members that supported the Four Mothers, including Michael Eitan and Tamar Gozanki²⁶.

The movement also benefitted from the weakened power of the governing coalition's parliamentary majority. As more and more politicians took a stance against the war, the media became more willing to report on protests and highlight casualties in the war. This gave the Four Mothers an advantage in having their issue validated by reported deaths and showing that their group was not a peripheral one, that their goal was not so outlandish²⁷. As Israeli politics became more and more polarized and the majority Likud coalition party dwindled, the Parliament Members became more sensitive to the opinion of the people. The absence of a party powerhouse in the Knesset gave them the chance to recruit allies from many different parties, so that they could not be written off as politically irrelevant²⁸. This political climate was one of the reasons the Four Mothers Movement was able to have the success that it did.

The Four Mothers Movement formed at just the right time to achieve success. There were few competing issues; in Palestinian news, things were quiet from 1997-1999, and Israel faced no threats from Iraq, Egypt or Jordan, so the Lebanon war was one of the central focuses of the media and public attention²⁹. So lowered perception of threats to national security led to a greater willingness to negotiate and take risks for peace³⁰. The Four Mothers was also the only large scale movement continuously active, so there were few groups to take away media attention from the Four Mothers.

3. Analysis of Goals

And then there is goal formation - this is one of the main differences that sets the Four Mothers apart from other such groups, the fact that they made a conscious decision to set only one goal, contingent upon the few years that the Israelis had declared the security zone. This was not an objective that would stretch out decades to complete. The goal was narrowly focused on the time frame of 1997-2000, and no further. Their group was centered on a single, concrete issue, though that was not the case initially. The original goal was vague, aiming for the government to solve the Lebanon problem. The decision to narrow their focus to a certain policy solution gave the group a main rallying point for supporters and advocacy³¹. They came to understand that rather than pressuring politicians to make the change, a more effective method was to influence public opinion in their favor and against the war. The simple goal of withdrawal from Lebanon permitted the group to draw many different constituencies; similarly, it was a choice of Ben-Dor and the other leaders aimed at survival of the group over the long run, ensuring others did not turn the group in too many different directions³². Their resources were not spread too thin attempting to achieve more than one goal. Ben-Dor herself attributed the success of the Four Mothers to the fact that they did not make it complicated by making goals for after the war or the withdrawal of the soldiers³³. Their goal was also something concrete, measurable. It was easily determined whether or not the objective was accomplished; the troops either were or were not withdrawn from Lebanon. It was not an abstract idea; it was something concrete and thus possibly seemed more of a tangible rallying point for people to muster behind.

3.1 Evidence Of The Four Mothers Movement On Public Opinion

But where is the evidence that the Four Mothers had a large influence on the change in public opinion on the Lebanon war? After the helicopter crash, there was an influx of citizen debate on the war, how and whether to withdraw, and why they were there in the first place. So while the Four Mothers did not spark the first mutterings against the security zone occupation, they certainly fed the flame, supporting it and giving it more power through

public and elite support for withdrawal from their focused advocacy³⁴. It is also believed that the group is responsible for a good deal of the opinion change in polls conducted by Tel Aviv University. In 1997, 60 percent of Israelis were for the government's policy to remain in Lebanon patrolling the security zone, and only 32 percent favored pullout at that time. However by 1999, one year after the Four Mothers formation and the election of Ehud Barak as the new Prime Minister, 70% of the population favored unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon³⁵. There is no other reasonable explanation for the drastic shift in opinion. Those that would not be expected to support the withdrawal, now believed it necessary. For instance, the commander of Israel's force in Lebanon, Maj. General Amiram Levine even stated that the alternative, delaying a pull out until Syria and Lebanon signed a peace accord, was unacceptable because it meant Israel would continue to suffer casualties at the hands of Hezbollah³⁶. However, some argue that there is a different explanation to the shift in public opinion. There are claims that state that the Four Mothers would not have made a difference, that public opinion would have shifted anyway and withdrawal was inevitable. The leaders of the movement disagree, and Ben-Zvi states, "When we began, Lebanon was a silent war. No one talked about it. There was very little support for a withdrawal, let alone a unilateral withdrawal. We didn't just reflect public opinion, we shaped it"³⁷. It also pulled discussion of the war out into the open, removing the taboo and stigma that it was unpatriotic; this is a direct result of the Four Mothers' efforts³⁸. So while the Four Mothers cannot claim to be solely responsible for the shift in public opinion, the group's effort is certainly one of the major causes of the change.

3.2 Election Of Ehud Barak Resulting In Withdrawal From Lebanon

Ehud Barak did not originally support Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon. He only publicly pledged to unilaterally withdraw from Lebanon during his 1999 campaign for Prime Minister, after his campaign consultants polled the public and saw that the majority of the Israeli voters were behind it. He announced withdrawal knowing that the tide of public opinion would be behind³⁹. This way, Barak set himself apart from Netanyahu, whose position on Lebanon was more conditional and was late in its admission. The 1999 election was also only the second election that featured the direct election of the Prime Minister, so capturing public support and the electoral vote would lead to winning the election⁴⁰. Public opinion, influenced by the Four Mothers, was able to directly score a victory via the new democratic process. By casting their vote for Prime Minister in 1999, the people were able to communicate to their government exactly how they wanted their national security and foreign policy to be conducted.

And so, with the election of Ehud Barak in 1999, the government machine was set into motion to fulfill Barak's campaign promise of unilateral withdrawal from the Lebanon security zone. On May 24, 2000, the mothers of all Israeli soldiers let out a collective sigh of relief, as the last troops left Lebanon after the government voted for and implemented complete withdrawal.

4. From the Four Mothers to the Parents Circle

All of these strategies created a framework which resulted in success for the Four Mothers movement. Their singular goal was defined concretely and measurably; the soldiers were either pulled out of Lebanon or they were not. The time period that they had to work with involved the security zone which had only been in place for about thirteen years, from 1985 to 1998. It was not a conflict that had deep roots and had stretched out for decades. All of these factors combined resulted in the Four Mothers accomplishment of unilateral withdrawal. By contrast, the issues which the Parents Circle-Families Forum is tackling may take longer to reconcile, perhaps more than one generation, stretching across decades of work and the development of many different programs. The Parents Circle was founded around the same time as the Four Mothers, but while both groups involve parents participating and fostering activism in support of the safety of their children, one has disbanded in the wake of its success, and the other is an ongoing and growing organization today. What are the Parents Circle-Families Forum chances of success in today's political climate? They have many programs and have been involved in awareness activities, so is this group making a difference?

4.1 Brief History Of The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

To properly understand the challenges faced by the Parents Circle, it is worthwhile to briefly summarize the recent history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In 1993, the Oslo Peace accords saw Israel acceding to the limited control of Palestinian territories by the Palestinian Liberation Organization, or the PLO, giving them recognition as a representative of the Palestinian people. In return, Israel received peace and an end to Palestinian claims on Israeli territory; Israel also received control of land, water, roads, and other resources. In 2000, there was a Second Intifada, leading to more bloodshed and suicide attacks on Israeli citizens and soldiers. The Palestinian people have had limited rights within Israel and the West Bank, with higher poverty rates and at times military occupation. In 2002, Israel began the construction of a “security fence” between the Palestinian territories and Israel proper to safeguard its citizens from Palestinian terrorists. Images of this “fence” cause some to hark back to the Berlin wall, for while it seems to be making a difference, it also makes life much more difficult for the Palestinians living in the West Bank. Recently, frustration has mounted, as the larger and poorer Palestinians find themselves on smaller parcels of less valuable land, while many homes are bulldozed by Israeli authorities in an attempt to wipe out extremists. On the Israeli side as well, there is anger at the violence, and a general mistrust of a population they believe wants to take their homeland. But that does not mean that there are not many Israelis and Palestinians who want to move forward, who simply want peace and to live their lives without violence and conflict with their neighbor⁴¹.

4.2 Founding Of The Parents Circle-Families Forum

The Parents Circle-Families Forum was founded in 1995 by Yitzhak Frankental and several other bereaved Israeli families. Each member of the Families Circle has lost a family member in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and in 1998, the group began to hold meetings with Palestinian families in Gaza who were sympathetic and identified with the bereaved parents’ cause, though contact with the families was cut off after the second intifada. In 2000, the group expanded to include Palestinian members from the West Bank and East Jerusalem, members who have since then greatly influenced the nature and activities of the organization⁴². The group does not state a position on the conflict, merely a need for reconciliation between the two sides at ground-level, before agreement can be reached by political elite. Most members believe that the solution must be based on freedom of human rights, open negotiations between leaders, and the establishment of two states for two people with a peace treaty committed to maintaining harmony between the two states. Today the organization includes over 600 families, all committed to ensuring that bereavement is not used as an excuse for violence and revenge; members conduct joint activities to prove that reconciliation and understanding is possible between the two peoples⁴³.

5. The Parents Circle’s Goals

The Parents Circle-Families Forum’s mission statement wishes to “create a framework of reconciliation between two peoples that takes into account that any peace agreement must include an infrastructure for the process of reconciliation”, “to work towards an end to violence and towards achieving an accepted political agreement”, “to influence the public and the political decision makers to choose dialogue and the path of peace over violence, in order to achieve a just settlement based on empathy and understanding”, and finally, “to avoid the use of bereavement for further violence and retribution”⁴⁴.

These are the organization’s goals, the first of which could be accomplished through some of their bilateral talks and programs that include the two peoples, which will be further discussed and explained later in this paper. However, this goal is still somewhat abstract, an objective of changing the peoples’ worldview of one another, of forgiving each other, something that is not easily proven or measured, for it involves the emotions, passions, and opinions of a group, not something tangible or readily measurable.

The second goal is a very ambitious one, and it could be said that it is contingent upon the previous objective, for if there is no reconciliation, it is likely the violence will continue and there will be no agreement for peace. Since before Israel was established, violence has been used by some in an attempt to make the other side acquiesce to their opponent’s self-interests, so in order to change that, one will need to break the existing cycle of violence, and not even allow conflict to be considered as an option. This will involve re-education, a new way of thinking, from the elderly who might never have known anything but violence, all the way down to children, who can still be taught and can more readily accept a new way of looking at the world. For this goal to succeed, every generation in Israel and its neighbors, including those still to come, will have to be involved: the grandfathers teaching the grandchildren, the parents teaching the children, and the children teaching each other how to be tolerant and to see each other in a new, understanding light.

The third goal will include protest, and as the organization is self-described as non-political, this could be one of the most difficult goals to achieve. With each new Prime Minister, there comes a new policy toward how willing each group might be to actively engage in a peace agreement that includes fair concessions on both sides for the sort of settlement each side envisions and desires to achieve. The Parents Circle also states in their third goal that they wish to influence the public to choose peace over violence. The public's opinion on the use of violence ebbs and flows, changing with the amount of conflict and acts of terror and violence that occur. When there is high conflict, violence and armed force may be the only method people see for keeping the peace.

The last objective is one of the Parents Circle's key points, avoiding justification of violence, based on their personal loss is a challenge, as all group members are bereaved families. This is an issue that is intensely personal to them, and instead of using it for vengeance, they have turned it around and used it as a platform to speak to the public, Palestinian and Israeli alike. These families have experienced the very worst loss possible, and if anyone could be called justified in seeking retribution, it would be them. So because of their testimony, there is no excuse for others to use something less as an excuse for violence. The Parents Circle is hoping to resonate with others who have lost loved ones to the conflict, and persuade them away from revenge and hostility.

This organization has four challenging missions, while the Four Mothers had only one goal. Because of this, it may take the Parents Circle many years and possibly decades for them to enact the changes they seek. But they have many programs, supporters, and funding sources worldwide that are actively pursuing and tackling these challenges, with much hope and faith in the work they are doing.

5.1 Parents Circle-Families Forum Programs And Projects

The Parents Circle-Families Forum has implemented many different projects and programs all aimed toward realization of their goals. They regularly have dialogue meetings with young Israelis and Palestinians, which for many of the students is the first time they have talked with each other. There are two members from the Parents Circle, an Israeli and Palestinian, and after they discuss their experience of losing a family member and their commitment to peace, the atmosphere in the room typically changes, and the students become more willing to explore dialogue instead of violence and explore understanding the needs of the other side. The dialogue meetings are known to work because of the emotional feedback Parents Circle often receives after such meetings, "this was a fascinating encounter. I never had a dialogue or met a Palestinian in the past. It was an eye opening experience which gave me a different perspective. I discovered things which I never believed happen on the other side and also their willingness to reconcile. This gave me so much hope and caused me to look at things differently"⁴⁵. Through the dialogue meetings, the organization works with youth, trying to foster understanding at a young age so that when they get older they will understand the consequences and dangers of using violence to achieve ends. Providing potential adversaries this exposure and conversation with each other humanizes those they view as the opponent and allows for empathy and understanding of a different situation and views.

Parents Circle also holds group meetings for women only, meeting three to four times a year since 2006; all the attendees are bereaved, sharing the common bond of tragedy and sadness. Each year that these women meet, they put together projects to work on, including exhibitions such as the 2010 "Fabric of War", a display of paper made from materials reminding them of their lost loved ones and using this outward expression of their grief as a way to speak of their hope for change. This display was exhibited in London and was shown in Southbank Centre, Saison Poetry Library and the Royal Festival Hall and the Courtauld Institute of Art. There are also plans to bring the exhibition to Israel⁴⁶. The exhibit has brought more international attention to the conflict and the organization itself, and is another example of the special authority mothers have in society, the legitimization they possess to call for peace, as it is their sons and daughters who lost their lives in this violent conflict.

One of Parents Circle's most impactful programs is the "History through the Human Eye" project, aimed at building empathy, trust and acceptance between Israelis and Palestinians through their corresponding narratives, allowing them to understand the cultural and national identity of each other⁴⁷. They each express their stories of the worst consequences of the conflict to each other, and this program creates an avenue of conversation, dialogue and understanding. Groups that participated in 2010 include Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian students from the Arava Institute, Israeli students from Sapir College in Sderot and Tel-Hai College in the north of Israel, together with Palestinian students from Alquds Open University in Hebron and The Arab American University in Jenin, Israeli and Palestinian grandmothers and Palestinian and Israeli young political leaders⁴⁸. This project took a model that was applied initially to Parents Circle members then taken into the broader community in Israel and the West Bank. This initiative is significant because it focuses on achieving each of the Parent Circle's goals, not just a single goal. It creates the dialogue and sharing of narratives necessary for understanding that can lead to a framework for

reconciliation that is necessary for any peace agreement at the top levels of government. The History Through the Human Eye project shows the consequences of violence and presents an alternative. It influences these groups, members of the public, who are encouraged to talk to their neighbors about the experience, spreading the desire for dialogue and peace instead of violence to achieve a settlement. The Parents Circle, by putting this project together, further put their name and their missions out into the public realm, using the platform of their grief and bereavement to speak out against using bereavement as justification for violence. The Parents Circle is also planning on compiling the narratives and experiences from this project into a book and documentary to be shown to wider audiences⁴⁹.

An important undertaking by the Parents Circle was the establishment of the Reconciliation Center in 2010 to support and expand on the group's goals of reconciliation, further raising public awareness and involvement on issues of peace at the political level. Additionally, it provides the tools and knowledge for reconciliation on the ground in Israeli and Palestinian communities. The Reconciliation Center has assembled all of the academic research and experiential information from the Parents Circle-Families Forum's activities from 2000 onward, offers an in depth study of reconciliation, identifies the necessary resources, and provides space for people to learn about the other side of the conflict. The Center's uses include a resource data base on reconciliation and conflict, with a virtual library and two physical centers, an Israeli center in Ramat Eyal and a Palestinian center in Beit Jala⁵⁰. They also set up group meetings to learn about the narrative of the other side and to discuss a variety of topics pertaining to the possibilities of reconciliation, and the Reconciliation Center invites members of the Israeli and Palestinian public to participate. The Center accepts submissions of individuals' experience in the conflict, publishing the stories of anyone who wishes to speak out on the Center website. Though the Parents Circle and the Reconciliation are not an active part of political thinking, advocacy or lobbying efforts, they hope to reach politicians on both sides of the issues and create support for the leaders who are committed to peace and mutual reconciliation as part of any agreement. In their political workshop during 2010-2011, they met with Israeli and Palestinian officials who were interested in the Parents Forum and Reconciliation Center's work, and some agreed to promote the reconciliation process⁵¹. The Reconciliation Center is a practical tool to extend the Parents Circle-Families Forum's reach, and is an excellent resource for mediators and peace activists, not just Parents Circle members; the Center is available to whoever might need resources to help them in their peace or reconciliation endeavors, providing support to the community, the people, and the public.

All of these programs are geared toward making progress on the stated missions of Parents Circle. And while it is hard to determine how much of a difference they are making in the community, the group continues to press on, encouraged by the responses of those who take part in these projects and the change in attitude they experience. In a five day summer camp the Parents Circle put on for Israeli and Palestinian children in 2012, Romi Genosar, an Israeli teenager, stated, "I think a lot about Israelis have a stereotype of what Palestinians are like. But they're really fun to be around and really funny and nice, and they have a very strong opinion of the situation." Madj, a Palestinian student from Hebron also had a positive experience. "I have come to take part in this camp in order to learn about the opinions of the other side. Jews are not just Jews who kill"⁵². The children who attended this camp had lost family members in the conflict, and Romi and Madj each had lost an uncle. The camp was a success, and the children promised to keep in touch through email, and many suggested holding next year's camp in the Palestinian Authority⁵³. Another bereaved Israeli woman, Robi Damelin, met with a hesitant, bereaved Palestinian mother, and by the end of the meeting, the two women were talking about their lost sons, and goodbye hugs were exchanged⁵⁴. The group is involved in the community and involved in the lives of the people on both sides.

5.2 2011 Public Opinion Poll

The majority opinion in the Israel and in the Palestinian territories today is one that promotes nonviolence as a tactic for attaining the goals of security and self determination; this is an opinion that supports the peace process. According to a 2011 Gallup poll, 22% of Israelis strongly support the peace process, 46% moderately support the process, and only 16% and 13% moderately oppose or strongly oppose the peace process, respectively. Conversely, 33% of Palestinians strongly support the peace process, 30% moderately support the peace process, and 10% and 22% moderately or strongly oppose the process. Also, when it comes to achieving security and self-determination, 65% of Palestinians and 61% of Israelis prefer nonviolence, and only 24% of Palestinians and 21% of Israelis prefer violent methods⁵⁵. However, it seems that there is little confidence in the peace process, with around three-fourths of Palestinians and Israelis saying the relations with the other are currently "somewhat bad" or "very bad", and 58% of Israelis and 63% of Palestinians think that the relations are getting worse⁵⁶. The people are committed to a common ideal of peace, and it is obvious that they believe it important to their wellbeing. While it is clear both sides support

the peace process, moving negotiations forward remains a challenge. The barrier to peace is the suspicion each side has of the other and of the other's leaders. But that is where the Parents Circle can come in, to build trust, understanding, and a foundation for building peace within each group.

While the results of these opinion polls cannot be scientifically attributed to the Parents Circle-Families Forum's work, it proves that there has been a shift in mind set; the current generation is not the one that lived and fought in the violence of the first intifada, and with the second intifada still a painful memory, it seems that both peoples just want peace, to be able to live without fear of terrorist attacks, of violence and maltreatment at checkpoints. The political climate is precarious, especially with the recent outbreak of violence between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. And with the Palestinian Authority entering a bid for non-member state status at the UN, tensions are building between the leaders of the Palestinians and Israel and its allies. But with the recent re-election of President Obama to office and emergence of the Egyptians in brokering a cease-fire in Gaza, there is hope for renewing the peace process, of returning to the negotiation table and coming up with a mutual agreement. Both sides have stipulations for an agreement: for the Palestinians, the Jewish settlements must stop in the West Bank; for the Israelis, the Palestinians must not go forward with the non-member bid at the UN. The cycle of violence ebbs and flows, as is apparent with the new conflict with Gaza, but it seems the people, the people are ready, they have had enough violence; this is clear from the 2011 polling. However, while the opinion polls are not yet available for 2012, it would be worth noting if views might have become more hostile with the eruption of fighting with Gaza.

The results indicate that community activism organizations like the Parents Circle are changing the way people look at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its participants, but there are still many more years and steps to take to achieve reconciliation and understanding. Every new account of violence pushes the efforts back a pace, and their work has to be doubled to counter each setback. This is why the Parents Circle-Families Forum still has a long road ahead of them, and this is why it is so hard to measure the success of their efforts to achieve their goals. It cannot be said that they have failed; they make new progress with each meeting, and each conversation they hold between Israelis and Palestinians, with each class, or with each politician they talk to. Simply getting the message out there and generating awareness brings them closer to their goal. Even if a person walks away from one of the group's functions still hating and misunderstanding the other side, they will at least have been exposed to another reality, the reality of the person they believe is their enemy, and that is a valuable thing, regardless. It is hard to determine just how successful they have been because it is almost impossible to gage their influence, and how willing the people might be to consider dialogue and reconciliation rather than bitterness and resentment. Beyond simply asking a person how they feel about reconciling with the other side, the goal is abstract, and even after one asks, the person could be lying or may change their mind later. It is hard to measure the worldview of an individual. And so the Parents Circle marches on, continuing to work towards the elusive goal of peace and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians.

6. Conclusion

The Four Mothers Movement and the Parents Circle-Families Forum are two groups of parent activists in Israel, both aiming to end the death and violence that their families experience every day. The Four Mothers Movement was able to influence public opinion to pressure the policy makers to unilaterally withdraw from Lebanon and thereby to achieve their goal. The Parents Circle has tackled a more deep-seated problem, which is to resolve in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and they continue to work today to improve relations and end the violence between the two sides. The two groups have used different approaches to solve political conflict in Israel, but the struggle for peace never comes easy. Peace is won through sacrifice and compromise from all parties concerned. The value of preserving human life is always worth the effort to achieve this goal; the upholding of human rights is a worthy cause to pursue, and all too frequently it is the state actors making decisions based on self interests which creates obstacles. And so non-governmental organizations take the reins of pursuit of peace, where the state has dropped them, oftentimes this goal is eclipsed by economic and/or security interests. The Four Mothers and the Parents Circle value the people, they promote peace above self-interests, and do what they can to make a difference. The struggle for peace in Palestine is not an easy road, but when it comes to the value of human life, it is one of the most worthwhile goals.

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