

# Across the Border

## Betrayal and forgiveness in the Middle East

by *Rachelle Lyndaker Schlabach*

“My youngest son, David, was killed on March 3, 2002. One moment he was there, a gifted musician, a committed educator.

The next, at an isolated roadblock in the West Bank, David was shot and killed by a Palestinian sniper.” Robi Damelin’s story is one of many Israeli tales of suffering.

Elham Elshoabe, a Palestinian mother, tells an all-too-similar story. Her son, Ghasan, was killed by the Israeli Defense Forces in September 2002. He had run into the street to warn children to stay away from advancing Israeli tanks. Sadly, stories like Elham’s are multiplied many times over in Palestinian communities.

In the Middle East, pain and betrayal runs deep. It begins in the years following World War I, when the lands of the defeated Ottoman Empire were divided into territories. The League of Nations gave Britain control over Palestine, and Palestinians were hopeful that they would eventually have their own state.

But Britain had also signed the Balfour Declaration, which promised to support the creation of a Jewish homeland in the land of Palestine. Eventually

Western countries, led by the United States, became strong supporters of the state of Israel. After Israel declared statehood in 1948, war broke out. More than 700,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes and hundreds of Palestinian towns and villages were destroyed.

Since 1967 Israel has occupied the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza. The occupation has deepened feelings of resentment among Palestinians, as Israel continues to construct illegal settlements, restrict movement in and out of the territories, and confiscate valuable water resources. Meanwhile, Israelis live in fear of violent attacks by Palestinians. All of these factors make forgiveness and reconciliation very difficult.

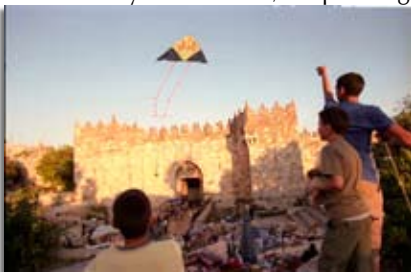


*Jerusalem at night*

*Photo by Melissa Engle*

# Across the Ocean

In the Gospel of Matthew, Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive one who wrongs him (Matthew 18:21–22). Jesus responds, “seventy-seven times,” or “seventy times seven,” depending on the translation. In either case, the intent is to forgive over and over, not keeping track of the count. The message is clear: God has been abundantly merciful to us. Our response to others should mirror this grace.



*Palestinian Children flying a kite.*

*Photo by Ryan Beiler*

Easy as it sounds, this teaching is tough to put into practice on an individual level. It is tougher to apply it within a congregation or organization, and even more so at the level of nations and peoples.

What does betrayal and forgiveness look like at this level, and is it premature to even speak of forgiveness in Palestine-Israel? There are no easy answers, but previous experiences reveal that truth-telling and justice will need to be crucial elements of any meaningful reconciliation.

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Some courageous individuals and organizations are pointing the way forward. Wi'am, the Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center, works to provide Palestinian families and communities with peaceful alternatives to conflict. Zochrot, an Israeli organization, helps Israelis learn the history of what happened to Palestinians in 1948 when the state of Israel was created.

And Robi Damelin and Elham Elshoabe, the two mothers who lost their sons? They are part of a group called the Parents Circle Families Forum, a group of Palestinians and Israelis who have lost loved ones in the fighting. They have resolved to turn their grief into a passion for working for peace, so that no more families will have to suffer. The group's motto guides their challenging work of forgiveness and reconciliation, “If we can, everybody can.”

The work is tough, but God calls us to it. May these courageous Palestinians and Israelis be a model for us all. 📌