

Breaking down walls at a peace conference made me more human

I sat at a picnic table sharing stories with a Palestinian Christian, two Israelis and an American who was neither

Jewish nor Palestinian.

Suha Ghateet, an attorney in Ramallah, asked if we as Jews believed that the Bible gives us the right to the land of Israel.

Stepping out of my role as reporter covering the peace conference at Camp Tawonga, I offered my two cents.

"If we take an absolute position, then there is no discussion," I said, emphasizing that I was speaking for myself as an American Jew, not as an Israeli or a biblical scholar.

"But if we're talking about the Bible, there is another principle. Just as the central metaphor for Christians is that Jesus died to save you from sin, we as Jews have another metaphor — the Exodus story. We were once slaves in Egypt. We are no longer slaves." Fighting back tears, I added, "Therefore, we cannot enslave another people."

Suha looked into my eyes and took my hand. Walking toward the dining hall, the other American told me I had made her cry.

Reporters are supposed to be objective, to not get emotionally involved. But while covering the Labor Day weekend conference, I couldn't stop myself from crossing that boundary. But crossing boundaries — Palestinians and Israelis, Jews, Christians and Muslims — was what the Oseh Shalom-Sanea al-Salam conference was about.

During a red card/green card exercise, we wrote down what propels us and what blocks us from moving forward. In one small group, I shared my red card: a teenage encounter with anti-Semitism at an upstate New York roller rink. After offering to lace up my skates, a guy made a quick exit when he found out I was Jewish.

In another group, I shared the green card: I spoke about Rolf Hofmann, a retired German architect whose father had fought in Hitler's army and was sent into a Russian village where he made new friends. Then he was ordered to burn their village.

He suffered lifelong post-traumatic stress, a condition Israelis and Palestinians know all too well. But his son took a new direction. He was



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recently honored by an American Jewish foundation for restoring a former synagogue, cleaning Jewish headstones and assembling more than 1,000 genealogical records, including those of my own forebears. That experience, I said, gave me hope for the next generation in the Middle East.

Mara List Avner, an Israeli teacher and peace activist, is involved in building bridges among Israelis, Palestinians and Germans. We talked about our visits to the Jewish Museum in Berlin, our recognition that Jewish history in Germany didn't begin and end with Hitler and our wish to reclaim that past.

Next summer she plans to travel to Frankfurt am Oder, Germany, bringing youth from the Holy Land to work with Germans to restore headstones and research its Jewish history. She would love to have American teens come along, and right now I'm trying to figure out how I can help make that happen.

But beyond sharing red cards and green cards — traumas, hopes and commonalities — I have to admit that one of my highs of the conference was getting on stage with my husband to sing an a cappella version of "Java Jive," a 1940 Ink Spots hit.

We've been singing what my granddaughter calls "the cuppa song" for several years — with Palo Alto's Aurora Singers, at a Beth Am wedding and even at an Arab restaurant on Israel's Lebanon border. But when we stepped out of our professional roles to sing at Camp Tawonga, we had our most enthusiastic audience. Israelis and Palestinians snapped their fingers and swayed in rhythm, laughing when my husband tossed in a gibe about Elite coffee and I bounced up and down like a percolator.

Everybody wanted to hug us — including our grandson, who wasn't even embarrassed. The hugs continued throughout the weekend.

"They liked us. They really liked us," I said to my husband.

"Here we were up on the stage having fun, making people happy," my husband said. "Singing made us human." ■

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