

## 'We know what peace looks like' Jews, Arabs break down barriers at Tawonga retreat

by Janet Silver Ghent  
Correspondent

Jamil Tarayra's brother was tortured and killed in an Israeli prison cell, and his 10-year-old nephew was shot to death while playing with a paper kite on his West Bank roof.

Michal Eskenazi of Karmiel, Israel, lost two friends in terror attacks, "one before my eyes."

Ann Gonski, an American born in South Africa, lost an entire branch of her father's family in the Holocaust.

Ismail Amira of Ramallah was forced by Israeli soldiers to stand on his knees, repeating obscene songs and slogans about Yasser Arafat.

Standing with a Palestinian and an Israeli teen by the Tuolumne River, Elizabeth Katzki, 17, summed up her four-day experience at the Oseh Shalom-Sanea al-Salam Palestinian-Jewish Family Peacemakers Camp, held over Labor Day weekend at Camp Tawonga.

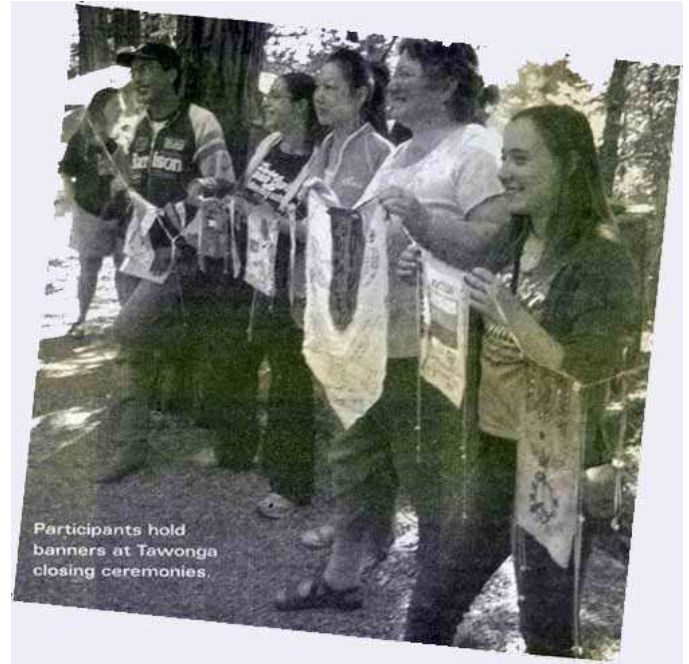
"We have become so close this weekend, closer than friends, and more than brothers and sisters," said Katzki, a student at San Francisco's Jewish Community High School of the Bay. "We can work for peace because we know what peace looks like. It is not too late. The future leaders of the world are here to make a difference. We come from different places, but we will make our destinations the same."

Amid tears, hugs and careening tricycles, some 250 Israelis and Palestinians - along with Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians from throughout the world - gathered near Yosemite for the fourth annual peacemakers camp. Their goal was to plant seeds for the future.

"When I saw Mandela walk out of jail, I knew anything was possible," said South African-born Irene McPhail of Kensington, whose family escaped Hitler's Germany.

"His example gives us hope," added Elias Botto, a Palestinian from San Mateo and part of the 14-year-old Living Room Dialogue Group that metamorphosed into the peace camp.

With shared meals and accommodations, singing, dancing, and paddling on the lake, the atmosphere at Tawonga was idyllic.



Participants hold banners at Tawonga closing ceremonies.

"It's like Shabbat," said Ken Kramarz, who co-directed the weekend with Gonski of Tawonga along with representatives of the dialogue group. "It's a taste of what could be."

Close encounters were the order of the day. In the dining hall, Palestinians and Jews traced one another's overlapping hands, discovering connections.

Sa'ad Amira, Ismail's 17-year-old son, had just returned from a peace conference in British Columbia, where he produced a film.

"I like Canada," he wrote. He started to write "unfortunately, not America," but crossed it out. It was the government he didn't like, not the people. He was particularly incensed by President Bush's use of the term "Islamic fascism."

American Jews are a different breed from Israelis, he said later that weekend. But he admitted that some Israelis were OK.

Tracing hands with a Jewish man from the South Bay, Tarayra described the loss of his brother and his nephew, and his own three years in jail. By the end of the encounter, Tarayra invited his new friend to his home in East Jerusalem.

Why did he put his anger behind him, visiting America for the first time? For one, his daughter Lama, a

student at Utah's Brigham Young University, where she is a minority among minorities, was involved. For another, he later told the entire group, "I'm here today because I don't want to lose any more [family members]. I am here because my kids and yours deserve a better future."

In the camp's outdoor sanctuary, Makom Shalom (Place of Peace), Rabbi Amy Eilberg, formerly of Palo Alto, discussed her involvement in peace issues with the Rev. Rick Van De Water, a Catholic priest who had just returned from 32 years in the Holy Land. The former j. Torah columnist now lives near St. Paul, Minn.

As a young woman, she spent five years in Israel and had planned to live there permanently. "Looking back, I wasn't hateful, but Arabs were the enemy," she said. "But during the last 10 years - I can't date when - I started to feel the call to stretch." That stretch led to writing, teaching and a commitment to Middle East peace. "For the first time I understood why Palestinians have difficulty with the state of Israel."

Van De Water, who grew up as an evangelical Christian in the Bible Belt, now serves St. Thomas More Church in San Francisco, which has a large Palestinian constituency. He said his interest in the Bible led him to the Holy Land, to Catholicism and to his concern for Palestinians. "My faith in God is really important to me. As an American, I want to let them know there are some Americans that care."

Speaking with Palestinians, Israelis and Americans, one participant discussed his evolution from Bill Kennedy, a Christian from Louisiana, to Bill Kedem, a San Francisco Jew who spent many years in the Middle East. "I'm very saddened because I know people can get along in other places," he said.

Looking at the surrounding rocks and trees, Kedem said that Jerusalem, where his son attends school, is "the spiritual capital of the world. It should be like the forest is to the environmentalists," sacred and open to all, but under Jewish administration.

Not everybody at the conference would have agreed. In addition to those calling for a two-state solution, there were several - Palestinians and Jews - who would like to see a nonsectarian, bi-national state. Others thought such an arrangement would jeopardize Israel's very existence.

Just as there was no single Jewish position, there were diverse voices among the Palestinians. Anis Said, a student in Chicago from Jenin, noted his own internal divisions. "I'm Palestinian Christian. People say

Christians and Jews are in one camp and Muslims in another, but [all] Palestinians are in one camp. My Christian beliefs forbid me from supporting violence. I can't justify violence in the Middle East, but I can understand it."



**Len Traubman, co-founder of the Living Room Dialogue Group, chats with Lama Tarayra.**

Throughout the weekend, former enemies shattered barriers. Among them were Meiron Egger, an Israeli musician who discussed his unpleasant experiences in the Israel Defense Force, and Sulaiman Al Khatib, who joined Fatah at age 12 and spent more than 10 years in prison for stabbing an Israeli soldier at age 14. Both are now involved with Combatants for Peace.

Len Traubman of San Mateo, who began the first dialogue group with his wife, Libby, in their San Mateo living room, is optimistic that increasing the number of such encounters will propel peace - not overnight but "very soon down the road." This year, 50 visitors from the Holy Land attended the camp, more than double last year's number, thanks to generous grants, and 22 peace organizations participated.

"You can feel the energy, and it has nothing to do with solving all the conflicts, but with seeing each other as equal and human and starting to want the best for each other and not just for oneself," said Traubman. "That is like a genetic change of the spirit and a world view that almost no Palestinian or Jew has ever had, here or overseas."