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Hila Russ, an Israeli who lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, meditates at the Peacemakers camp near Yosemite National Park.

Peaceful setting, intense dialogue

Israelis, Palestinians gather in effort to understand each other

By Jim Doyle
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Camp Tawonga, Tuolumne County -- It was an unusual setting, light-years away from the carnage of the Middle East.

Standing before a campfire near Yosemite National Park, a middle-aged Palestinian Muslim told a story of how his brother had been imprisoned, tortured and killed by Israeli soldiers 25 years ago. He spoke of how his 10-year-old nephew had been killed by a sniper's bullet in 2003 while flying a kite from the roof of his home on the West Bank.

"I am here because your kids and mine deserve a better present and a better future," Jamil Tarayra of East Jerusalem told a group of campers.

A few minutes later, Ella Carmela Margalit, an Israeli Jew who lives near Galilee with her husband and three children, trembled when she described how a friend's grandson, serving as an Israeli soldier, was killed in 2003 in a skirmish with Palestinians on the West Bank.

She spoke of how her hopes for peace were shattered by this summer's war in Lebanon and the terror of rocket attacks on Israel. "I don't want to live in fear," she said.

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More than 250 Jews, Muslims and Christians gathered over the Labor Day weekend at the Oseh Shalom-Sanea al-Salam Palestinian-Jewish Family Peacemakers Camp -- with the aim of actually listening to each other.

They included about 50 men, women and teenagers from the Middle East as well as scores of American Jews and Arab Americans from the Bay Area and beyond, ordinary citizens ranging in age from 1 to 77, many of whom have ties to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories.

"Once people meet and engage in a safe place, change begins," said Len Traubman, who with his wife, Libby, started a dialogue group for local Palestinians and Jews in San Mateo in the early 1990s and began the camp three years ago. "Government itself can't do it. It doesn't have the consent or the will or the imagination."

For four days over the holiday weekend, the campers shared a sylvan retreat with rustic cabins next to the Tuolumne River -- engaging in a grueling, 17-hour daily schedule that included intensive dialogue sessions, eating meals together, hiking, swimming, dancing, singing in Hebrew and Arabic and trusting each other on a perilous ropes course. At night, they suffered each other's snores in close quarters.

The Palestinians brought a sense of urgency, calling not only for peace, but justice. They spoke of the poverty and hardships of life in the occupied territories -- the Israeli checkpoints, armored tanks, house searches and arrests -- calling the conditions a form of ethnic cleansing. They complained of a pro-Israeli bias in media coverage, and the need for a change in the region's balance of power.

Israeli Jews attending the conference appeared wary but eager to explore ways to break the Middle East's cycle of violence and retribution. They expressed outrage over suicide bombings and cautioned that Israel's war with Hezbollah fighters in Lebanon had hardened the anti-Palestinian attitudes of many of their fellow citizens.

There was tension from the start, as two men squared off within seconds of meeting each other.

"You don't speak Arabic? You're kidding me! You look freakin' Arab," Anis Said, a 21-year-old Palestinian Christian from the West Bank city of Jeneen, said in a teasing tone to a startled man.

"Maybe it's my hat," said Ofer Margalit, 32, a Jew from Tiberius, Israel. "I have no hair under it."

A 10-minute debate ensued about volatile points in the history of the Middle East.

"I need the contact with you," Said, who is now a premed student in Chicago, told his counterpart. "I need to talk with you. Otherwise, I'm your enemy."

The Jew responded with caution: "We're here not to agree but to hear each other."



Miryam Suliman, a Palestinian attending the Peacemakers camp, sits on a rock in the sun during a group discussion.

Rick Van De Water with St. Thomas Moore Church in San Francisco talks with **Rabbi Amy Eilberg** from Mendota Heights, St. Paul, Minn., during group discussion at the Peacemakers camp.

Group leader Ken Kramarz told the campers a story from the Coast Miwok, whose tribal ancestors once inhabited the Sierra. A boy tells his grandfather: "I feel that I have two wolves fighting inside of me. One is angry and violent. The other is loving and compassionate. Who will win?"

The grandfather responds: "The one you feed."

Some campers said they were drawn to the weekend retreat because they dread another war in the Middle East. Others came to heal their wounds.

"It's hard to be Arab in Israel," said Manar Azriek, a young woman who explained that most Palestinians in Israel live in isolated communities with segregated schools. Azriek, an Arab Christian and Israeli national judo champion, grew up in northern Israel and speaks Hebrew and Arabic.

"Through the languages, I know both cultures. I have two identities. It was tearing me apart," said Azriek, who moved to San Diego in June. "I feel both sides' sadness. ... I had to leave."

It was a time to shed feelings of prejudice.

Dina Helweh of Milpitas, the mother of a young girl, said she had spent little time with Jews before moving to the Bay Area from Lebanon six years ago, when she "learned that they are human. I thought Jewish people were beasts with no heart."

In the mornings, the participants met in a shady grove of pines and incense cedar trees. They were divided into groups of four, and later



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into couples. They were asked to address questions such as: How do you describe the root cause of the conflict? What does the term "suicide bomber" mean to you?

"With the increasing violence, I have developed more prejudice, more bigotry," said Debbie Rakotomala, 52, of San Francisco, a second-generation Russian Jew. "It's come with the suicide bombings.

"I see ourselves as two sides of the same coin, but it's a volatile situation," Rakotomala said. "I think Israel was born out of absolute desperation. They needed a place to live, and they didn't give a hell who they pushed out. ... I don't think anything will be solved with violence. Someday, people will get tired of fighting."

Adel Nazzal, 57, an Arab American chemist from San Jose, said: "In the U.S. press, Palestinian has become almost synonymous with the term 'suicide bomber' and the term 'terrorist,' unfortunately."

Nazzal, who lived the first 18 years of his life in Ramallah on the West Bank, said suicide bombings are acts of ultimate desperation. "I imagine there were many people at Auschwitz who would have been ready to be suicide bombers if given the chance," he said.

Across the glen, pairs were engaged in similar conversations. At the end of their dialogue, a young Jewish woman and a Palestinian man hugged in a long, tear-streamed embrace.



In the dappled light of a hillside, people sit in groups to discuss many questions..



Teens sit on the grass during one of many discussions during the Peacemakers camp. Forty-three teens were among the participants at the camp this year.

Only 45 people attended the first Peacemakers Camp in 2003. This year, there were more applicants than could be accepted at Camp Tawonga, which has an 85-year tradition as a Jewish family camp. Funding for the event came from individuals and foundations including the Walter & Elise Haas Family Fund.

This year's campers included veteran peace activists as well as a former Israeli soldier and Palestinian fighters who have put down their weapons to form a group called Combatants for Peace.

A peacemaker from the West Bank said his house was stoned after he set up meetings between Palestinians and Israelis. An Israeli activist recalled her fright when soldiers fired smoke grenades at her group of demonstrators during a peace march.

Many campers voiced frustration with the powers that be.

"For me, the Hezbollah are not terrorists; they are freedom fighters," Iman Bodarna, an Arab Muslim who lives in Sakneen in northern Israel, said through a translator. "The Jewish think all Arabs are terrorists. We're the same as you. Heart: You have, we have. Eyes: You have, we have."

Bodarna, the mother of five children, added: "I can't rely on the politicians to do anything. For me, a simple woman with kids, it is a struggle to survive. We have been fighting for a long time. We have no more strength."

It was not always easy to listen.

"That wasn't a dialogue. That was a monologue," said Ann Rubin, a middle-aged Jew from San Francisco, who added that she was surprised the conference didn't reflect a broader range of views.

Some of the most intense conversations occurred late in the evenings on a lazy wooden deck where a dozen young adults -- most of them Palestinians -- gathered on sofas to sip Arabic coffee and share hookah pipes.

"I came here just to talk, not to play," said Muhannad Braik, a young Palestinian man who lives in Ramallah. "This is our problem: The world doesn't know about us. You've heard about bin Laden, but I would like to tell the story of the good things about Islam."

It was a time to share cultures.

Saheer Siam of Jerusalem, the mother of three children, exhibited a traditional Palestinian dress and shawl, along with family photos of her ancestors, on a table in the dining hall. Also on exhibit was a book about a family's journey from Russia to America and others' stories from the Holocaust.

There was also time for fun.

A talent show featured everything from the dabke dance to a rabbi joke, as well as two young Americans who performed a hilarious song, a send-up of the camp's serious tone: "We want to Di-a-logue/We're going to Save-the-world, Ba-by."



Palestinians socialize around the waterpipe at the Peacemakers camp.

A discussion turns emotional for Judy Serebrin, of Redwood City, at the Peacemakers camp.



The camp's 43 teens seemed eager to mingle and make new friends.

"You are the future," a group leader told them.

Rami, a 15-year-old boy from Iraq, said the camp's teen dance, which featured a mix of international music, was the high point of his stay. "It was my first time," he said, adding that American rap was his favorite.

"I never thought I'd be in a place where I could listen to both sides and be exposed to the fears of both sides," said Amar Taha, 16, of Kfar Kassem, Israel. "We've become brothers. ... I hope this camp will be just the beginning of peace."

The day before leaving camp, several women met by the river and talked about how to move forward.

"We need to find ways to support each other as peace organizations rather than compete with each other for scarce funds," said Devorah Brous, a young American Jew who lives in Jerusalem.

Brous is the founder of a nonprofit group called Bustan, whose projects include building a medical clinic for Bedouins, who once roamed the desert with livestock but have been confined by the Israeli government to urban ghettos and "unrecognized villages" that do not appear on official maps.

Before leaving, the campers pledged to stay in touch via e-mail and collaborate on new projects.

Gail Weinstein, an instructor at San Francisco State University, made plans to travel to the West Bank in December to conduct literacy-related workshops called "Learners' Lives" for Palestinian teachers. The classes are designed to help students tell their stories.

Bodarna, the Muslim woman who had spoken of her powerlessness, summed up her feelings: "There's been lots of talk. Now there's need for action. I feel like a battery that's been recharged. ... We need to send a message to our governments for more peace and compassion. We need to build an infrastructure for peace."

Said and Ofer Margalit, who had confronted each other on the first day of camp, ended up eating meals together and laughing.

"We've become good friends," Margalit said. "I don't know if we'll be friends for life, but the bad feelings have disappeared. I think we've built some trust."



In the main hall are items exhibited by families attending camp.

Aliya Suliman, an Israeli Arab, makes coffee for herself in the camp kitchen.



Avi London-Wynn, 8, from Albany, plays ping-pong with his mom.



For more information on the Oseh Shalom-Sanea al-Salam Palestinian-Jewish Family Peacemakers Camp, go to

http://www.tawonga.org/wf_nature.html and Google "Palestinian Jewish Camp 2006"

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