

Reconciliation in Israel and Palestine

“I discovered the human being where there should have been an enemy”

Bassam Aramin is Palestinian, Rami Elhanan is Israeli. Both lost their daughters to the Middle East conflict. How do they remain friends, despite everything?

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Versöhnung in Israel und Palästina: „Ich entdeckte den Menschen, wo ein Feind sein sollte“

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Bassam Aramin (left) and Rami Elhanan have been friends for twenty years.

Photo: Wolfgang Borrs

Interview by **Mitsuo Iwamoto**

In 1997, Israeli Rami Elhanan was listening to the radio in his car when he heard about a suicide bombing in Jerusalem. His daughter Smadar was there with a friend in a pedestrian zone to buy school books. A Hamas assassin killed her. Smadar was thirteen years old. Bassam Aramin's ten-year-old daughter Abir was on her way home from school in Anata in the West Bank in 2007 when she was hit in the head by a rubber bullet fired by an Israeli border police officer in front of a candy store. Abir died in hospital three days later.

In September 2025, Rami Elhanan, now 76, and Bassam Aramin, 56, sit in an office in Berlin to talk about their friendship. They have been invited by the Kreuzberg Initiative Against Anti-Semitism. It is an unlikely friendship. Elhanan was once an Israeli soldier. Aramin fought against the Israeli army as a teenager and ended up spending seven years in prison for it. But the deaths of their daughters brought them both to the Parents Circle, an organisation that creates space for exchange between families who have lost loved ones to the Middle East conflict.

taz: Mr Elhanan, Mr Aramin, you have been committed to peace for decades. But the last two years have been the bloodiest in Israel and Palestine since the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. How has this changed your work?

Rami Elhanan: We have to start from scratch. From a very low point, where the humiliation, anger and frustration on both sides are so great that no one wants to listen, no one shows compassion.

In the interview: Rami Elhanan

is an Israeli peace activist. He fought in three wars as part of the Israeli army. At the age of 47, he lost his daughter in a Hamas suicide bombing. He was co-director of Parents Circle for many years and, together with his wife, campaigns for an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

taz: That seems understandable given the pain caused by the Hamas attack and the pain caused by the destruction wrought by the Israeli army in Gaza.

Elhanan: We weren't prepared for these atrocities. But we had feared for many years that the occupation would lead to an act like the one on 7 October. The last two years have reinforced our conviction that we must redouble our efforts to break through the blockade in the minds of people on both sides.

In the interview: Bassam Aramin

is a Palestinian peace activist. As a teenager, he was part of a militant resistance group and spent seven years in prison. He co-founded the organisation Combatants for Peace and was co-director of the Parents Circle for many years. He is a recipient of the Bremen Peace Prize.

taz: You both once had this barrier in your minds too. Mr Aramin, you were born in 1969 in the south of the West Bank, first living in a cave with your family in the traditional way, then later moving to a village. What image did you have of Israelis as a young person?

Elhanan: Dir balak.

Bassam Aramin: He says to me, 'Watch out, be careful what you say.' (*Both laugh*) For me, the Israeli soldiers were very strange people. We children didn't understand their language. We didn't know why they were coming to our village. Their behaviour was very brutal. I noticed that they went crazy when they saw the Palestinian flag. So, I formed a local military group – that's what we called it – with four other children, and we started hoisting the Palestinian flag at night. It was a crime punishable by up to twelve months in prison. But for us, it was like a sacred mission to annoy the soldiers.

taz: Why?

Aramin: It was a game for us. We knew they hated it, so we wanted to do it. And a few years later, we found these old weapons in a cave. The members of my group threw grenades and shot at an Israeli patrol. Fortunately, no one was injured in the attack because they didn't really know how to use the weapons. But a year later, when I was 17, we were all arrested. I spent seven years in prison. It was only there that I really began to study Palestinian history.

taz: In prison?

Aramin: Yes. It came about through my Israeli prison guard, Shimon Herzl, who asked me questions. He said: We Jews have been here for 2,000 years, what about you? You Palestinians, who are you actually? Do you even have roots in this country? I didn't know. But I wanted to discuss it with him. So, I went to my cell to read.

taz: Did you continue talking to your guard afterwards?

Aramin: We had many more conversations. I was happy when I could tell him that we Palestinians have our own history, that Jaffa was once the cultural capital of the Middle East. At some point, Herzl understood that I wasn't a terrorist. I was just a child who became a fighter. We became friends.

taz: That sounds incredible.

Aramin: Herzl helped me to understand Jewish history better. I was shocked by the crimes committed against them. I discovered human beings where I expected to find enemies. That doesn't mean that I agree with the Israeli occupation. But it's very important to know the history of others.



Abir Aramin was killed by an Israeli border police officer. Smadar Elhanan was killed by a Hamas assassin.
Photo: Wolfgang Borrs

taz: Mr Elhanan, let's start from the beginning with you too. What image did you have of Palestinians as a young person?

Elhanan: I had a very sheltered childhood without Arabs. I was born in Jerusalem in 1949, my father was a policeman, my mother a nurse. I never heard anything about the expulsion of the Palestinians during the founding of Israel; it simply did not feature in the Israeli education system. Later, I was a soldier in a total of three wars.

taz: The fact that your life crossed paths with that of Bassam Aramin has to do with 4 September 1997. On that day, Hamas suicide bombers killed your daughter and four other people, and more than a hundred were injured.

Elhanan: I was so full of rage. She was a little girl, she hadn't hurt anyone. And she had to die. For what? Because she was Jewish? Because she was Israeli? Because she was white? Because she was a girl? My rage was eating me up inside. In the end, it was the meetings with the Parents Circle that gave me a reason to get out of bed in the morning again.

taz: **At the Parents Circle, relatives of victims of the Middle East conflict meet and listen to each other without comparing their pain.**

Elhanan: I was curious and went there. It was the first time I met Palestinians as human beings. Not as workers on the street. Not as terrorists in the news. To this day, I am ashamed that it took me 47 years to do so.

taz: **Did you have reservations?**

Elhanan: The turning point for me came when I saw the Palestinian bereaved families getting off the buses and coming towards me, shaking my hand, hugging me, crying with me. It was like an earthquake for me. I remember how this old Arab woman in her traditional black Palestinian dress came up to me. She was carrying a picture of a six-year-old child on her chest. Just like my wife Nurit, who was carrying the name of our daughter Smadar. This sight touched me so deeply that I made my way to the other side, to him (*points to Aramin*).

Rami Elhanan and Bassam Aramin are in Berlin to present the documentary film 'Until We Talk,' which portrays their story and their work. In it, they also recount how they met in 2005 – before the death of Bassam Aramin's daughter. Rami Elhanan's son knew Aramin from a peace organisation and needed him to come home for dinner. Afterwards, Aramin invited the Israeli family to visit him in the West Bank.

As they walked together through the Palestinian town of Anata, Elhanan was afraid that a terrorist could be waiting for him around every corner. But gradually, the families grew closer. In 2007, Aramin's daughter Abir was shot by an Israeli soldier, and Elhanan was at his side. Together they stood at Abir's bedside and prayed. Without success. Elhanan relived the feelings he had experienced when his own daughter died. The powerlessness, the anger, the horror. And for a moment he wondered whether the death of his daughter would change his friend's attitude.

taz: **Mr Aramin, when your daughter was killed, did you doubt whether reconciliation was the right path to take?**

Aramin: I saw Abir's death as a kind of test. A test from God. He is watching to see which path I will choose.

taz: **An unimaginably difficult task.**

Aramin: Yes, but I emerged from it even more determined. Because what does revenge do to you? If you give in to it, you yourself become a murderer. You create another victim. You will probably cause the next victim to be on your own side. Because the other side will also come to take revenge.

taz: **The Israeli police initially concluded that the Israelis involved were not responsible for Abir's death. Four and a half years later, Israel's Supreme Court ruled that the border police were responsible and ordered the state to pay compensation. However, there were no criminal consequences. Have you ever met the Israeli border policeman who shot your daughter?**

Aramin: I met him in court. And I said to him: I want you to understand that you killed an innocent ten-year-old girl. You are neither a warrior nor a hero. You did not kill an enemy. You only killed an innocent girl. And yet, if you should ever ask me for forgiveness, I will forgive you.

taz: Are you both religious?

Aramin: I am a devout Muslim. Rami doesn't consider himself religious. But I think he is very religious. (*Rami laughs*) Because at its core, every religion is about love. About cooperation. About humanity.

Elhanan: See, that's how radical Muslims sound.

Aramin: Just respect your fellow human beings, that's all. That's religion. According to this definition of religion, Rami is a great rabbi.

taz: Nevertheless, your work meets with a lot of resistance in Israel. As early as 2017, there were scenes in which you, Mr Elhanan, were shouted at by right-wing extremist Israelis at your events, accusing you of destroying the state that protects you.

Elhanan: That is the reality we face in Israel today. Anyone who dares to show understanding for the other side and speak their mind is met with extreme harshness. Neighbours cross the street to avoid meeting me. And on social media, people write to me: 'It's a shame you weren't blown up together with your daughter.'

Aramin (*looking up from his mobile phone*): A member of the Parents Circle, his name is Mazen, has just lost a relative in Gaza. A child, maybe five or six years old. He was shot dead in a refugee camp in Gaza. This happens every day.

Elhanan: What is happening in Gaza is terrible. The whole situation makes me ashamed to be Israeli and ashamed to be human. The Israeli government is using the right to self-defence for revenge. Pure revenge, which will bring nothing but more revenge. Because the Hamas murderers of 7 October 2014, when Israel attacked Gaza, were 10- to 12-year-old children. What will today's Palestinian victims do when they come of age? Where will they direct their hatred, their anger? It's a cycle that never ends. It will go on and on and on until we humans are able to see ourselves as human beings.

taz: Can an appeal to humanity really resolve this conflict?

Aramin: We, the people who live in Israel and Palestine, are paying the price for this war. Groups such as Parents Circle, Combatants for Peace and Standing Together, which promote understanding and compassion, will prevail in the end. We have no doubt about that. The only question is when.

As an agreement between the Israeli government and Hamas looms this week, we write to Rami Elhanan and Bassam Aramin again to ask how they view Trump's peace plan. Is this the solution you had hoped for? Rami Elhanan responds promptly: 'The proposal is hollow and hypocritical.' It seems counterintuitive: the people who have been campaigning for peace for years are disappointed when the army wants to withdraw and hostages are to be released? Elhanan explains that the release of hostages and Palestinian prisoners does give cause for hope. But the plan continues to ignore the core of the conflict, namely that millions of people in Palestine live under Israeli occupation. A genuine agreement must grant the Palestinians democratic rights. However, this is not provided for anywhere in the current negotiations.



Rami Elhanan (left) and Bassam Aramin were invited to Berlin by the Kreuzberg Initiative Against Anti-Semitism.
Photo: Wolfgang Borrs

taz: Mr Aramin, when you were a student, you were in prison. But later you studied peace research in the United Kingdom and wrote your master's thesis on the Holocaust. Why?

Aramin: I really wanted to understand my counterpart. And during my studies in England, I realised that, in a sense, I am also a victim of the Holocaust. Because we Palestinians became the victims of the victims.

taz: Does that sound presumptuous, Mr Elhanan?

Elhanan: You know, I am the son of a Holocaust survivor. My late father's parents were murdered in Auschwitz. For a long time, he never said a word about it. It was only when he was in hospital for an appendectomy and I was sitting at his bedside that he began to talk. After that, I became intensely interested in the history of the Holocaust. At times, it felt like an addiction to learn more about it. And although I received many invitations, I never travelled to Germany. Hearing German was like the sound of fingernails on glass to me. I couldn't even bear the thought of it.

taz: Nevertheless, we are talking to each other today in Berlin. How did that become possible?

Elhanan: Through Bassam. In 2014, we were at a demonstration together against the Gaza War when he took me aside to ask me for a favour. A joint lecture tour to Germany. Inside, everything inside me contracted. But I said, okay. We drove together to Dachau, where school buses with German teenagers were visiting the memorial. We saw the golden plaques on the pavements of Berlin. That fundamentally changed my perspective on the Germans.

taz: Is there optimism in the history of coming to terms with the Shoah?

Aramin: Nowhere is it written that we will kill each other forever. That is a fact. The Germans killed six million Jews. And yet today there is a German ambassador in Tel Aviv and an Israeli ambassador in Berlin. Neither have we Palestinians killed six million Israelis, nor have the Israelis killed six million Palestinians. History shows that we don't have to continue as before.