Abstract

This is an account of three weeks spent in Israel and the Occupied Territories talking to activists and volunteers engaged in initiatives to foster cooperation and understanding between Israelis and Palestinians. Interviews in the article include: with the Siraj Centre who run walking tours in the West Bank and along the renowned Abraham Peace Trail; Yesh Din who investigate infringements of personal and property rights experienced by Palestinians in the Occupied Territories; The Greenhouse at Kibbutz ein Shemer, where Israeli and Palestinian youth collaborate in conducting scientific, ecologically based experiments; Neve Shalom where Jews and Palestinian Arabs have been living together for fifty years; Derech Hachlama whose volunteers drive Palestinian families with sick children from checkpoints to Israeli hospitals; and others. Within the context of the Netanyahu government’s increasingly hard-line approach to the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza, the unsung story of this intrepid band of warriors for peaceful coexistence deserves telling.

Keywords: Arab/Jewish relations, Israel, Occupied Territories, Palestine, peace-activism, reconciliation and peace, Separation Wall

Four years ago I travelled to Israel and Palestine for research on my novel-in-progress. It was the first time I’d been back since working on a kibbutz in 1960 before I went to university, and it was an emotionally wrenching trip. Afterwards I wrote of how, during a walking tour on the West Bank, I’d found my intention to remain neutral and even-handed pushed to the limit. In 2015 I returned to explore whether there were any ‘pockets of hope’ at all in the seemingly intractable relations between Israelis and Palestinians.

To Netanyahu and his party, and to the majority of Israelis, a two-state solution is no longer a desirable or foreseeable option. Yet behind the Separation Wall – and to many ‘out of sight’ – the Palestinians continue to suffer from oppressions and infringements of liberty meted out by the
occupying power on a daily basis, with no obvious end in sight. Despite this, are there still people in Israel, and on the West Bank and Gaza, I wanted to find out, who hold firm to the belief that they can live peaceably alongside their neighbours given a chance, and are doing something in their life towards that aim? And if so, where might they be found?

When I emailed my intention to write an article on ‘Pockets of Hope’, Israeli friends’ response was so uniformly enthusiastic it occurred to me that it is probably a rare event for a writer from Europe at present to come to their country with such a focus! Everyone, it seemed, knew of some person, or organization, that could constitute ‘a pocket’. In Jerusalem, through therapist friends, I was introduced to Psycho-Active, their political branch, whose members proved particularly helpful. Soon my notebook was crammed with addresses of people I might be interested to meet. For the next nine days, I criss-crossed the country talking to people. From situation to fraught situation I found my own mood see-sawing, but I was frequently surprised and profoundly moved. The conversations described in this article open a window on a rarely documented segment of Israeli life: the valiant minority who are keeping peace in their sights, and – against the odds – hope alive.

We start in the Tel Aviv office of Yesh Din (‘Let There Be Justice’) with Neta Patrick, the Executive Director, and Communications Director Gilad Grossman. Their team of volunteers, field workers and expert lawyers investigate infringements of personal or property rights (such as land theft, burning of trees and property, ‘roughing up’, intimidation) experienced by Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. If there is a complaint about the actions of settlers, army or police, an Israeli volunteer will go along with a Palestinian field worker to take down a statement and decide whether there are grounds to file charges against those responsible. Even if there is a case, I am told, most Palestinians will not take the matter forward, for very real fear of reprisals. Only a few will choose to take the risk. And of those, very few succeed. So why do the work, I ask? Sometimes a case is successful. I am given an example, small as it is, of a recent case where a Palestinian was stopped by an Israeli soldier, who ordered the man to drive him to a nearby settlement. The Palestinian was terrified. He feared he was being kidnapped, as Palestinians aren’t allowed into the settlements. It transpired the soldier simply wanted a lift to save him walking! And he was prosecuted.

The large land claims are fought by eminent human rights lawyer Michael Sfard, who started Yesh Din and out of whose offices they work. And sometimes, if rarely, there are satisfying results. ‘It is an uphill struggle’, admits Gilad, lightening when he remembers the success in Migron in 2012 where a building had been destroyed, or in Beit El in the same
year where a house had been built on privately owned land, or in 2014 in Amona, the largest outpost in the West Bank, where it took two years to evict settlers from Palestinian land. ‘We’re happy when we win’, he says, ‘but we are very realistic, we know the figures are disheartening. Last year there were a mere six or seven indictments, despite all our efforts. The Israeli government can keep changing a law to make it impossibly difficult. The main thing is that it is important for those who have been badly treated to be able to have someone listen to them (and particularly to be able to tell a Jew)’.

One of the main satisfactions, Gilad says, that makes it all worthwhile, is a very modest but important thing: to de-demonize the other. The distressed Palestinians see Jewish volunteers who listen to their complaints, take them seriously, write a report, try to help. All the information is kept on the website and forms the basis for research. Members of Yesh Din are welcome in the villages. They provide a different experience and give some remnant of hope by exemplifying the belief in a common humanity. But it is very little. And the work is grim often enough and frustrating.

Leaving the office, I eat what’s described on the board as a ‘workers’ lunch’ at a nearby café in sombre contemplation. Faced with the implacable machinery of the Israeli project to demolish homes and whole communities, can any amount of goodwill put against that make any real difference?

I take a bus from Jerusalem travelling south of Bethlehem towards the Palestinian town of Beit Sahur on the West Bank. We dismount at an entirely dehumanizing checkpoint, and wind single file through its barbed wire yards, then through the twists and turns of barrack-like corridors. It’s eerily silent today. You’re conscious that invisible eyes are scrutinizing you. Sheep-like, moving through pens, you follow the person ahead. The relief of being out the other side in bright sunlight afterwards.

The taxi driver who drives me the short distance onwards to Beit Sahur bitterly describes the West Bank as a very large prison. Where is optimism to be found here, I wonder, as I step into the busy office of the Siraj Centre, which runs walking tours in Palestine. But Michael, the director, is a man who positively exudes it. Talking fast, telephones ringing, he tells me how the walking holidays have gone from strength to strength since I did mine. In 2012, they won the ‘Responsible Tourism’ award, and in 2014 the National Geographic ‘Ten Best New Trails’ award. These bring more people than ever from abroad. But at the same time, he has extended the centre’s programme to include many other walks.

‘The five-day walk you went on’, Michael tells me, ‘only suits a certain kind of person with the time and the stamina. We decided to
offer shorter walks so that different kinds of people would come to our country, to enjoy Palestinian hospitality and culture. The walks also open the eyes of walkers to the reality around. Though people might come initially for spiritual reasons, or because they have environmental interests, they may well end up becoming a supporter of justice and peace activism.

‘As well, we are now promoting walks for Palestinians. Unfortunately, many from the towns no longer walk today as part of a way of life. That has been lost. And we want to re-introduce it, to get families and young people out into the countryside.’ They offer cost price walks to women’s union groups, and to Palestinian scout groups free travel, and free meals if they clear garbage from around the path as they go. My ears prick up at this. The litter and the open fires burning garbage outside every village are a distressing sight. They are planning some family walking weekends. Michael is brimming with ideas. He believes that walking is not only healthy, but regenerative to the soul. I want to ask him what well he dips into to retain his bounce, but he is already turning to address the questions of two employees who are waving papers and gesticulating. He apologizes to me with wry humour… ‘if only there was more time in the day…’.

Back on the other side of the Separation Wall, optimism positively exudes from the team at The Greenhouse situated at Kibbutz ein Shemer, a fifty-minute drive north of Tel Aviv. This vast structure, seven metres high and the size of a football pitch, was constructed in 1977 by the acclaimed Israeli artist Avital Geva, and is currently run by his son Noam. Their aim is to provide a space where young people of different backgrounds and with different life experiences conduct scientific, ecologically based experiments as a means of breaking down barriers between Jews and Arabs but also between children from regular schools and children with special needs, the victims of crime, all sorts of ‘others’.

I’ve been driven out to the kibbutz by Ilana Yron, a recently retired stem-cell biologist from Tel Aviv University, who two years ago created an after-school programme at The Greenhouse called ‘Growing Together’, where equal numbers of Jews and Palestinian Arabs with Israeli citizenship share classes with dual teaching in both languages. Noam and Ilana show me around.

This must be a young person’s paradise, I’m thinking. The greenhouse is warm but pleasantly so (outside the temperature is soaring into the forties), in no way overbearing, a huge open space divided into many smaller spaces, some designated classrooms with tables and chairs and shelves on which a variety of plants are growing in containers, maps, diagrams, walls dotted with drawings. Imagine a space large enough to accommodate three ponds, one of which children can dip into, one containing a system where recycled water showers back into the pond from
above, giving rise to a soft, moist air. Much that is growing provides the roof with necessary shade; in other places panels block the sun’s direct rays but leave the place wonderfully light.

The projects are of different levels of sophistication, involving children from the age of nine to eighteen. Over here children have been experimenting with producing protein, sugar and fuel from algae. There is work being done with food waste, with bees, with ‘warm farms’, hydroponic and micro-algae investigations. In the office, I am shown a 3D model made by a fourteen-year-old boy of an entirely new device for collecting and measuring the toxins on the ocean bottom. And over here a mock-up of a whale-like creature that is an agro-dynamic tent which will withstand gale-force winds. Research students from MIT are involved in a unique 3D printing technology project, as well as researchers from universities within Israel and leading industries.

It is hard to imagine an environment more heartening, given over to broadening a child’s mind by exploring how to protect and care for our beleaguered planet. While engaged in this way, children of different races, in a war-torn country, where fear and mistrust abound on both sides, have the opportunity to work alongside each other, form friendships, forget about each other’s differences and instead experience their commonality.

Are there difficulties when they first come together, I ask? Of course, certainly there can be, Ilana answers. She gives me the example of a Jewish boy, as a Growing Together project got underway, complaining that an Arab boy was throwing stones at him. When called to account, the Arab boy insisted that they weren’t stones, merely pebbles, it had only been a game, and that he hadn’t understood the other boy’s asking him in Hebrew to stop. Skilled facilitating at times like this is essential, particularly at the onset of a project. But before long the excitement and immediacy of the scientific engagement becomes primary, she says. Differences fade into the background so that by the end they are barely aware of each other as from separate ethnic groups. In the video I watch, you see the children working in pairs and teams, you hear their recorded words, over and over the same story, ‘we stopped thinking of “them” as other. We were one team, we became friends’.

Witnessing two of the issues I feel most passionately about being addressed together in a unique way in this setting has to be good for the soul: reminiscent of first hearing of Daniel Barenboim’s orchestra of young Israelis and Palestinians. Today, at least, the sad stories of Yesh Din recede for a while.

Next day my friend Amira and I head off to Neve Shalom (Wahat al-Salam), lying between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, a village where Jews
and Palestinian Arabs with Israeli citizenship have been living together for nearly fifty years. This well-established community is still going strong. The community is built on a hilltop and is a peaceful environment of stunning beauty, its paths and small roads bordered by established shrubs, climbers, bushes. Today few people are about. In a nearby village, houses belonging to people who have built without the requisite building permits are being demolished. The locals are demonstrating and members of Neve Shalom have gone over to support them. The school day though is in progress, the children taught equally in Hebrew and Arabic with teachers of both races.

By fortunate chance, Bob Fenton, the Communications and Development Officer, hasn’t gone on the protest. He tells us about Neve Shalom’s leading role in this bilingual teaching and how a successful bilingual school started in Jerusalem uses similar methods. Both Arab and Jewish teachers wanting to learn how to teach bilingually are provided training at Neve Shalom. There is also an international Peace School, a small hotel – a perfect place to rest and recharge your batteries – an outdoor swimming pool, and a stunning round building for spiritual contemplation. They support the integration of spiritual life within the context of Arab/Jewish relations.

As in all communities, this one has had its difficulties. From the late 1990s onwards, as the idea of a peaceful solution to the Jewish/Palestinian issue seemed more elusive than ever, the people at Neve Shalom sometimes experienced a sense of losing their way, wondering what was the point, feeling despair. They had hoped to provide a beacon for a way forward, and as that became more and more unlikely, there was some re-evaluation of their role and usefulness. But they go on believing in the importance of demonstrating that the peaceful living together of Jews and Arabs in a single community can be done, albeit with a privileged few (the lease of the land being 25–50,000 dollars, plus ground rents, means only Palestinian Arabs with Israeli citizenship with relatively well-paid jobs are likely to be able to afford to become members). Nowadays they also showcase their ideals through the Peace School and other world initiatives. And within the peace movement worldwide, they probably have more of a role than at home in Israel where you feel that if they haven’t exactly been side-stepped, they are not, on the other hand, central.

But they remain there, and they continue to evolve with changing circumstances like through the building of a hotel, and the Peace School that draws international participation. Perhaps most important of all, the next generation of Jews and Palestinian Arabs with Israeli citizenship (who grew up together at Neve Shalom, left to train in the cities, or if Jewish, to go into the army) are now returning. They want to bring up
their children in the same way they have been brought up, in a com-

munity where Jews and Arabs live integrated lives and take for granted
tolerations of religious and cultural differences.

It is a good place. You feel it. It may have struggles and not have the
impact it would have liked on the larger community within Israel, but
its core is unquestionably intact. I ask Bob whether he feels optimistic
for the future. There is a pause, even a sigh, then: ‘The community see
a vision and keep focused on that’. They have a quote on their website
from a visitor: ‘Visiting and talking to the residents of this village gave me
the hope that reconciliation and peace are possible’.

Reconciliation is just as key for the volunteers working with the orga-
nization Derech Hachlama (‘On the Road to Recovery’), which was started
by Yuval Roth after his brother was killed by Hamas. Yuval’s team drive
Palestinian families with sick children from the checkpoints to the Israeli
hospitals, and back again. Palestinians are not allowed to drive their cars
through the checkpoints so it otherwise requires a taxi at around ninety
dollars a time, or a lengthy bus journey.

In Jerusalem, I meet two of the volunteers, Ruta and her friend Yoram.
Ruta, a psychologist in her late sixties or seventies, has been driving the
same little boy from Hebron once a week for four years. The boy has
kidney and liver failure and needs daily dialysis to remain alive. There are
no dialysis machines in the West Bank. The round trip the family make
six days a week to keep the boy alive takes four hours. Ruta has learnt
Arabic so as to get to know the family better. They have become friends
over the years and after the treatment they often return to her home for
a visit.

The parents accompany the boy, but the grandfather who would oth-
erwise wish to as head of the family is not allowed over the checkpoint,
for reasons unclear. This upsets him and he has devised an ingenious way
of being in touch with and thanking the Israeli team of eight who are
helping his grandson. He has got to know them by phone, these people
he has never seen. ‘He phones regularly’, says Ruta, ‘it has become quite
a feature. He wants to know how I am and takes a caring interest. He
even wants to know what he can send for me from Hebron. Little gifts
from his garden, and so forth’.

Ruta also tells me that in her street live Israeli Jews at one end and
Palestinian Jerusalemites at the other. So far, the two communities have
kept to themselves. But now, through her experiences with the family in
Hebron, Ruta is starting initiatives for the women in the two communities
to get together. So far, this has taken place at the community centre. She
has invited one of the young women to her house on several occasions
but gathers this might be putting pressure on her neighbour within her
own community, so they are going to continue meeting in the shared hall for the present. But again, she sees this as a beginning.

Yoram has been helping a family by ferrying their son to hospital in Jerusalem for eight years. The family used to live in the north of Israel but have moved nearer the hospital. Unlike Ruta, he has not learnt Arabic but nevertheless has developed an important relationship with the boy and his family over the years. Now the boy is eighteen, he comes by himself. During the trips, they make jokes and have a real connection. But Yoram speaks of his political despair. It weighs heavily on him. Much of the despair is centred on the work he also does for Yesh Din and what a tiny drop the results so often are.

Despair and hope so finely balanced. Does it depend on the temperament you have? And does it in the end come down to individual acts, I’m wondering, the drops in the pond that build a momentum?

I accompany Amira, my host for some of my visit, who is part of the Derech Hachlama organization, to the Naalin checkpoint to bring a sick child into a hospital in Tel Aviv. We get up at 5.30, leave at 6 am. Sometimes the soldiers at the crossing hold the families up at the checkpoints, Amira says you can never tell. She has had to wait up to two hours on occasion. The drill appears well organized. That morning Amira learns that it won’t be the girl she was expecting, but a boy from a different family. We get to the border. There is no delay. Out come a young Palestinian man and woman with an alabaster pale child of around seven who has leukaemia and is about to have a bone transplant in his leg.

Amira doesn’t speak Arabic. They get into the car. Relief, and smiles of gratefulness. The boy cradles his head against the man’s side and goes to sleep. The man, speaking softly, tells us that they will be with him in the hospital for his six-week stay while the operation is performed. He says that his son is scared. The atmosphere is sombre. No small talk, only as smooth a drive as possible to the hospital. Because it is early, there is little traffic on the road, nor is it too hot. It transpires the woman is not the mother but the aunt. What has happened to the mother isn’t broached. She is not at home, clearly, because it is the man’s mother who is looking after his other children while he is away for this long stretch.

The young Palestinian woman says almost nothing. But there are signs of her independence in her contemporary clothes and her not wearing a headscarf. They occupy themselves mostly with the boy who wakes now, trying to reassure him, and perhaps themselves. You feel the trio awash in a strange and frightening new place. The enormity of what is ahead for these three is palpable. We drive in silence, feeling for them. When we arrive at the gate of the hospital, there are more security checks. We must leave them here. They get out of the car and Amira
retrieves their travelling case from the boot. They are fulsome with their hugs, their thanks, accepting our good wishes. With their permission, I take a photo of them, a brave and mournful little family, setting off to a hospital under a foreign and no doubt daunting administration, with the hope that this transplant will succeed in saving this very ill child’s life.

We watch them go with our hearts in our mouths. And next week it will be another child, another family smiling through their fear, when one warm and human Israeli meets them and helps their passage on their dark journey with uncertain outcome. Treats them with respect. Israeli Jewish volunteer and Palestinian family are meeting one another not as enemies, as those on the other side, but as people sharing a common humanity.

In the sherut (communal taxi) driving from the airport to Jerusalem, I’d sat opposite an engaging young man studying in the rabbinical school in Old Jerusalem. He has no aspiration to become a rabbi, he’d told me. So why was he studying there, I’d asked? To be a better Jew, a better human being, he said. So eager, so fresh and hopeful. Then, as we alighted, he told me he had to move quickly through the streets. ‘It is the saddest thing of course’, he said, as if it was simply a shared knowledge, ‘“they” want to kill us. It’s how they are. What we have to put up with…’.

If the volunteers in places like Derech Hachlama are doing one incontrovertibly worthwhile thing, alongside the practical and vital work of helping families get their children to the medical care they need, it is in de-demonizing the ‘other’. In showing that there are Israelis who care, that there is another face to that of the soldier at the crossing.

I talk with a mother and daughter who are two of the ‘drops in the ocean’ – individuals committed to trying to make a difference. The daughter, Tamar, tells me that during her training as an art therapist working with sand-tray therapy she became friends with a Palestinian Arab with Israeli citizenship who lived nearby in Pardas Channa. Her colleague, who is married to a Bedouin, then moved to Beersheba, where she teaches thirteen–sixteen-year-olds in the Bedouin village school of Lakya. There are many traumatized children at the school as Bedouins were rocketed by Hamas in last year’s war. Her colleague’s head teacher is supportive of her therapeutic work. Tamar and her colleague offer a day of sand-tray therapy, with Tamar bringing her daughter’s class of Israeli Jews to the school so that the children can meet and work together through the sand play. The day is an ‘eye-opener’ for the participants, Tamar tells me. Everyone wants to repeat it, this time at the Jewish Israeli school, but the geographical distance between the two communities (two and a half hours by car) and the fact that the mothers from Lakya don’t have cars, has made it difficult to arrange a return visit so far. So no development yet. Some of the children write to one another, keeping up
the friendships formed. Tamar would like to do more of this work. This is very little she says, it is my mother you should talk to…

Meanwhile, the area in which Tamar lives is one where there are a number of Arab villages and also nearby is the Jewish town of Hadera. In Hadera, where there are people from tough economic backgrounds, a mixed group has been going for the last ten years run by two counsellors, one Jewish, one a Palestinian Arab with Israeli citizenship. The women themselves decided for a mixed group, believing there was no need for division between Jews and Arabs. Tamar went to provide a session in sand-play therapy. It was one meeting but received well. Again, she hopes to do more. Her experiences have reinforced for her the value of working across borders and in doing what she can to demystify ‘the other’ through her work.

I hope to meet Tamar’s mother, but time is short so we speak on the phone. I get the sense of a feisty woman perhaps in her late sixties. Rony has been witnessing at the checkpoints for many years, and in the Occupied Territories. She says the Israeli government ‘don’t like our work’. A lot of aggression is shown to this organization. And settlers don’t in fact behave any better because there are witnesses to their actions, though soldiers may behave better.

Rony says that it can be very tough, you can yourself be the recipient of abuse. And the job gets harder all the time. For example, the checkpoints themselves have been altered specifically so that monitors can no longer see what is going on inside. She says the work can be distressing. Rony organizes mini tours to take ordinary Israelis to the Occupied Territories to see for themselves. She drives them down by car. She seems to be driven by a huge energy. I had remarked to Tamar earlier, it must be nice, mother and daughter working in the same field equally committed. Sometimes, too, it can be hard, says Tamar. We can get each other down, too. But we try to hold on to the hope.

I am reminded of that when Rony says she has done the work for many years but now she lives further away in the north of Israel, and so the journey to the Occupied Territories is longer, and sometimes she loses her impetus to go on being a witness to this injustice, the scale of it, the no let-up from the government. It can get you down, she is implying, plus she gets more tired. But she says, ‘I tell you what keeps me going on doing the work. My family came from Germany. My children and grandchildren are living here in Israel. I imagine my grandchildren one day asking me: what did you do Grandma to stop the separation, just as the German Jews might have asked in Germany. And then I have to go on’.

I hear of other organizations; the more I ask, the more they mushroom. Other Voice, founded seven years ago by people in the area in
Israel near the Gaza border who want the IAF bombing as retribution to stop, believing it to be no answer. Jewish women from the border towns are rallying under the belief that the solution must be diplomatic, not military. And more recently, The Future of the Western Negev, an organization more aggressive in its aims and approach but with a similar message. And then there is Breaking Silence for those coming out of the army. Rabbis for Human Rights, and then Zochrot, the organization that is reclaiming the names of all the Palestinian villages that have been erased. They are putting up little plaques with the original names on near the site – similar to the paving stones in Berlin where the names of families who had been deported are recorded.

Amira tells me of the day (Independence Day) when the Palestinian Arabs with Israeli citizenship can officially return to their former villages, to visit, to stand on the earth. A day often experienced as uncomfortable by the ones now living there, and not welcomed. Amira tells me of her own experience in Poland when returning to the house her parents had had to flee from, how surprised and moved she’d been when the present incumbents welcomed her not hostilely, as she’d expected, or even mutely, but with real hospitality, and how in the moment of exchange some deeply visceral – at bone level – healing took place. Could it eventually happen in Israel? Even in Israel.

Back on the plane, I think of the children working side by side in The Greenhouse, of the Palestinian grandfather in Hebron finding his own way of offering support in thanks to Ruta in Jerusalem who is helping his grandson. I think of Rony’s fire, you have to keep going. I think of so many meetings of the ‘other’, whether institutionally or in a more personal sphere. Not at the top levels of government, but beneath the public rhetoric, a section of the populace – many more of them than I could include in this brief visit – are setting an example.

I hadn’t expected to enter a world, under the umbrella of a divided country with an intractable extreme right-wing government, where pockets of hope exist to the extent they do. During my time in Israel, I’ve found myself in daily contact with people who, within a negative political environment, are nevertheless working in individual and collective ways towards a future in which the two peoples can coexist in greater harmony. True, many of the initiatives are small. Some involve no more than a Palestinian Arab and a Jew (adult or child) sharing a common cause and in the process de-demonizing each other. Out of these, can we have any hope that the drops will culminate and one day begin to take on a force of their own?

The Berlin Wall did get dismantled. Mandela saw the collapse of apartheid in South Africa without civil war, Northern and Southern
Ireland negotiated a fragile peace where Catholics and Protestants are representatives in the same parliament. None of these outcomes seemed remotely possible for a long period in my lifetime.

In the year I was born (1942), my country was in the thick of war with Germany. We lived on the south coast and my mother, carrying me in her womb, feared a German invasion as every person in England must have, not least every Jew. Seventy-three years on, almost daily when I walk down the street I’m conscious of the good fortune to be living at a time and in a place where safety and acceptance are the norm. From this relatively stable town in southern England, where the greatest annual disruption is the jamboree of its renowned Guy Fawkes celebrations, what right have I then to write of the Israelis – who always fear the next attack and believe that their present safety is one to be guarded at all costs? Yet one of the lessons we must pull from the tragedy of the Holocaust, as Rony implied, is not to treat other peoples as we ourselves still in living memory have been treated: as inferiors, as animals, or worse.

Criticism of Israeli policies by Jews not living in Israel is sometimes called ‘anti-Semitic’. But I don’t think it is that. It is rather the opposite: a sense of wanting to be proud of other Jews seventy years after the worst tragedy in our history, of what we’ve become, of what we are going towards, of how we treat a people who this time round have less might and power, less war machinery than we do. Do we honour ‘the other’ as people too, as we would have liked to be honoured? To hear stories of the opposite makes me angry. But it also – because there is so little I can do about it – can lead to frustration and powerlessness. I recognize the leap from anger to those other emotions in myself. When I see a picture of a Palestinian youth raising a stone in his fist, I understand only too well the emotions from which that act generated. Powerless and frustrated, you may want to hurl a stone. From a stone to a rocket.

For days, I’ve been in the company of those who want to see an alternative long-term solution to Separation Wall and barbed wire pens. But the people I met on this second trip to Israel are a noble minority. Can they make the change themselves? Realistically, probably not. For that reason, I came away with no more optimism – but perhaps with marginally more hope. Because, as Barbara Kingsolver responded when asked whether she was more or less optimistic about the environment when she’d finished writing *Flight Behaviour*, ‘I don’t think I am optimistic, no’. (Pause.) ‘But I am hopeful. Because hope is a matter of choice, something you can choose to have every morning as you clean your teeth.’ Hope makes it possible to go on doing the things I saw happening. And who knows, because it has
to be the right way in the end to treat others with dignity, and as human beings, maybe more people will after all join the cause.

Afterword

Since I wrote this piece, with the steam-rolling through of new settlements on the West Bank, extensions to the Wall, ever more restrictive and unpalatable (to the Palestinians) security arrangements on the Israeli side, a situation where both aggrieved settlers and aggrieved Palestinians increasingly resort to violence – the elusive peace between Israelis and Palestinians seems ever further away. Yet remarkably, in this climate, not only are the initiatives I cover here growing in strength and reach, but new organizations aimed at furthering peaceful co-existence are mushrooming. Hope may have dimmed with the passage of time but the desire for a peaceful solution is still resonant. The story of the brave minority working towards that aim is as relevant today as ever.

Christine Cohen Park has published three novels, prose, and short story anthologies. This piece stems from a research trip to Israel and Palestine for her present novel.

Funding Charities

The Greenhouse is an NGO and non-profit organization run on a limited budget through a government grant, donations and income from educational activities. It welcomes further support (www.greenhouse.org.il).

Neve Shalom (Wahat al-Salam)’s land and public buildings are owned by the village. Friends Associations, foundations and funders, including the EU and the Israeli government, help with the infrastructure expenses (wasns.org).

Yesh Din’s donors include: the EU, the UK, Germany, Norway, Ireland, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) and HEKS-EFER (Switzerland). The organization also receives funds from the New Israel Fund (NIF), Oxfam NOVIB (Netherlands), Moriah Fund and the Open Society Institute (USA) (www.yesh-din.org).

Road to Recovery (Baderech Lehachlama/Derech Hachlama)’s activity is conducted primarily on a voluntary basis, the drivers volunteering their time and their vehicles. They receive small donations from concerned citizens to help with petrol and running costs, and from the
German organization ‘Re’ei Yisrael’ (‘Friends of Israel’) (www.roadtorecovery.org.il).

Note