

Making peace as development practice

Sumaya Farhat-Naser and Gila Svirsky

Peace-making is the ultimate site for development in that it works towards building a stable environment in which to construct a better life for future generations. The contributors to this chapter – one Israeli, one Palestinian – live in the same country, and have been associates and partners in this struggle for ten years. Yet they still cannot go out to a restaurant together, or invite one another home for a cup of coffee. Only on a recent trip to Rwanda, where they served as peace mediators, were they finally able to live their friendship openly on neutral ground. These two women are co-founders of the Jerusalem Link for Women, a peace movement split in two, ... between the Israeli Bat Shalom and the Palestinian Jerusalem Center for Women. Through educational programmes, training seminars, non-violent demonstrations, mediation, e-mail exchanges, and interviews such as the one they conducted with us to produce this chapter, they proffer strategies for developing trust, developing relationships, and negotiating difference in the most extreme of political circumstances.

Susan Perry and Celeste Schenck (eds.) *Eye to Eye: Women Practising Development Across Cultures*

Dialogue in the war zone: Israeli and Palestinian women for peace

Gila Svirsky: Sumaya always begins.

Sumaya Farhat-Naser: We have always had women and men who try to talk to each other, who crossed the barriers to speak to each other and do something for peace. But until 1992 it was forbidden to meet as politicians or to represent political positions. It was forbidden to talk to the other side – on both sides – because speaking with the enemy

was treason, a form of recognizing the enemy, and so both the PLO and the Israeli government forbade it. But there were always groups of women, individuals who met. I remember in 1986 we met for the first time, six Israeli and six Palestinian women, to develop a programme on how to continue to work with each other. These meetings continued, hidden and informal for several years.

In 1989 a group of Palestinian and Israeli women were invited to Brussels by the Jewish Cultural Centre, which hosted a joint meeting. That meeting was a secret one during which the women worked together to form political principles and create a framework for our joint work. It was necessary to have political guidelines.

These guidelines guaranteed political protection for both sides, because these meetings were forbidden and we wanted to show our people that we were meeting for something that was good for both sides. We formulated principles such as the recognition of national and political rights, the recognition of the PLO, and our stand against violence.

In 1992 a second meeting was held, again in Brussels, because it was too difficult between 1989 and 1992 to continue meeting in Jerusalem because of the *intifada*. Our second meeting was entitled Give Peace a Chance, and we worked out amended principles. The event was extremely important, because four women who were elected to the Israeli legislature came to Brussels in their official capacity as parliamentarians. That made us realize that we had to include Palestinian women who were also elected officials, and so ten women from the Tunisian legislature came. Thus it was a meeting not only of women at the grassroots level, but also of responsible women in politics on both sides. This forced people on both sides to speak about the fact that it was illegal for politicians from either side to meet. We were happy to note that several months later this type of legislation was invalidated on both sides.

We presented our ideas in Brussels at a press conference. We emphasized that we had to work together as part of a joint venture for peace. We recognized that our main enemy in the current situation was false or inadequate knowledge about one another. There was so much fear and mistrust rooted in misinformation, and the fact that we were kept apart by political barriers and exclusive ideologies that conditioned our peoples to remain separated. The Occupation policy and policies fostering animosity caused these fears, and the belief that we could only be enemies.

What we were trying to do was to encourage both sides to view one another as partners, having parity in everything – equal rights; the right of both peoples to live in peace, dignity, and security; and accepting the notion that we both belong to this piece of land. It belongs to us both as two states for two peoples.

- We believe that Jerusalem belongs to both, as an open city that can serve as two capitals for two states.
- We reject all kinds of violence.
- We have not only the right but the obligation to involve ourselves in politics, to shape our political future constructively, and to influence the formation of a civic, democratic society in both nations. We want to see ourselves as one front working for peace for the benefit of both sides.

Those are the main principles that we have been working for, ever since.

Now, practically speaking, we received support from the European Union to establish two centres in Jerusalem – Bat Shalom for Israeli women and the Jerusalem Center for Palestinian Women (JCW). Together both centres comprise the Jerusalem Link. It was meant that these two centres should be in this same city. It would have been a serious error to have only one centre, because we have an asymmetrical situation.

On one side is an established, 50-year-old state with a well-organized, highly developed structure, all the attributes and infrastructure of a state. This includes a high level of educational, technical, and economic development. And on the other side, we have a society that has been plagued by the 30-year revolution and Occupation, and is totally destroyed, yet is on its way to beginning its dream of becoming a state. This asymmetrical situation means that the women of the Jerusalem Center must deal with much more difficult and very different problems than those faced by Bat Shalom. The Israeli women also face an unbelievably complex situation and difficulties that they have to deal with differently. And so we need these two separate centres.

This also demonstrates that both sides want to achieve independence and freedom, and do not want to distort themselves to accommodate the other. We wish to retain our political and cultural identity. Therefore it is important that we should be able to stand in front of each other and look into the other's eyes knowing that we are different, and simply respect that each side is different.

Bat Shalom is located in West Jerusalem for the Israeli women and the Jerusalem Center is in East Jerusalem for the Palestinian women. Each centre has its independent programmes that comply with the immediate needs of its own society. We also have joint programmes that address the political situation, and empower women for political activity. We discuss political principles, and are aligned with the negotiations and the Peace Process. We are committed to the Peace Process and the international covenants, laws, and references for this Peace Process. Together, we address the problem of human rights, especially in Jerusalem. We make joint statements concerning what is happening; for example, if a terrorist attack takes place, irrespective of who did what against whom, we issue a joint statement condemning the event, which points out responsibility for this action and takes a stand on the event. This is very important in terms of public education for peace. As a women's organization, we are also members of the Palestinian Women's Association, and we are very involved in educating women about democracy and human rights.

So we are forced to work and struggle on different levels. We work internally for the development of a civic, democratic society, and in doing this we are very much in confrontation with the whole political and legal system, because we are trying to promote a Palestinian legal system. As women we also have to fight for our women's rights together with other women. We have Palestinian–Palestinian dialogue on the Old City of Jerusalem, where Palestinian women – Christian and Muslim, as well as Christians from different churches – come together to talk about their problems and present their own visions for society. We have civic education for the women of the Old City. The Old City was neglected for such a long time. Palestinians were not allowed to present any sort of developmental plans there, nor was the Old City part of any Israeli development plan. Consequently, there is a lot to do.

We also have a dialogue between Palestinian women from the West Bank and Palestinian women with Israeli passports from Galilee. The main theme is the idea of national identity. Both groups are Palestinian, on the one hand, in their culture, religion, and emotions; but on the other hand, one group has Israeli passports and has gone much further in terms of exposure to Israeli society and their way of life. Therefore we have to recognize our connection to these women from Galilee, and analyze our triangular relationship. How do we make peace work, have a vision for co-existence with dignity for all parties?

The core of our work is our third dialogue programme called Women Making Peace, which provides training for dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian women. This is the most difficult programme, because many people on both sides want to meet, and are eager to do so. But it is not enough to have good intentions and a desire to meet. A suitable infrastructure must be in place. When we have lived 50 years knowing each other only as enemies, with pain and bitter experience very much alive on the Palestinian side, it is very difficult to say 'Let's sit together and hug.' We can't hug. Without proper training, women on both sides think, 'Now we can come together, and I will show them what I have experienced.' Yet everyone has, in the back of her mind, the idea either of defending herself or of attacking the other. After just two sentences, the whole discussion explodes: 'You see, they are so bad. I don't want to see them again. I knew that it was no use meeting with them. I knew that they were terrible.'

To prevent this from happening, we conduct dialogue training. We train both groups, independently, about how to meet, how to learn to respect one another's vision, how to know that there are at least two versions, not one, to every story. Although meeting together is painful, we must learn to bear this pain, to defend ourselves from feeling this pain, and learn how to cross this painful stage. We must address our fears, speak our hopes and visions aloud. But to do this, we must also lay the groundwork by training women in political analysis, teaching them to analyze the information around us. What is going on behind the scenes; what does it mean to speak about refugees, borders, Jerusalem? How do these issues affect one side or the other?

When both sides feel that they are prepared to look into the eyes of the other with respect, to heal, to listen, to understand how to contribute to a logical discussion, to be sensitive in wording, in attitude, then the groups can meet and begin working together. The aim is not to learn to drink coffee together. Anyone can drink coffee together. The aim is to discuss political issues, very difficult political issues, and to come out of these discussions with a consensus that is good for both sides. This is the aim for this dialogue programme that caters to young women, old women, and target groups such as students and policewomen.

Gila: I'm really going to miss hearing these speeches. I'm always inspired by them.

At the same time, I'm always struck by how the approaches of each side are different. The work of Bat Shalom is also different from the other peace movements in Israel.

First, perhaps I can capture the difference between us by saying that the Israeli women come to dialogue with Palestinian women so that they can sleep better at night. They can assuage their guilty feelings about being in the camp of the oppressors. On the other hand, Palestinian women come to the dialogue group to prevent the Israeli women from sleeping well at night. I think that pretty much captures the different stances that each side takes. We have had dialogue work for about three years now. We have had some very difficult times in the groups, and also some superficial times in the groups. The dialogue work is always marked by the determination of the Palestinian side to get to the political issues, to talk about what Israel is doing wrong, and to have the Israeli women understand that they must pressure their government to change things. Whereas the Israeli women come because they want to be friends with the Palestinian women. They want to drink coffee, they want to talk about their children and about good books they've read. They acknowledge the faults of the Israeli government but, at the same time, they want to get past it. But the Palestinians are not past it.

The Oslo Declaration of Principles – and the famous handshake on the White House lawn – happened in September 1993, but there is no peace. There has not been an end to the Occupation. In some ways, in fact, the Occupation has got worse. Although Israelis in general – especially the Left – recognize that we are a long way away from the final peace agreement, many people think that peace is in the bag. All we have to do now is work out the details.

But peace is not yet in the bag. On both sides, it's our task to clarify to our respective societies that not only are some things worse, but some very, very painful decisions will have to be taken – on both sides – for peace really to be in our pockets. Our job in Bat Shalom is to prepare Israeli society for some of those painful concessions. Bat Shalom serves a different function in Israeli society from the other Israeli peace organizations. It's not only because we're women, but I think being women has a lot to do with it. The principles that we signed jointly with the JCW were much more progressive – in fact, radical – principles than had been signed previously by any joint gathering of Palestinian and Israeli peace advocates. They were way ahead of their time. Some of the statements made in those principles are matters of consensus in Israel today, but some of those statements remain on the radical fringe, and it will take a few years before we move towards them.

Let me give you a couple of examples. Sumaya mentioned them in the Palestinian context. Let me present them in the Israeli context.

The first statement is that there must be a Palestinian state side by side with an Israeli state. This principle was considered anathema to the Israeli public when we first began to talk about it. It was beyond the pale. We spoke of it without going into detail. We are now ten years past our initial dialogue groups, and we can look with gratification at public opinion in Israel and say that it has moved a long way on this subject. Today, 60 per cent of Jewish Israelis believe that Palestinians have a right to a state of their own, side by side with the state of Israel. Sixty per cent! Ten years ago, it was less than 20 per cent. An additional 10 per cent of Jewish Israelis believe that while the Palestinians may not have a right to a state, this state is inevitable. Which means that 70 per cent of the Israeli Jewish public believes that there is a state around the corner and the great majority feel that it is justified. This is an *enormous* stride forward.

A second joint principle, which is not yet acceptable to the Israeli public, is that the city of Jerusalem must be a shared capital. If you ask Israelis today what they think about Jerusalem as a shared capital, 80 per cent will tell you that Jerusalem must be the exclusive capital of Israel. An additional 15 per cent have creative ideas about how to go about solving the problem of joint claims to the capital. Only 5 per cent accept the solution which the Jerusalem Link supports: the concept that Jerusalem must be a shared capital, in united and shared sovereignty – part of the city will be the capital of Israel and part of it will be the capital of Palestine. That is still a principle on which we are way out on a limb compared to the rest of Israeli society.

I'd also like to point out something that Sumaya mentioned in passing and for which the JCW deserves enormous credit: their courageous position on the rejection of violence as a political strategy. For the Palestinians that meant condemning all forms of Palestinian violence, even at a time when the Palestinians had very few other tools to make their claims or focus world attention on the injustice done to them. Nevertheless, the Palestinian women's centre said 'No' to violence. For us Israelis, condemning Israeli violence means condemning the Israeli army for its acts of state terrorism. This includes using live ammunition to control demonstrations, grabbing land by force, destroying homes, and even denying Palestinians their fair share of drinking water. These are all forms of state terrorism used against a weak civilian population, and we condemn them even

though they happen under the auspices of a legally elected government. We regard this as a form of terrorism; condemning it was our own courageous contribution to the principle of non-violence.

I'd like to talk about the ways in which the women's peace work at Bat Shalom is different from the type of peace work that takes place in the rest of the Israeli peace movement. First of all the mainstream peace movement in Israel, the mixed-gender movement, is very conservative. It looks at the issues and asks itself: will the security of Israel be strengthened? Security is the ultimate criterion for them. It looks at any of the proposed solutions or political accommodations and asks: what are the security safeguards? What's in it for Israel?

We believe that this turns the question on its head. It's our belief that a peace agreement holds the best – indeed the only – hope of security. A peace that is acceptable to both sides is the only way to achieve security for Israelis, as well as Palestinians.

Our methods are different, our goals are different, and our vision of peace is different. The mixed-gender peace movement in Israel seeks a peace of mutual deterrence. This would include closing the border, locking the door, and throwing away the key. No more Palestinians mixing with Israelis. They want limits set on the extent to which the Palestinian side can arm itself – no tanks, no warplanes, no artillery. I'd like to set those same limits on Israeli society. I'm not arguing for tanks on the Palestinian side but for banishing tanks from the Israeli side as well.

The difference is that while the mixed-gender Israeli peace camp argues for mutual deterrence, the Bat Shalom women argue for a culture of peace and mutual co-operation. We argue for a future in which our destinies are intertwined, in which we have economic, cultural, and recreational co-operation – in sport, in fashion, in business, whatever. Our economies should have some integration, while at the same time maintaining the independence of both states.

I argue forcefully for the economic integration of both communities because of the terrible disparity between the two economies. The per capita GDP in Palestine is approximately \$1600 per year. The parallel figure in Israel is \$16,500. That's ten times more. Israel's per capita GDP is roughly the same as that of Italy and Spain, modern European countries. Palestine's economy is Third World. This enormous disparity between Palestine and Israel fosters instability between our two societies. And we have learned from history that you cannot have two neighbouring societies with such a huge economic

gap between them and expect political stability. There will always be volatility unless there is some parity. So we in the women's peace movement argue for a shared future.

There are also important differences in our activities. In the women's peace movement, we do different sorts of things. The mixed movement embraces the 'big bang' theory of organizing. It has a big rally where a hundred thousand people show up, hug each other, and then all go home again until the next rally six months later.

The women's peace movement has consistently advocated ongoing peace activities – ongoing in every way possible, using every strategy imaginable to build bridges between our societies and to educate Israelis about the importance of peace. For example, in addition to the dialogue groups that have already been mentioned, the Israeli women make condolence calls to some Palestinian families when a family member has been killed by the Israeli authorities. Conversely, the Palestinians do the same thing on our side by visiting – where they would be welcome – families of Israelis who have been killed by terrorism.

We have public education activities. We run seminars and open-panel discussions. We have our own newspaper, and we pay for advertisements in national media to air our views. We had a meeting just last week to begin our analysis of a very difficult issue: the refugee problem. How can we resolve the problem of almost a million Palestinian refugees created by the 1948 war, who have now grown into a population of several million? We have begun this series of meetings to come up with a solution that makes sense.

Finally, Bat Shalom women have been physically courageous in their activities, in a way that the mixed peace movement has not yet begun to dream of. Bat Shalom is willing to engage in civil disobedience. We're willing to break the law if we believe it to be an unjust law. We act in the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi, who said that non-co-operation with evil is a sacred duty. We believe that very strongly. A case in point is the demolition of homes that has taken place over the last few years. Over 5000 Palestinian homes have been destroyed by the Israeli authorities under the pretext that they were illegally constructed, but in reality this is an effort to move Palestinians out of areas that Israel wishes to claim as its own.

The Israeli women of Bat Shalom have joined Palestinian protests, thrown themselves in front of the bulldozers together with our Palestinian sisters and brothers, defied laws, pushed past soldiers,

put ourselves on the line because we know that non-co-operation with evil is a sacred duty. The consensus-driven peace movement in Israel would never participate in this way, and has shunned these activities of ours. We act in conjunction with a few men who have the same take on the politics of the region as we do, and we appreciate their presence. The women's peace group in Israel has taken leadership within Israel in terms of its courage, its progressive political beliefs, and its feminist vision of peace – not just an end to the belligerence, but peace with dignity and co-operation on both sides.

Sumaya: We Palestinian women in the Jerusalem Center have many difficulties convincing our people that this joint work is fruitful, and that we must go on with it. We have these difficulties because we work openly with Israeli women, and are stamped as a joint venture. For example, the Palestinian network association for NGOs in Palestine has refused us membership because we work with Israelis. However, because we are already stigmatized, in a sense this gives us the freedom to dare to do things that others cannot do. This is a strength in itself. We have taken small steps towards success in showing people that it is possible to reach consensus with the other side. First we have to persuade the Israeli side that we have rights, and then we must convince our own people that some Israelis are willing to recognize our rights. We try to see these small steps as something big in order to encourage ourselves, to defy the despair and disappointment we sometimes feel.

We always have the feeling that we are in a state of alarm. We have to be careful not to make political mistakes, so that we can show our people that we are keen to protect our rights and do not want to give anything up, that we never compromise. This is very tiring, and a great pressure. We have a concept in Palestine called 'normalization'. Normalization means the establishment of normal relations with the Israelis. This is strongly rejected – people say: how dare you try to make something normal in a situation where nothing is normal? We are *still* under occupation; they are *still* the occupiers. They are *still* taking land away, they are *still* restricting our movements, destroying our houses, detaining our people, depriving us of our rights, and so forth.

We have to be very careful to avoid being pushed into that corner of normalization. Normalization can be something great, the fulfillment of living together in peace. But we are not there yet. We always have to persuade or to ask our Israeli partners to understand that we cannot

do many things we wish to do because we are afraid of being accused of normalizing relations. For example, meeting in a restaurant and eating together, or visiting each other at home. We cannot do it. We are afraid of it. We become vulnerable, unprotected, if we do it. On the other hand, we know very well that if we do do these things, we will become much closer to each other. The process of understanding and making a relationship will be greatly enhanced. So it's always one step forward, two back, then perhaps try another step forward. That is what we must do in this very sensitive situation. So working for peace in Palestine is very, very difficult. We must always defend why we do it. We must always consult people. We must always fear for our safety. We must be very cautious, and involve both people on the ground and people in decision-making positions so that they can give their seal of approval. We are so pleased to see that officials are now using the same phrases, the same words, we used three or four years ago. We say things today, knowing that in a few years officials will say them. This is our contribution.

Gila: On the Israeli side, the media have completely ignored us until recently, and I think this is part of the general syndrome of marginalizing women's activities. When we stood in the Women in Black vigil for many, many years, we were covered by every major international news network. We were on CNN, the BBC, all the major networks, and had a segment on *Sixty Minutes* in the US, but in Israel we never made it into the newspapers until the fifth year of our vigil. By and large, the Israeli media ignore women's work.

Sumaya: The majority of our people don't yet see the importance of the work we are doing. We see that our work together is preparing the ground for the people who will build peace together when the peace settlements are achieved. But our people still have difficulty believing that the Israeli government wants peace with us. They are reluctant to believe that our work is necessary. I myself hesitate to go to the media to say I am doing wonderful things in Israel. It can provoke a backlash, backfire on us and hurt our work. Our strategy to let people know about us is to work with groups of women, girls, boys, who participate in our courses. Every year we have five or six hundred participants in our courses. We are afraid of being attacked if the media turn their lens on us. Abroad, in Europe or the States, the media are interested in knowing about us, and academics in particular are interested. They do research on us. Journalists, on the other hand, want action, and they

love to show violence, bloodshed. But our work, moderate work, is measured in small steps. There are no immediate results. We make dialogue groups; it takes time. How can this be covered by a journalist? When there is a violent act, the whole world knows about it in ten seconds. We must learn how to use the media better; we must become better skilled at presenting our words, our ideas, our message. How to make coalitions. To seek assistance. We need to work on this.

We also need to work on fostering economic development, but unfortunately that kind of development is inevitably linked with the official political system. In Palestine, any co-operation with Israelis, especially economic, must be via the official political establishment. There is an undefined relationship between NGOs and the Palestinian authority, officials, administration. We are working on that. But again, I have received several letters from Israeli businesswomen and organizers who are seeking connections with Palestinian businesswomen. They met several times just for discussion, but nothing came out of it because Palestinian women feared normalizing relations with Israelis. 'I don't need to do this', says the Palestinian woman to herself; 'my business is doing well. I must wait until this co-operation is fully accepted, not just ten per cent.' Except those who are in the Palestinian Authority. They have good relations; they work together. Especially the businessmen, who have the power. The women feel that it is forbidden as soon as they begin, because of the patriarchal structure, the authority of men. Men maintain the difference between business and politics. We don't think this is correct.

Gila: Yes, this is terrible. People who were once involved in the worst forms of oppression against the Palestinians are today businessmen making money from the connections they had as perpetrators of torture, or demolishers of homes, or agents in the secret-service organizations. Some of these Israelis are making money today through partnerships with some corrupt politicians in the Palestinian Authority, as well.

Editors: How does the Jerusalem Link work out its differences? What sorts of skills have you developed over the years for mediating conflict? Do you have anything formal in place? [Sighs from both Sumaya and Gila.]

Gila: That's a hard question. Well, sometimes we ignore the differences. [Laughter on all sides.] If there's a difference of opinion, such as we had for a long while about what we mean when we speak of

sharing Jerusalem – what kind of model we have for the city – I think we agree not to talk about it. Wouldn't you say so, Sumaya?

Sumaya: Yes. But I have to tell you: I have been the spokesperson for the Center for more than two years now. Before that, I was on the Board of Trustees; I was a co-founder. In these years, we always had disputes. And always there is some sense of suspicion. Do they really mean what they say? There have always been issues we have not dared to speak of. But even as a responsible person, I tended until now to ignore these things, and sweep the disputes under the table. But now I am at a new stage. I have a new project with the former director of Bat Shalom in which we are trying something I suggested. We try to talk about our differences, and to address them now. You need a certain degree of maturity in order to face these disputes. So I decided to write an article about our differences in which I say why I had quarrels with Bat Shalom on this issue or that. I wrote about 50 pages, addressing 12 disputes in this single document. These were the things we couldn't talk about. Whenever we started, we quarrelled again. So I thought it would be more effective to write about them, to write about things we can't say face to face. Now that we have started, I give the article to my colleague, and she answers in writing from her point of view. Afterwards we might meet together to say: 'Isn't it too bad we quarrelled; how crazy we were.' Or we can say: 'I had not realized what you meant.' We also saw, through this process, that it is possible to solve problems once and for all. We are working on it right now; we already have 60 shared pages. For example, she was very upset with me because I write exactly as I speak, enumerating my political points: one, two, three, four. I ignored the fact that we had worked together for so long. I called her 'the Israeli' or 'the co-ordinator.' I never used her name, Daphne, or 'my friend'. And I responded: 'How can you expect me, after just two years, to say that you are my friend? You are not yet my friend. It is not that easy, especially if I am representing an official political stance in my work with you. I am afraid of being accused of normalization. You are asking me to behave as if I am living and enjoying a state of law in Israel, with all the reassurances that go with that.'

Through this writing we are trying to promote understanding. Through this writing I introduce my culture, my thinking, my behaviour, in the context of the culture and the education I had at home in the street. It is a very important process that can be followed in conflict management.

I also have many things to write to Gila – about our disputes, and problems, and difficulties with her. These are completely different from the difficulties I had with Daphne. It is so interesting. I hope this process continues.

Editors: Could you talk about the difficulties you face today?

Gila: Allow me to begin. The Jerusalem Link recently voted to change its founding principles. To be more honest, actually the Palestinians came to the Israeli side and said they had to have the principles changed. I liked the old principles because they were a broad, general vision of what peace should be. The Palestinians wanted the principles to be more specific. When we went over them point by point, the recommended changes turned out to be ones with which I found it hard to agree. Ultimately I resigned from the directorship of Bat Shalom over this. I don't want to go into great detail here over these principles, but the general dynamic was that the Palestinians would ask for a particular change and the Israelis would immediately concede. I would raise my hand and say: this is not acceptable to me; it's too extreme. Then the Israelis would say: it's OK, the Palestinians need it for their purposes; it's no big deal for us. And I would say: but it's a big deal for me. But I was in the minority at that meeting. Eventually the principles approved at that meeting were taken to the wider membership of Bat Shalom, and it became evident that there were many women in Bat Shalom who felt that they could not live with the new principles. There were a number of resignations as a result.

This is a really fine example of a poorly handled dynamic. The situation was not set up to allow for discussion, or even for the existence of a safe space for those who disagree to express their point of view. I said earlier that often we handle conflict by not talking about things. This was different. This was a situation in which the Palestinians said: 'We need this', so the Israelis, after so many years of being the oppressor, felt that they could not disagree with what the Palestinians were asking for. I think that in America in debates over race relations this is called 'white guilt'. We felt unable to make legitimate counter-proposals. In separate meetings, the Israelis spoke of bringing to the Palestinians some suggestions for compromise wording, and we did. But as soon as each suggestion was raised, there was initial resistance on the part of some Palestinian women – the younger, more extremist ones – so the Israelis immediately backed down without a full discussion. I blame the Israelis for not being more honest, more open.

Instead, we were constantly backing down against real or even imagined Palestinian objections. There was no real engagement on those issues. To this day, the matter of the principles has not been resolved.

Maybe an example will help. Both sides knew that we had to make a statement about how to resolve the problem of several million Palestinian refugees created by the war of 1948 – Palestinians who once lived in areas that are now Israel. The Palestinian side proposed a wording that included the sentence: ‘This solution must honour the right of return of the Palestinian refugees in accordance with UN Resolution 194.’ In my opinion, this resolution – passed 52 years ago, in 1948 – is outdated today. It would give Palestinian refugees the right to return to their former homes in Israel, thereby evicting Israeli families and compounding one injustice with another. Even my very mild suggestion that we say ‘in the spirit of UN Resolution 191’ rather than ‘in accordance’ with it was rejected. And the Israeli side did not stand up for this revision, even though many Bat Shalom members cannot live with the wording as it now stands.

I hope that following this turbulent period there will be engagement on the issues and frank discussions about what the problems are, what solutions would be agreeable to both sides. Final-status peace talks are being launched, and I want the Israeli women’s peace movement to come to the Israeli politicians not with an untenable 52-year-old position, but with viable, rational proposals for resolving the issues in contention.

Sumaya: For us, the Palestinians, it was very necessary that we re-evaluate and amend our principles to include certain details of the Final-Status Negotiations. We have received more and more pressure from our society to the effect that working with the Israelis is useless. But we are very clear. We want to work with you. And we push for our joint work. First, we want to show our people that we are working on very sensitive issues, and working together with the Israelis, preparing the ground for those who are the negotiators and for those who are on the street to understand what is going on in the negotiations. Second, we feel that we have been misled by the Israeli government so many times over the past years of the peace process. The agreements that were signed went back on those written before, and each time fewer rights were given to us than in the previous agreement. The feeling was that the Israelis are cheating us. You can’t trust agreements with them. We have nothing to revert to.

We need a very clear reference for our work together. We feel that our legitimacy comes from the Oslo and UN resolutions, for example. We feel that we need to be much more specific, so that we can count on some rights. It is important to us that the basis for the two states be the borders as they were on 4 June 1967, before the war broke out. Why should we now make concessions before we begin to negotiate? In any negotiation, both sides must make compromises. Why should we in the Jerusalem Link begin with a compromise that benefits the Israeli side? This is how our side viewed it. The re-evaluation of our declaration was a kind of self-protection, self-defence in our society, but also to initiate the discussions that we hope will begin. We wanted to include specifics – the refugees, the settlements, Jerusalem. We also thought the weakness of the Oslo agreements were that they did not address the problems of the Palestinians, yet they claimed that they had brought peace discussions to the final stages. We felt that we did not get even a small part of the rights to which we were entitled in the previous agreements. Thus we cannot go to the final negotiations with only 8 per cent of the land – if earlier agreements had been honoured, we would enter the Final-Status Negotiations with 30 per cent of the land.

This is to show you the immediate and critical necessity for re-evaluating and amending our principles, from our point of view. I must say frankly that it was a shock to see that this produced such turbulence in Bat Shalom, and that its director – Gila – quit. We were very surprised by this. Nobody could believe it. We worked together; we expected her to understand. How could she work with us and not share our vision of our rights? How can any individual be against the UN resolutions? She can afford to say it because everything is settled in her state, and its legitimacy is based on UN resolutions. But we are now struggling so that those same resolutions should be applied to us, and nobody can tell us they shouldn't. It was a very important discussion. The problem is that there was no room for discussion. What Gila says is right. We wanted to amend things. But they gave up immediately, so as not to have a dispute and to show they can work with us. Let's show that we get along together. So we hid our disputes and real messages again.

Letter

Gila to Sumaya

Dear Sumaya

This dialogue with you, like the many we have had in the past, has been marked by openness, honesty, and an empathetic listening, even where we disagree. I have had the feeling at all times of speaking as equals, without holding back difficult words, without making 'discounts' for the differences between us.

And yet I have also been painfully aware of the need you have to maintain distance – what the Palestinians refer to as preventing 'normalization'. Even though this has continued to sadden me, as I have longed for a 'normal' and close friendship with you, someone with whom I share so much and feel so warm towards, I know and understand that you cannot allow this to happen under the rules that you have agreed to live by. Distance is a political statement of your own, as well as protection for you against those who attack your efforts at reconciliation. I know that you need to protect yourself and your family from those voices and acts of criticism, but I ache to think how politics can come between people.

Another ache I have is the thought that you and your colleagues on the Palestinian side have not been able to understand or appreciate my decision to resign as director of Bat Shalom, based on my objection to the new principles that the Jerusalem Link adopted. You were 'shocked', you note in the interview. I do feel the need to try again to explain. Not just as someone who might have been your friend in a world that was more just, but as one who continues to be a political ally in our common cause.

Let me say at the outset that I was in complete agreement with the previous Jerusalem Link declaration. That document reflected the principles common to us all – the shared yearning of Israeli and Palestinian women for a just and enduring peace in the Middle East.

The new document, however, although it may be a suitable statement for the Palestinian side of the Jerusalem Link, does not take into consideration Israeli needs. Some of the new principles adopted are not fair to the Israeli side, in my opinion, and will alienate Bat Shalom from even the progressive elements of Israeli society that we have worked so hard to nurture and expand, including many of its own members. These new principles will weaken Bat Shalom's ability to influence political opinion, and hence political decision making, inside Israel.

Some of the new principles return us to old conflicts, rather than lead us to new and creative solutions, to a healing of the old pain. In my opinion, the following three principles advocate positions from an earlier era, which are no longer tenable:

- Principle 1 calls for ‘establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel on the June 4, 1967 boundaries’. Calling for these borders without acknowledging the inevitability of ‘adjustments agreed upon by both sides’ is unrealistic. I had proposed that at the very least we insert the words ‘based on’ the June 4, 1967 boundaries, suggesting that amendments can be made, but this formulation was rejected.
- Principle 6 calls for solving the Palestinian refugee problem ‘in accordance with UN Resolution 194’. This resolution – passed more than 50 years ago, in 1948 – is outdated and irrelevant today. For example, it would give Palestinian refugees the right to return to their former homes in Israel, thereby evicting Israeli families and compounding one injustice with another. I do believe that a just solution for the Palestinian refugee problem must include the Palestinian right of return to the area that is now Israel – for those who so choose – but I cannot agree that Israelis who currently live in these homes must now be turned into refugees.
- Finally, principle 4 notes that the permanent-settlement negotiations must resume without delay (with which I certainly agree), but then adds: ‘the terms of reference being all relevant UN resolutions ...’. I think it is absurd to invoke the 2000 pages of UN resolutions that have been enacted since 1948 as the ‘terms of reference’ without a thorough reading and review of their applicability to contemporary times. Indeed, many of these resolutions foment anger and divisiveness, rather than offer constructive solutions. The previous Jerusalem Link declaration correctly referred only to Resolutions 242 and 338, which are still the key and relevant resolutions, and did not resurrect old hurts.

These were my three main objections, and they were key matters of principle for me. You yourself saw that at the meeting where the Palestinians raised these proposals the Israelis were fearful of expressing their uneasiness with them. You saw the dynamic that was created – of going along with whatever the Palestinians said. I was the only one who consistently found the voice to speak honestly, and that is because I spoke as an equal with you, having had years of frank and

fruitful dialogue. It seemed to me that the other Israelis spoke out of 'white guilt' – shame over the years of oppression by Israelis of Palestinians. The Israeli discomfort with the principles became evident only when we met separately as Bat Shalom.

Sumaya, my disappointment was with the Bat Shalom board, which consented to these principles without making any effort at all to create a statement that would be fair and relevant to our side as well as yours. Those few on the Israeli side who pushed for the new principles acted in utter disregard of the negative implications for Bat Shalom. Although their primary motivation was to provide the Palestinian side with a document that they felt was necessary for Palestinian needs, in my opinion the damage rendered to Bat Shalom will ultimately harm the Jerusalem Link.

It seems that the honesty that you and I have had as directors of the Jerusalem Link has not filtered down to our respective organizations. Perhaps because they have not had the ongoing contact with each other, as you and I have had.

This matter of the new principles and my resignation as a result often evokes in my mind the words of the Lebanese writer Kahlil Gibran: 'When your friend speaks his mind you fear not the "nay" in your own mind, nor do you withhold the "ay".'

Dear and trusted colleague, thank you for your ongoing cooperation throughout our work together. I hope that the day will come when concerns over 'normalization' and ideology will no longer prevent us from actually becoming friends.

Sincerely,
Gila Svirsky
29 January 2000

Letter

Sumaya to Gila

Dear Gila

Thank you very much for your kind words and sincere feelings in describing the relations between us, which have developed through our sensitive and hard work, the joint management of conflicts, and the growing process of our personal maturity – perceiving, learning, and ultimately acknowledging each other’s positions. We have become very close, and while we share almost the same feelings, attitudes, and perceptions about many points, we also have our differences – which is normal and correct – derived from our respect for the identity and uniqueness of each. Opening up and expressing our common concerns and aspirations has helped us both to understand the importance of circumstances and context when searching for solutions. The willingness to put oneself in the place of the other has made it possible sometimes to reach consensus on difficult issues. When we fail to reach consensus, it has sometimes been because of insufficient time and also an unwillingness to have intensive and comprehensive discussions. Even though we know the importance of having a frank and thorough discussion, we often avoid it because we fear confrontation. We would rather conform than confront.

Thank you, Gila, for understanding the complex issue of ‘normalizing relations’, which will exist as long as our peoples consider each other the enemy. Political reconciliation must precede social reconciliation. When it does, then it will be easier to meet, work jointly, and plan for a common future. But as long as one side is politically, economically, and ideologically taking advantage of the other, peace work is perceived by the majority to be not just nonsense, but also dangerous. Based on their daily experience my people believe that Israel is fulfilling Zionist ideology by acquiring as much Palestinian land as possible by force and illegal means and aims to control our people forever. They see Israel as engaged in a process of dictating rather than negotiating. In peace both sides must win; in war both lose although the loss of one side is greater than that of the other.

Why do I write all this to you? I know your thoughts, attitudes, humanity, and desire for justice. I also know your political stand and, based on personal discussions, I understood your motives for resigning. But this does not make up for the sad feeling I have in

losing you as a trusted colleague and partner. I highly respect and value your thought and character. What shocked me was your quick resignation, your setting of priorities while dealing with the matter. We are both aware of the difficulties in each centre. It had always been a relief to relate, compare, and share these problems. I have the feeling that both our boards did not discuss the principles thoroughly, bringing dissatisfaction and new conflicts. Addressing disputes is the basis of our efforts to reach reconciliation. And yet we are still at the starting point, and must develop this as a valued culture to guide our behaviour.

I understand your concerns about borders, refugees, and UN resolutions. This is not only a matter of principle, but also a matter of trying to convince each other. The UN resolutions are the only legal documents that Palestinians have to protect our rights. We cannot drop these resolutions before even beginning to negotiate, or receiving a sign from your side that you are prepared to acknowledge responsibility and admit guilt. I know you are far from thinking about these issues, but I feel that it is my responsibility to address the linkage between responsibility and guilt, and thus open the door to compromise. This is the basis for the first step in reconciliation. I understand your concern about not wanting to evict Israelis from the homes they now live in, the Palestinian homes from which the owners were forced to evacuate and become refugees. First admit the injustice that was committed and recognize the rights of the Palestinian refugees, so we can then find options for solving the problem. Your fear of seeing your people become refugees is respected and understood only if you prevent the creation of refugees on the Palestinian side. We two peoples have the same values! What an appreciative reaction and feeling of relief spread among my people when they read about the Israeli researcher who published an acknowledgement of the massacre of Tantura, a village near Haifa, where 200 Palestinian people were killed in 1948, and the village was destroyed. Such forms of acknowledgement open the heart and mind to rethink, reconsider, and search for solutions.

I have interest and desire to continue this dialogue with you on political issues and on a social and personal level. I feel enriched by it. The obstacle is only the accumulation of work in the office and at home. I am sure we will do it, and I am very happy to know that you will always be there to share our concern and participate in our joint mission.

Dear and trusted colleague, I also thank you for your ongoing cooperation and because I have learned a lot from you. I hope that the barriers preventing us from becoming close friends will diminish. There are not only physical walls set by law, but the psychological barriers are also still thick and diverse. On your side, you can work for peace and be proud; you will be admired and encouraged by most, even though some will reject you. On our side, my work for peace is perceived by most people with doubt, question marks, accusations, and sometimes a sense of shame. Sometimes we have to hide from or avoid public meetings and events. My work is not only difficult and sensitive, but could turn unappreciated and even dangerous.

Most painful to me is that I consider my work very important, necessary and vital for our joint survival. I believe in that, and this is what keeps me strong and gives me the strength to continue and start again and again. The main source for my strength and courage is knowing that there are hundreds of wonderful women and men on both sides who share my vision and work sincerely and with commitment. I hope that these people on both sides will become one front that grows and grows into thousands and millions. I not only hope, but I do believe that we will make it.

Sincerely,
Sumaya Farhat-Naser
3 February 2000

Acknowledgement

This chapter is reproduced with permission from *Eye to Eye: Women Practising Development Across Cultures*, edited by Susan Perry and Celeste Schenck, published in London and New York by Zed Books in 2001.