The New York Times

Opinion

Nicholas Kristof

Meet the Champions of Nuance and Empathy We Need

November 8, 2023



An artwork burned at a checkpoint. Credit: William Keo for The New York Times



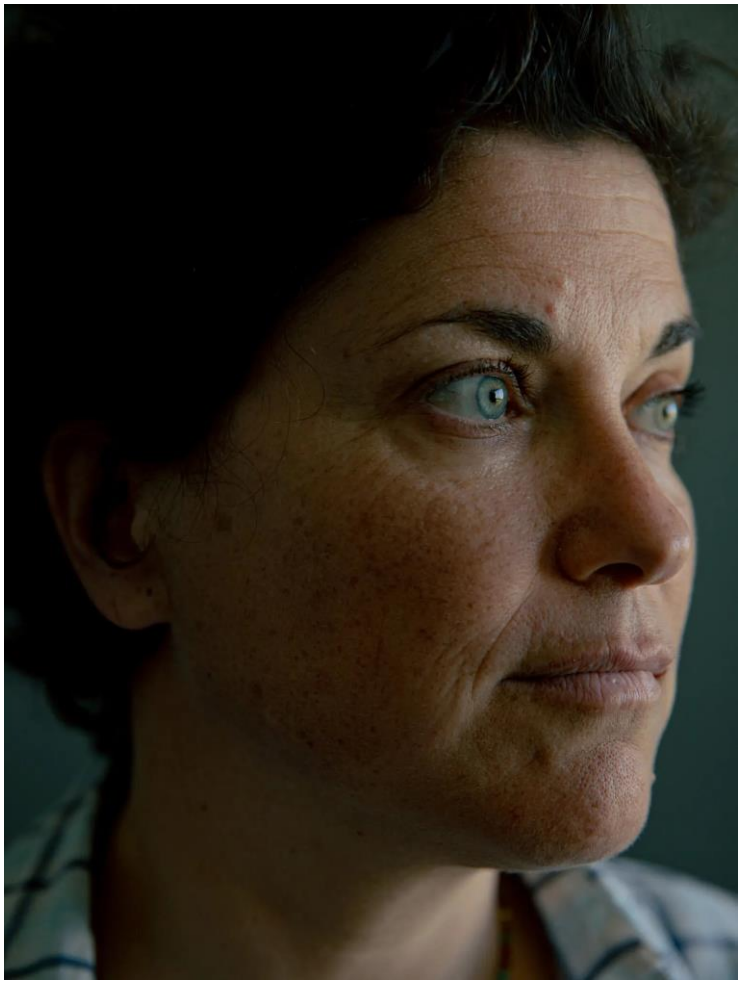
By Nicholas Kristof
Opinion Columnist, reporting from Tel Aviv

My columns from Israel and the West Bank over the past few weeks have been depressing, reflecting my fear that we're on a bloody, downward spiral that will make everything worse. So let me share what I saw as an ember of hope.

I didn't expect to find such a thing. On this trip I met with civil society organizations that have toiled for years to bring Israelis and Palestinians together, but frankly I was skeptical of their efforts.

Some good that did, I was thinking. All those feel-good programs, often American-funded, to build bridges — and today we're engulfed in war.
But let me tell you about an Israeli woman I met, Meytal Ofer: A couple of weeks ago, I sat down with her in Tel Aviv — 10 years to the month after two terrorists from Hamas murdered her father with 41 blows of an ax.

"How could they do that?" she wondered aloud to me. "You need so much hate in your heart to do that."



Meytal Ofer in Tel Aviv. Credit: William Keo for The New York Times

Ofer pondered where that venom came from. In the aftermath of the murder, she wondered about demolishing the killers' houses, as sometimes happens in Israeli-occupied territories. She concluded that would not help.

"It would just grow the cycle of revenge," she told me. After her father's murder, she joined Parents Circle — Families Forum, a joint Israeli and Palestinian nonprofit made up of people who have lost loved ones to the conflict. They hold dialogues, bonding in grief with those on the other side of the chasm, and give talks together aiming to end the escalating bloodshed.

I expressed my skepticism: Is this actually accomplishing anything?

"I think there is no other choice," she told me.

"This is my home. I don't want to give up my home," she added. "I don't want to go, and Palestinians will not go anywhere either."

So she persists. “We have to do something,” she said. “You cannot stop violence with violence. We tried it for 100 years, and it’s not working.”

Hearing from bereaved Israelis and Palestinians together is “mind-blowing” for children, she said, because many of them have never thought much about losses outside their own group. One indication that these talks are effective: The far-right government this year barred Parents Circle from public schools.

Bassam Aramin is sometimes the Palestinian speaker in these Parents Circle appearances. Imprisoned by Israel as a 17-year-old for belonging to a then-banned Palestinian organization and possessing a weapon, he spent seven years behind bars. Then in 2007, his 10-year-old daughter, Abir, was killed outside her school by an Israeli soldier firing a rubber bullet.



Bassam Aramin and his wife at a memorial in 2007 for their 10-year-old daughter, who was killed in the West Bank by an Israeli soldier. Credit: Rina Castelnuovo for The New York Times

Instead of turning to bombs, Aramin turned to reconciliation. He studied the Holocaust in a master’s program, learned excellent Hebrew and tried to see the humanity in Israeli soldiers at West Bank checkpoints.

A process of mutual dehumanization has led each side, he said, to regard the other as morally inferior. He noted that Israelis often suggest that the problem is

that Palestinians don't love their children and are ready to sacrifice them for the struggle, while Palestinians traffic in a similar stereotype about Israelis.

"We don't see each other as human beings," he said, and he told me of the Palestinian mother of a teenage boy killed by Israeli soldiers who reluctantly came to a Parents Circle meeting, still fuming at Jews.

"She believed that they were animals," he recounted, quoting her as saying, "They don't have hearts like us; they hate their kids because they send them to the army." But she met an Israeli mom who told of losing her child to a Palestinian, and soon they were both sobbing and embracing.

Aramin is outraged at what he sees as Israel's quotidian mistreatment of West Bank Palestinians, including women, at checkpoints, but he sees the humanity in the soldiers there.

"They look like killing machines, but they're scared of us," he said. Aramin told me that the day before I spoke to him, he and his wife had driven to visit their children, taking a mountain road to bypass delays and humiliation at Israeli checkpoints in the West Bank. But he said they were stopped by four Israeli soldiers who angrily told them to return and threatened to seize their car. Aramin said he spoke calmly in Hebrew, recognizing the soldiers' fear, and they soon got to talking. In the end, the soldiers still turned them back but apologized for doing so.

I noted to Aramin that these organizations promoting mutual understanding mostly date from the Oslo peace process, when two states were expected to emerge side by side. Now that process is in hibernation, if not dead. It's nice that Parents Circle holds camps for Israeli and Palestinian children to get to know each other, but how is that saving lives on either side of the Gaza border?

The arc of history is long, he replied. Germany once tried to wipe out Jews and now exchanges ambassadors with Israel. Some day Israel and Palestine will coexist as states, he said, and the question is simply how many corpses will pile up before that happens.

"We must share this land as one state or two states or five states," he said. "Otherwise, we will share this same piece of land as the graveyards of our kids."



Yuval Rahamim in Tel Aviv. Credit: William Keo for The New York Times

I'm not sure that these efforts at understanding will get anywhere, and the Hamas attacks and Gaza war have added to the fear and trauma. Even Yuval Rahamim, an Israeli director of Parents Circle, acknowledges that the group is swimming against the tide.

"When I interview new employees, I ask them, 'Are you ready to be frustrated every day?'" he said. "Because we don't see success. But things will eventually change. Because there is no other option."

After talking to Rahamim, Ofer, Aramin and others, I'm grateful to them for providing moral leadership that so many presidents and prime ministers have not. I don't know if they can actually succeed in blazing a path to peace, but we need such champions of nuance and empathy if we are to have any hope of moving forward.

As we Americans increasingly find ourselves caught in toxic or bigoted battles on our own turf, echoing those in the Middle East, we should learn not from the arsonists but from these firefighters who demonstrate the human capacity for conciliation, healing and progress.

Nicholas Kristof joined The New York Times in 1984 and has been a columnist since 2001. He has won two Pulitzer Prizes, for his coverage of China and of the genocide in Darfur. You can follow him on Instagram, Facebook and Threads. His forthcoming memoir is "Chasing Hope: A Reporter's Life."
@NickKristof

If the Parents Circle is also your ember of hope, please make a contribution to support our peacebuilding work.

DONATE NOW





Shiri Ourian
Executive Director
American Friends of the Parents Circle - Families Forum