

Place4Peace

Muslims, Jews unite in quest for peace

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Breaking the Ice organization set to send delegation of men, women from Israel, PA, Iran on journey to Sahara desert, Libya. Objective: To prove cooperation, dialogue possible in face of challenges. Ynet will be there with them

Oren Rice

At the beginning of March, ten men and women from Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and the United States will set out on a journey in the Sahara desert.

The group will departure from Jerusalem, and arrive in Tripoli, Libya, 5,500 kilometers later. They will pass through Ramallah, Jericho, Beit Shean, Amman, and the Suez Canal.

The Breaking the Ice organization, based in Berlin, is behind the initiative, and succeeded two years ago in uniting Israelis and Palestinians on a joint journey to Antarctica. Ynet will accompany the journey and will exclusively provide journal entries from the Israeli participants.

The journey is planned in such a way that every participant will require help from other participants, some of which come from enemy countries, and together the group members will have to contend with desert conditions for a number of weeks.

Both participants and organizers hope that the journey will help create trust and maybe help foster an atmosphere of dialogue between western and Muslim countries.

Reopening old wounds

The two Israelis in the international crew are Gil Fogiel, 59, of Reut, a reserve Air Force pilot, who was taken hostage and tortured in the Lebanon war, and Galit Oren, 40, from Tel Aviv, who lost her mother in a terrorist bombing of the number 20 bus in 1995.

Fogiel, who is married and a father to three children, told Ynet how the project began. "My story starts in 1982, when my fighter jet was downed over Lebanon during Operation Peace for Galilee. I spent two years in Syrian captivity as a hostage, and they know how to 'host.' I went through questioning, torture, the whole package. And after two years I was returned as part of the hostage trading deal of the summer of '84."

Fogiel spent many years guarding his secrets from his close family. "There were many

interview requests from TV and newspapers and I rejected them all. I decided that this was my personal story, that nothing good or productive would come out of it. This project brings me into the open. Therefore it was worth it for me to become exposed. There is a goal here that can be obtained. There is also an element of adventure which is tempting," he said.

Fogiel added: "I'm willing to reopen the wounds of the past for this and talk about what happened. My kids and wife support this. I haven't exposed them to all of the things I went through. One day they will have to know. This is a personal pain that I bear, within all the pain of the region. Today, my children are mature enough mentally to receive this, and this was one of my considerations before I decided to set out on this adventure. I am a son of Holocaust survivors. My parents couldn't tell their stories. I am also pretty closed. Maybe I can pass the story to my children through the journey. I am not carrying a torch or a message. The message carries itself. We don't represent a nation or state. I represent myself."

'Not just hummus and hugs'

For Galit Oren, the journey will also be a personal journey into the wounds of the past. Today she admits that the murder of her mother on a Ramat-Gan bus in 1995 was the most difficult moment in her life. Since then she has been a member of the Forum for Bereaved Families, which includes 500 bereaved Israeli and Palestinian families who lost their family members in terrorist attacks or military incidents.

"First of all, I see this as an adventure and a personal challenge, a personal and human way of coping. This journey is about going back to base – to what we all want, and that is to live quietly. This journey obligates me to be authentic and to trust other people, to let other people trust me. After the tragedy that happened to me, there is a will in me to influence and give inspiration to people. To show that it's possible to talk. It may appear I have a conflict with half of the group, but in reality the idea is to activate a serious dialogue, and not just 'hummus and hugs.'

Galit says that since the induction and preparation in the Jordanian desert which took place a month ago, she has begun to learn Arabic. "I waited 40 years for this. Since we left Jordan, me and the other group members have been in constant touch through emails and phone calls."

But this is almost like a reality show. What can actually grow from this?

"This is a message to politicians who say that there is no one to talk to," says Galit. "It's possible to find serious partners to talk to. Though our stances may be different, our needs are very similar – freedom and calm. The thing I lack the most is a sense of security, of calm. There is no competition over the pain, because we are all suffering."

'No one likes the occupation'

Sheikh Yishak Abd al-Gawad Taha, a 53 year-old Imam and father of 14 children from east Jerusalem, is one of the two Palestinians who will take part in the desert journey. Today he manages the Islamic Council al-Fatwa in Jerusalem. In the past, he was jailed for a year and a half after inciting against Israel as an Imam. "I spoke against the occupation. No one likes the occupation," he says.

He told Ynet about distant relatives who have been killed, injured, or jailed during the long

years of conflict, but unlike the Israeli participants, Sheikh Taha prefers to focus on the national aspect of the journey, and less on the personal level.

"I want to talk about our suffering due to the occupation. I'm not talking about myself, but about the whole big problem between Palestinians and Israelis. I am speaking in the name of my nation, we are suffering and we want peace in order to solve the problems and end the occupation."

Against a two-state solution

The second Palestinian representative is Muhammad Azzam al-Arajah (22), from Qalqilya, who was born in Saudi Arabia to Palestinian parents, and who is today completing his studies in accountancy at al-Quds University.

"In the last intifada soldiers entered my house at three in the morning, and we all went outside because they were looking for a suspect. People were killed in the intifada years, including my cousin. On a personal level, I want to hear people, and I want people to hear that it's possible to reach peace. There needs to be hope and respect for people."

His friends are enthusiastic about the adventure, and would have been glad to take his place. And what about the principles of peace and fraternity that are supposed to accompany the journey? "My friends tell me: Forget that, it's bullshit. But I hope that politicians will hear us and understand that if simple people are making peace, they can too. Before the intifada I had Israeli friends who came to Qalqilya and today they don't come anymore."

Al-Arajah said that the two-state solution is not applicable, and said he wants to see a bi-national state.

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