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Jalaja Bonheim, center, participates in a session in northern Israel during her trip to the Middle East in January. (Photo Provided)

Creating Community

Karen Gadiel
Contributing writer

A circle can be a formation of people where everyone around the rim may easily see and hear everyone else. Like King Arthur's legendary Round Table, where everyone met as equals, Jalaja Bonheim brings together groups in circles to create community, promote healing, peace and global perspective.

In January, she traveled to the Middle East where she worked with groups of women of a variety of ethnicities who came together to create a safe, sacred space where each could express her pain, help each other heal and share dreams for peace.

"I started working with Jewish and Arab women in 2001," Bonheim said.

Several of them contacted her for Circlework training, a leadership training course Bonheim evolved to help others learn how to work with diverse groups. In 2005, Bonheim visited Israel for the first time - this recent trip was her third.

"January, during the Gaza war was a very intense time to be doing peace work in Israel," she said. "But in some ways, it was the perfect time because the need was really great."

The women who came together were Jewish and Arab, Bedouin, Druze and Palestinian.

"These women are very courageous, very committed to peace," Bonheim said.

Some might virtually be neighbors, living in ethnically-segregated villages situated geographically close to each other, though culture and politics might otherwise keep them worlds apart.

"There are huge issues. You could hardly imagine the level of trauma they are living with," Bonheim said. "There is nobody in those circles who has not lost at least one loved one. Many of the Arab women had relatives in Gaza, many Jewish women had children in the military - in Israel, both men and women have to serve in the military for three years. There was a tremendous amount of pain and fear and anger. It was not easy at all."

Helena Cooper, a graduate of the Circlework training who traveled with Bonheim on this trip to Israel as well as on a previous trip, said that on this recent occasion, apart from seeing more soldiers on the streets there wasn't a distinct feeling of peril.

"You didn't really get to feel like there was something awful happening," she said.

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Still, at the same time, Cooper said, there was "definitely more of a tangible sense of intense pain, with this situation, on both sides. The Jewish women were really feeling pain; and Arab and Palestinian women are the ones who have suffered so much more in many ways."

And out of this pain came something even more powerful.

"The empowerment of the women as peacemakers," she said thoughtfully, "because of their capacity to bond so deeply and accept each other. It's a heart connection that happens in this space, to really listen, to really bond."

It's not a matter of simply talking through one's differences. Movement, sharing, writing exercises, chanting and other experiential group activities are part of it.

"It's not really mental," she said. "There's a sacredness that gets created, this space for process, to really bond in ways not just mental."

In one group, a Palestinian woman decided to share something very painful she had never shared before, Cooper said.

"She felt the safety of the container, that's what Jalaja creates. Then there's the possibility of being really heard, being bonded," she said. "Healing can happen, women have that way of just being with pain and joy. It's not like just one spiritual way, but being connected to something that's more sacred, that brings us back to who we really are, connected to our own center. And I think that's the whole idea of the circle, to bring us closer to our own center."

"Circlework is very much based on the premise that we need to cultivate receptivity, deep listening. We live in a society so focused on having opinions, taking a stand, it's a discipline to be receptive," Bonheim added.

One of the groups she met with was composed of non-Israeli women from the West Bank. These women experience two different sorts of oppression, Bonheim said, one from the political situation, the other from their culture's traditional lack of freedom accorded to women.

"They came with a great deal of anger," she said.

But, because of the great value placed on motherhood, these women, as with the mixed groups of Jewish and Arab women, also feel a deep sense of connection, united in wanting to see their children move into a better future.

"If people go into it with a mental attitude of, we're going to discuss the issues, debate and argue, it's a complete waste of time, nothing will come out of it," Bonheim said. "Culturally we have this strong belief that every problem can be resolved by thinking about it. Think long and hard enough and you'll find a solution."

"My sense is that as we let go of thinking, we gain access to a deeper wisdom that goes beyond what the conscious intellect can access. If people are able to really open their hearts and listen deeply, that's where it begins to happen," she added. "My sense is that as we let go of thinking, we gain access to a deeper wisdom that, goes beyond what the conscious intellect can access."

In a previous group, an Israeli woman talked about her father's horrific death from injuries in an earlier conflict. Held by the other women in the group, she recounted her traumatic memories and wept. Other women in the group were also moved to tears, including an Arab woman who sobbed as she pointed out as a daughter of a father she also deeply loved, she could experience the other woman's pain and sadness.

"Whether we're Jewish or Arab, we all share the same pain," she said.

"This is where it's very beneficial to be an outsider," Bonheim said. "Someone who isn't perceived as being on one side or another, but someone who can hold a container."

That sense of the circle as container, as sacred space, allows for an alchemical transformation.

"One of the ways I define circle gathering is to create a field of love powerful enough to heal us and our communities," said Bonheim. "There's a growing awareness around the world that we are members of a single planetary community."

"No matter what our differences, we're basically human beings with the same kind of feelings and responses," she added. "We have to learn to share the planet, to come to a realization of our one-ness not just an intellectual insight but something we feel deeply. Yes! We really are all one."

The work is not all sweetness and a continual flow of epiphanies.

"Conflict happens in any circle that goes deep enough," Bonheim said. "Part of what I teach people is how to work with conflict. When you work skillfully with conflict, it creates an amazing opening."

On a previous trip, Bonheim led a workshop in a beautiful retreat center owned by a Jewish family.

"But this very old, beautiful building had once belonged to Arabs who had been driven out of it," Bonheim said. "The Arab women understandably had a lot of feelings about it, and there was initially a lot of defensiveness on the part of the Jews. So what can easily happen is one side gets entrenched in defensiveness and guilt; the other side gets entrenched in a sense of victimhood."

"We did some beautiful work in that circle around cracking that open, through deep listening and recognition that we can't change the past, but we can change the stories we tell ourselves about the past. Clinging to the past can really imprison people," she added. "Forgiveness is letting go of all hope for a better past. You can let go of the past without forgetting or betraying our ancestors. And these things are universal."

Changes emerge. One group of Arab and Jewish women made a commitment to start a cooperative kindergarten so both groups of children could meet at a young age and become friends. And a core group of women Bonheim has been working with resolved to stay connected, even when cooperation became difficult.

During the most recent conflict, "These women would call each other on their cell phones, whether Jewish or Arab, telling each other which roads were safe, helping in very practical ways," she said.



"I really saw how healing it was, how important it was for them to get a wider perspective that this kind of warfare is happening not only in the Middle East but around the planet," said Bonheim. "Our old ways of resolving conflict won't work - we'll either learn new ways or self-destruct. There's a global process of awakening and transformation.

"The need for healing in a war zone is huge, but the need for healing in our own community is huge too," she added. "We shouldn't just think we're fine and they need all this help. There's a lot of segregation going on and a lot of wounding in our own community, too."

Bonheim said she's long felt called to circle work, to the emphasis on the universals that unite people rather than the details that divide them. Could Circlework help rival gangs?

"Yes, it's already being done, and it works," she said. Would the circles be different in other places? Yes, there would be cultural differences, she said, "but at the same time there is an energy and a presence in the circle that I believe is universal. There's no culture on earth where people did not traditionally gather in circles.

"Another image I often have, I've read about veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq, it would be such a beautiful thing if we could offer them circles where they could tell their stories," Bonheim added. "I remember talking with a peace activist who was very discouraged. She asked, 'Why am I doing this? Things have not gotten better.' I think it's a global process; human consciousness needs to transform and is transforming. My job is to make the contribution I can make, even if it's tiny, regardless of what the outcome is going to be. I don't feel it's my job to predict how things are going to turn out but to be a force for peace as best as I can. And that's all each one of us can do, do it to satisfy our own soul. That's what we came here for. When I die, I want to feel I've given the gift I had to give, regardless of what shape the world is in. I don't know how it will turn out in Middle East or elsewhere - but I know unless we transform the consciousness, we don't have a chance."

To get beyond the words, or, as Bonheim puts it, to lead people from their heads into their hearts, music and dance can become what she describes as "a very joyful and healing thing. People might be in a hard place, but the movement and the music takes them to a completely different place than they were before. Music in itself is such a universal language."

Taken to that different place, one woman commented, wonderingly, at the close of a session, "I thought I was a lonely soldier. Now I see I'm part of a whole army. And our ammunition is love."

This sounds like a satisfying wrap-up - but there's more. There's always more.

"It's an ongoing discipline," Bonheim said. "Circlework is an ongoing practice, not just one workshop. That's why I'm so committed to training circle leaders."

Local Circlework trainings are given by Bonheim at Light on the Hill Retreat Center in Van Etten. Several of the participants in the Middle East retreat hope to attend trainings here in September.

While she offers workshops around the world, Bonheim does have one coming up locally. "Sacred Sexuality Made Simple: An evening with Jalaja Bonheim" will take place from 7:30-9 p.m. April 1 at Rasa Spa in Ithaca.

The event is complimentary, but interested persons should reserve a space by calling Rasa Spa at (607) 273-1740.

For more information on Circlework training and news, visit the Web site www.instituteforcirclework.org.

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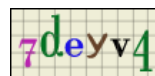
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