



# Promoting Peace While Memorializing the Fallen

MICHELLE I. GAWERC

This is the twelfth year we gather together to remember the loved ones we have lost, and to remember that war is not our fate, and we can change reality with our own hands. ... We have learnt from our joint experience that human suffering can create partnership even between enemies.  
—Neta Hazan

These words by Neta Hazan marked the beginning of the 2017 Israeli–Palestinian Memorial Day Ceremony. For the last twelve years, on the eve of Israel’s Memorial Day, two joint Israeli–Palestinian peace organizations, Combatants for Peace (CFP) and Parents Circle–Families Forum (PCFF), have hosted an Israeli–Palestinian Memorial Day ceremony as an alternative to the official state-run ceremonies. While an audience of only 200 gathered the first time they hosted the event, in 2017, roughly 4,000 people attended the alternative Memorial Day ceremony in Tel Aviv.

Each year, at the ceremony, artists perform and intellectuals speak. Bereaved Israelis and Palestinians speak about their pain and about how their families have been transformed by their losses, and activists from the two organizations (both Israelis and Palestinians) share their thoughts, experiences, and what they have learned being involved with a joint Israeli–Palestinian organization. The primary purpose of the Israeli–Palestinian Memorial Day Ceremony, as CFP notes on their website, is “to remind [their largely Israeli audience] that war is not an act of fate but one of human choice. ... [And] on this particularly difficult day ... [they] call upon both sides to acknowledge the pain and the aspirations of those living on the other side of the fence/[wall] and for each [individual] ... to strive to prevent the next war.”

At the ceremony, some of the Israeli presenters talk about their experiences with the state-run Memorial Day ceremonies. Some express anger at their community’s surrender to—and acceptance of—war, killing,

and bloodshed. Many indicate that they cannot disregard the ideological message of the state-run and more mainstream ceremonies. As Avner Horowitz, a bereaved son and activist in CFP, noted in the 2013 Israeli–Palestinian Memorial Day ceremony, “[These mainstream ceremonies involve] the exaltation of battle to instill determination and courage in young soldiers [and] the removal of all doubt in the righteousness of our path. [They also] reinforce a brutal and inhuman image of the enemy, [thus] fueling the well-oiled wheels of the war machinery and mutual violence in our region.” Similarly, in 2014, Ruvick Rosenthal, a mournful brother, noted, “I stopped going to the national memorial ceremonies because they are trapped in clichés, sanctifying the constant sacrifice of our young people, making it a unifying symbol which defines our lives and our future. ... I can only voice a short cry here: No more wars! I am here because only here do we keep in one parcel of memory victims from both sides, Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians. ... All of us sitting here, just have one war to wage, a war without rifles and blood, a war to end the conflict.” And in 2016, Yigal Elhanan, another bereaved brother, asked, “How long will we let the blood of our loved ones cry to us from the ground? And so, as everyone else gathers in denial this evening curled up in their suffering, we cry out. And when everyone else says a faint ‘amen’ of acceptance, we refuse to accept their deadly judgment.”

With no equivalent in Palestine to Israel’s Memorial Day, the Palestinian speakers focus largely on the messages they want to impart to the largely Israeli audience. As Seeam Nadeem, a grieving father, noted in the 2017 ceremony, “One of the hardest things for a father to do is to bury his son. There is another way! We, Palestinians and Israelis, must take responsibility for changing the reality, breaking the cycle of hate and violence.” Similarly, Muhannad Najar noted in 2014, “Agony over those lost and fear of who we will lose unites us.” And he added, “Peace will not come, we believe, without a two-state solution [one that fully ends the occupation].” And in 2013, Jamel Qassas, a bereaved brother, stated, “I think the Israeli people have the power in their hands. Don’t let another people suffer the anger, pain, and racism that you suffered in the past.”

In recent years, this event has been met with backlash. Quite often, right-wing protesters stand outside the event screaming, “Leftists-out,” “traitors,” “Nazis,” “go back to Auschwitz,” and “there is no such thing as a Palestinian people.” There has also been opposition from some in the Israeli government, with one governmental official even claiming it as an “insult to the citizens of this state.” In 2015, a settler group tried, unsuccessfully, to have it shut down, proposing a law to ban the ceremony.

They also called on the defense minister to withhold entry permits for the Palestinians, with the goal of ending their participation. The Palestinians seeking permits were described by the settler group as being “family members of terrorists”—which, although inaccurate, was reprinted in the mainstream media. For the first time, in 2017, the government refused to grant entry permits to *any* of the 225 Palestinians who wanted to participate under the guise of “security.” Nonetheless, CFP and PCFF decided to hold the ceremony as planned and quickly organized an additional ceremony in Beit Jala in the West Bank, for the Palestinians, as well as any Israelis who preferred to be there. The main ceremony in Tel Aviv was broadcast live for those in Beit Jala, and the audience at the main ceremony could also see previously recorded broadcasts of the Palestinian speakers—as well as live broadcasts of the audience at Beit Jala—thus allowing them, in the words of one CFP activist, “to commemorate together the memory of [their] loved ones and call for peace ... together.”

**T**o understand the exceptional nature of the alternative Memorial Day ceremony, however, some context is needed. Israel’s Memorial Day falls annually between Holocaust Remembrance Day and Independence Day. As the political scientist, Gal Ariely indicates, the former commemorates the worst calamity to ever befall the Jewish people, while Israel’s Memorial Day and Independence Day serve to signify to the Jewish population that the only viable answer to the persecution of the Jewish people, such as during the Holocaust, is a Jewish state willing to go to war to defend itself. During Israel’s Memorial Day, memorial ceremonies are held at cemeteries, schools, and universities throughout the country. Meanwhile, TV broadcasts, along with the radio, are dedicated to covering Memorial Day–related topics throughout the day, as well as broadcasting live the major ceremonies.

Television ratings have indicated (according to the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*) that roughly 30 percent of viewers watch the broadcast of the annual national ceremony held in the Old City of Jerusalem, which is also attended by the president and army chiefs. On Memorial Day, by law, all places of entertainment are closed, and thus Memorial Day events are front and center. Perhaps it’s not surprising, then, that in a recent survey, Gal Ariely found that “nearly all Israeli Jews participated in Remembrance Day-related behaviors,” which could include standing when the siren goes off in honor of those who have died in the country’s wars or via terrorism, attending a local ceremony, or watching the national ceremony on television.

As esteemed social psychologist Daniel Bar-Tal indicates, “in times of conflict ... ceremonies contribute to the continuation of the conflict.

Their contents fuel public animosity towards the enemy while urging the society's members to fulfill their patriotic duties in the conflict." Indeed, when it comes to Memorial Day ceremonies in Israel, as sociologist Edna Lomsky-Feder observes, the state-organized ceremonies have very patriotic messages and make clear the obligation of the people to "stand firm against the State's enemies." While there are more variations among the school ceremonies, she reveals that: "The main values that are delivered ... are: heroism and self-sacrifice; the victory of the few over the many; Zionist historiography and national revival; and the command to remember the fallen ..." Moreover, she notes, "Peace is often referred to, but mostly as a utopian aspiration that is the absolute opposite of the state of war that has been forced upon the Israeli nation from without." Given the above, it's not surprising that Gal Ariely found that exposure to Memorial Day heightened nationalism and the belief among Israelis that Israel is a moral nation, a better country than most, and one that other countries could learn a lot from.

It's within this highly nationalistic and militaristic context that the Israeli–Palestinian Memorial Day Ceremony occurs. And it behooves us, as scholars of peace and conflict studies, to consider, in such contexts, the importance of alternative Memorial Day commemorations such as this one. Having participated in two ceremonies in 2008 and 2014, observing five recorded versions from afar (2013–2017), and interviewing the Israeli and Palestinian activists who organized the ceremony, I found myself reflecting on the importance of this type of activity in a context of occupation and protracted conflict. Drawing on the literature of both social movement and peace and conflict studies, I argue that this type of activity can contribute to a just peace in five discrete ways.

First, it challenges long-held and widespread views of the Israeli Jewish public, including the traditional Zionist narrative that Israel is reluctantly engaging in war, the wars are righteous, and that there is no one to talk to on the other side. As noted above, this is in sharp contrast to the message that is put forward elsewhere on Memorial Day. Indeed, as journalist Larry Derfner notes, "Today [Memorial Day] is not only a day of sadness for fallen Israeli soldiers, it's also one of public declarations that all those bloody conflicts were righteous and necessary—just like the current ones and those that lie ahead."

In contrast, one of the main arguments coming through this alternative ceremony is that "war is not our fate" and that "there is another way!" Speakers often point out that there is a choice, and some highlight the investment of the Israeli government in settlements and the occupation, rather than in peace and the pursuit of a negotiated solution to the

conflict that meets the needs of both sides. Meanwhile, each year, several of the Palestinian speakers share stories of their family members who were killed because of these wars, Israel's military operations, or the occupation. For instance, in the 2016 ceremony, Arab Aramin discussed the killing of his ten-year-old sister, Abir, who was shot by an Israeli border policeman while standing outside her school with classmates. In 2014, Ahmad Helou spoke about the 27 family members that were killed in Gaza since the Second Intifada, the youngest two—who were twelve and fourteen—killed while playing soccer. And in 2013, Jamel Qassas spoke about his grandfather who was killed because he refused to leave his village in 1948.

While the message is often subtle, given the strong belief in Israeli society that Memorial Day events should focus on commemorating those killed, rather than engaging in politics, the ceremonies do challenge the belief that the wars have been righteous and that Israel has not had a choice. Similarly, with a handful of Palestinians speaking at each event, whether in person or through previously recorded video statements, this ceremony also helps to contradict the notion that there is no one to talk to on the other side. This understanding is further aided by the audience's awareness that every year, the organizers seek to attain more than one-hundred entry permits for Palestinians who share similar beliefs in order for them to participate in the ceremony. Thus, the ceremony challenges several long-held views of the Israeli public that help to maintain the Israeli military occupation and the protracted conflict.

Second, it enables and promotes an alternative frame of the conflict by confronting the framing of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in Israel, which is one of Arab intransigence and an unwillingness to accept Israel's right to exist. In addition, it promotes, instead, the perspective that violence begets violence, which fosters and maintains a cycle of violence. There is also a more critical frame introduced by some of the speakers each year at the ceremony, which highlights Israel's investment in the occupation and settlements, Israel's control over the Palestinians, and the restricted freedom of movement that Palestinians face, along with other injustices.

Alongside the aforementioned frames for understanding the conflict, the event also promotes another frame, which eminent sociologist William A. Gamson would identify as one of “dual liberation,” as this frame has the benefit of allowing the two communities to move forward together, suggesting that each side's liberation is tied up with that of the other. Without ignoring the structural reality of occupation, the ceremony, however, makes clear that peoples on both sides are victimized by this

conflict, and that security for Israelis will not come through Israeli military might and operations, but rather through a negotiated peace—one that respects human rights. As Michal Pundak relayed in the 2014 ceremony, “The security Israel seeks will be achieved only by peace,” which promotes the idea that security for Israelis is intimately tied up with freedom and justice for Palestinians. Indeed, as Arab Aramin, the son of one of the Palestinian founders of CFP, noted in the 2016 ceremony, “the continued oppression of the Palestinian people will not bring you security.” As social movement scholars have found, shared frames of what a conflict (or issue) is truly about, along with what is needed to address it, are critical for mobilizing individuals to take action. Alternative frames can also promote cultural change, of course, and consequently have an impact on governmental policies through elections and referendums.

**T**hird, it humanizes Palestinians and provides a stronger and more personal understanding of the occupation. The ceremony makes it clear to those attending that Palestinians grieve their dead loved ones just as Israelis do, and it provides Israelis a better understanding of the occupation. Indeed, the Israelis attending learn immediately that many Palestinians cannot attend the ceremony that their own organizations produced—even if they were scheduled to speak—because they cannot get entry permits into Israel to do so. Depending on who is speaking and what they share, the audience also has the chance to learn about: the restrictions on Palestinians’ freedom of movement in the West Bank, including the challenges posed by the hundreds of checkpoints; the existence and reality of curfews; the widespread fear that is created when the Israeli military or Israeli special forces speed through Palestinian areas; the damage Israeli soldiers often do to houses when they are searching an area; and administrative neglect and discrimination of Palestinians in East Jerusalem.

In almost every ceremony, the audience is also introduced to the unfortunate reality that unarmed Palestinian kids, as well as unarmed Palestinians adults with no connections to militant groups, are often killed by Israeli soldiers or the border police. The aforementioned realities of the occupation are interwoven through stories—including those of loss from the Palestinian activists—of their own traumatic experiences and observations from the Israeli activists who have spent time in the Occupied West Bank. This humanization, and personalization, of Palestinians and the occupation, goes counter to media treatment, government rhetoric, and public discourse in Israel. And as the journalist, Amira Hass, points out, the lack of understanding of the impact of the occupation on Palestinians, combined with the reality that most Israelis have never met a Palestinian, “reinforces Israelis’ racist—or at best, patronizing—attitudes towards the

Palestinians.” Thus, this re-humanization, which is dependent on understanding the impact of the occupation on Palestinians, can lead to a feeling of reassurance, as well as a sense of possibility, that peace is, in fact, possible. Both are critical for societies moving from war to peace, according to renowned social psychologist, Herbert C. Kelman.

Fourth, the relationships among the activists in the organizations provide hope, as they act as an example of the relationships possible between Israelis and Palestinians. The ceremony is led jointly by an Israeli and a Palestinian moderator, it is conducted in both Hebrew and Arabic, and it thoughtfully introduces the audience to two joint Israeli–Palestinian organizations that not only advocate for peace, but also seek to prefigure new types of relationships between Palestinians and Israelis—ones that embody respect, care, trust, and equality. This is reinforced by statements such as one that came from Maya Katz, a moderator in 2013: “It’s possible to find a common way with adversaries and even with enemies.” The audience also witnesses close relationships between Palestinians and Israelis on the stage, such as the one in 2014 between Robi Damelin and Bushra Awad, two bereaved mothers who hugged warmly on stage. Robi stated, “Note and understand how the pain is the same for both sides. When you see the humanity of the other, that is the end of the conflict.” Similar, in 2016, two grieving brothers (one Israeli and one Palestinian) in their early twenties, along with their fathers—all members of PCFF—shared warm hugs.

Reflecting on this annual event, a CFP organizer noted, “I think in a way, this is what peace looks like. This is peace. For people to be on the same stage and talk about their losses [together].” It should be noted that the ceremony can also allow the audience to see the activists engaged in difficult (staged) discussions across the difference and power asymmetry. For instance, in 2014, the Israeli and Palestinian moderators engaged in a conversation in front of the audience, which involved the Israeli repeating and validating the language of his Palestinian colleague while also sharing his own sentiments. In this conversation, Mohammed Awaida relayed, “I was a prisoner searching for freedom . . .” When he was finished, Assaf Yacobovitz affirmed, “You were a prisoner searching for freedom . . .” and then continued, “I served in the [Israeli] air-force as an officer. As a matter of course, I participated in an activity in areas where you, Mohammed, and your family live. I did this without deeply understanding that it involved denying their humanity and yours, and actually also mine.” These relationships, the activists’ abilities to communicate honestly across the conflict lines, and the organizational models of these two joint organizations, which prefigure the relationships they would like to see in the broader society, can

further provide hope and a sense of possibility, which, as noted above, is critical in situations of protracted conflict.

Finally, it provides a space for Israelis who support peace and an end to the Israeli occupation to gather. This ceremony has become a main space of meeting for left-wing peace activists each year, providing support and aiding persistence. As Mira Awad, a Palestinian citizen of Israel, noted in 2013, “The fact that in the heart of Israel, there is this one space where Israelis and Palestinians meet and cry over the losses on both sides, this is a real achievement. It is mutual recognition of the pain, of the history, and the right to live. More than 2,000 in here, others watching on TV. I can say for myself, today, I feel less alone.”

According to social psychologist Ifat Maoz, this supportive function is critical in hostile environments when the larger society does not reinforce the beliefs held by the activists and stigmatizes those who hold on to them. It becomes a place for the peace activists to heal, to renew, and to remind themselves of what they stand for, what they are working toward, and that they are not alone. Since it includes peace activists from many of the peace organizations that exist, it also helps to foster a sense of community and collective identity across the peace and anti-occupation organizations. Such a collective identity is critical for enabling collective action and sustaining individual commitment in the broader peace movement, as well as increasing capacity at the civil society level when it comes to peacebuilding.

**W**hile the ceremony itself will not end the 50-year-long occupation or the protracted conflict, this essay makes clear its transformative power and potential in the Israeli context. Indeed, this ceremony, which illustrates the costs of war and memorializes those who have been killed in both communities, challenges long-held views in Israeli society, promotes an alternative frame of the conflict and what will bring security, highlights the reality of occupation and humanizes Palestinians, inspires by portraying a new type of relationship possible between Israelis and Palestinians, and fosters a sense of collective identity among peace supporters, which is critical for mobilization. While the challenges are great and the ceremony is not a panacea, one thing is clear: with this event, Combatants for Peace and Parents Circle-Families Forum are promoting peace one ceremony at a time.

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Michelle I. Gawerc is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Global Studies at Loyola University, Maryland. Her research interests include the sociology of peace, war, and social conflict, social movements, and organizational studies. E-mail: [migawerc@loyola.edu](mailto:migawerc@loyola.edu).