



RAMI ELHANAN: FROM PAIN TO PEACE

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball Campus in Los Angeles and your host. Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast in which we will have the pleasure of a conversation with Rami Elhanan together with his Palestinian friend, Bassam Aramin. Rami is the protagonist of Colum McCann's recent acclaimed non-fiction novel, *Apeirogon*, which recounts the tragic loss of their daughters in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and their transformation of that tragedy into peace activism. Rami Elhanan, it's a pleasure to have you on the College Commons podcast.

Rami Elhanan: Thank you for having me.

JH: Rami, I wanna ask you about the telling of the story in *Apeirogon* as it relates to your way of telling the story together with Bassam and alone as you have spoken publicly for many years. Did meeting Colum McCann... Did the process of his writing *Apeirogon* itself change your own understanding of your experiences and did the book shift your perspective on your own experience even though you had been telling the story long before the book?

RE: Well, I'm telling my story for the last 24 years ever since the tragedy happened and I'm doing it like an actor on a stage. I have a purpose, I have a target, I have a mission. I need people to understand that it will not stop unless we talk to each other and I devote myself into this mission. And I do it four times a day, five times a day, one time a day to an audience of five college kids or 4000 hall full of people in a big church. And this was the case until we met Colum McCann about five years ago. He was in a mission with a group of tourists who came to the Holy Land to learn some facts and they scheduled a meeting with us. There was nothing new about it but I have noticed and Bassam have noticed that he reacts in a deeply emotional way. He burst into tears, he was totally crushed, and we tried to comfort him. It happens from time to time because the story is really sad, but I was overwhelmed by his involvement, the measure of his involvement. So it developed into a friendship and what came out of this friendship is the book.

JH: The story of reconciliation in a big sense but also in a deeply, deeply personal sense between you and Bassam is of course at the heart of the story but we wonder if that story of reconciliation had repercussions in your respective worlds. How has your broader Jewish-Israeli circle received this brotherhood?

RE: With a big question mark, with a big misunderstanding. We are all victims of our education and I was brought up in a way that my brain was washed. The other side was hidden. It took me many years to understand why the other side is being hidden from me for so many years. Today, when we step into a high school class on the parent circle lectures in high schools, we are facing this education of not understanding, not accepting this friendship, this brotherhood, and we are facing young kids who have never ever laid eyes on an Israeli and a Palestinian before which are not fighting each other, which are not blaming each other, which are not putting their pain on the table trying to compare whose pain is bigger, which is kind of an earthquake. And these kids, Israelis and Palestinians alike, are going through a brainwashing system that is designed to hide the other side and demonize the other side in a way that it will not be a problem for a young, angry Palestinian kid or a young Jewish boy to pull the trigger and do things that are unspeakable. So we are facing two societies at war. It's like two kids fighting over the same toy and they won't let go and our mission is to put a crack in this wall of hatred and fear, the divide between us. A little crack and the light comes in and it can drive away a lot of darkness. And this is it, this is our mission no matter what.

JH: Is there a personal relationship that... Or a familial relationship that you can describe that particularly captures how, even though they may know you very well and they clearly know your story very well, they nevertheless somehow don't get it?

RE: Yeah, it happens a lot. We are swimming against the current. In a way, we are taking water from the ocean with a little spoon full of little holes. And the journey that I made, the journey that Bassam made since he was a terrorist sitting in Israeli jail, since I wore the uniform of the IDF is a huge journey towards the other side, towards understanding, which most of the people don't do this journey and the media of both sides, the culture of both sides, the environment of... And also the reality of what's happening every day is doing its utmost to pull us apart. So many people, don't accept, don't understand. They don't consider the pain to be the same and we are facing two very angry societies. And this is the mission, this is the work that we do.

JH: I want to ask you a little bit about what it means for you to have gotten out of your skin geographically, we learn in the book about Bassam going to England and studying the Holocaust and how that changed his perspective in Hebrew, we say... [Hebrew]. You change your location and that changes your luck, your situation, the way you find yourself. The story of course talks about you going into Palestine, it breaks down the journey with the various check posts you have to go through or the way you have to

avoid the wall or you have to avoid the potholes. It's a symbolic journey of getting out of your skin, out of your place. Tell us a little bit about how leaving the Israel you knew and grew up in physically, geographically, culturally, has participated in your development of this relationship and your experience.

RE: So it's a journey we started the day I joined the parent circle. In the book *Colum* describes it very well. The first meeting with the Palestinians, I was 47 years old. It was the first time ever in my life I met Palestinians as human beings, not as workers in the street, and not as terrorists, and not as transporting people. And this meeting changed my life. I was 47 years old, and I'm still ashamed to admit it, that it was the first time ever. And the sight of this Palestinian mother with the six years old kid picture on her chest like my wife carry the name of our daughter on hers, made a transformation in my mind. I understood that I have to start this journey towards redefining myself, redefining myself as a Jew, as an Israeli and as a human being.

JH: Is there something about the cultures that addresses the communal pain in a way that's necessary or might be a tool for you to think about healing instead of outrage?

RE: Well, it's deeply complicated. You know, I come from a culture of 3000 years of victimhood. We are born victims, it's under our skin, in our blood, the fear, the anger, the victimhood is justified, we really were victims, and the same culture of victimhood is existing in the Palestinian side, the Nakba, the Palestinian history, the fact that whatever they did throughout history did not succeed and they still don't have their independence and freedom and respect, so these two victimhood mentalities are the basis of the continuation of the conflict. And once we will be able to get rid of it, not forget the past, but moving forward in order to acknowledge each other pain, this is the moment it will change.

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JH: Introduce us to your work in the Parents Circle, I don't know if you're still active in Combatants for Peace or not as well.

RE: I met Bassam in 2005 when Combatants for Peace were created by four Ex-Israeli officers, combat soldiers, and six Palestinian, Ex-terrorist prisoners. One of these Israeli soldiers was my son Elic, my older son, who served in an elite combat unit in the Israeli army, and when he finished the army and the journey after the army, he came back refusing and he have decided not to take part anymore in serving the occupation and he looked for ways to fulfill this sense of mission that he had, and this is how Combatants For Peace were created.

And me and my wife were standing by the cradle of this noble movement. It was a lot of fun and this is how we met with Bassam and his family. We became the best of friends. We became very, very close. They came to our house in Motza, we came to their house

in 'Anata, and we became really, very, very close. And then on the 16th of January 2007, we got a telephone and we rushed to the hospital, and we slept there three days by Abeer's bed until she passed away. And for me, it was devastating because I knew this girl very deeply and it was like losing my daughter for the second time. And I remember I asked Bassam, "What are we going to do now?" And he said to me, "God is testing us." And I was overwhelmed and ever since then, the friendship developed deeper and deeper. And he joined the Parents Circle and together, we became The Parents Circle and the activity within the Parents Circle became the center in our lives.

For the last four years, I've been the Israeli Director of the Parents Circle, Bassam was the Palestinian Director of the Parents Circle. We finished our term about half a year ago and now, the Parents Circle is moving forward, a very difficult year. Most of the activity was done by Zoom, the lectures at high schools, the groups, but the activity is amazing. The activity and the ability to get into the minds of people and show that there is another way is a mission by itself and I think the Parents Circle is doing great in this sense. There is a wide range of people active in many ways, in many stages, in many levels of activism because many, many people feel that they cannot stand aside, they cannot keep silent, they need to do something, and more and more people are joining us. For example, in the Parents Circle, activities are wide open to create discussion and meetings between Israelis and Palestinians. There are joint summer camps for the kids. There are very, very strong women group in the Parents Cycle and also, personal initiatives.

RE: There is one member of the Parents Circle who created an organization of Israelis who are taking Palestinians from the checkpoints to the hospitals, which is a huge effort and a very blessed one. So there are so many activities, wide range of it. I don't know if you heard about the alternative memorial ceremony which took place just last Independence Day in Israel.

JH: No, tell us.

RE: We are doing it together with Combatants for Peace for the last 16 years. It's a gathering of Israelis and Palestinians on the eve of Memorial Day in Israel, which is a sacred day, and we have decided to remember all the victims, the Israeli victims and the Palestinian victims, which creates a lot of anger. The Israeli said to us, "What? Are you going to remember those who blew themselves up in the buses?" And the Palestinian says, "Are you going to remember the soldiers that killed us?" And we said, "No, we remember the victims and we are trying to prevent more victims." The first ceremony held in Tel Aviv, there were 200 people in the audience. Last year, it was done by Zoom. There were more than 200,000 people watching. And this year, this event, you can watch it online. If you get into the Parents Circle website or the Combatants for Peace website, you'll see a magnificent ceremony of love, compassion, understanding realities, and a lot of reconciliation effort. This year, it was 250,000 people watching. It's a huge success.

JH: That's amazing. That's remarkable. It's remarkable to hear such massive numbers of people participating in a time when the message that we're getting in the United States about the political situation, the mass political situation, in Israel is not positive. Are you feeling worried or are you reacting to mainstream politics? In ways, are you seeing consequences of the political atmosphere in your work?

RE: Well, things are really dark. It's the dark ages. We are being ruled by a bunch of criminals, corrupt politicians. We are being led by an agenda of Jewish Nationalism and the future is not so bright because the Israeli public is tending towards the right but also the Palestinian public is tending towards the right. If there were an election today in Palestine, Hamas would have been elected, and this is an outcome of this ongoing pressure between the two sides. On the surface, we are living so-called normal life. Under the ground, there are tensions and hatred, and anger, and oppression, and occupation, and whatever you like. It's like a time bomb. We are sitting on a time bomb going to explode every moment. And there is no leadership and there is no compassion, and there is no future, and there is no solution because each side fortifies itself in its justice, in a way that justice is being interpreted is just us rather than justice.

JH: I wanna ask you about the very soul of this entire story that is brought us by Apeirogon, but is also, of course about you and Bassam's relationship. And I want to close the interview by getting to that very soul, which of course, is your daughters, Abeer and Smadar. You, Colum, and Bassam referred to each other as brothers. So I would like to ask you as Bassam's brother, and on behalf of yourself and your family, I'd like you to tell us about both Abeer and Smadar, something about each of them, that is essential, that you want us to know.

RE: Wow. That's a tough one. I will not get into details because it's too difficult, I can only say that they were, both of them, happy girls, very talented, very joyful, full of life, full of energy. And Smadar was a dancer, she was a swimmer, she was a... She played the piano. She was amazing. And Abeer was making jokes all the time. I mean... The loss is overwhelming, and the pain never goes away. It happened for me, 24 years ago, for Bassam, 16 years ago. The pain is there. It will never go away. For 60 seconds out of every minute, it's there and never give you any rest. And the only question that remains is, what do you do with this energy? The energy is nuclear. It has an atomic power. And you can use it in order to get revenge, to bring darkness, and destruction, and death to people. And you can use the same energy to bring light, and warmth and hope. So this is what we are trying to do. It is the decisions that you make every morning, again and again, you climb out of your dark hole, and you make this decision every day, again and again, Today I will go this way and not the other way.

JH: Well, on behalf of all of us, who have had the privilege of hearing you, I wanna thank you for bringing that light, because you have, and today and every other day you did this work, you have succeeded.

RE: Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of The College Commons Podcast. Available wherever you listen to your podcasts, or at the College Commons website, collegecommons.huc.edu, where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.

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