

Her Son Was Killed By A Palestinian Sniper. Now, This Israeli Activist Works For Change In Israel/Palestine.

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11-14 minutes



Robi Damelin's son, a reservist in the IDF, was killed by a Palestinian sniper. She's used her pain ... [+] and anguish to work to improve society for both Israelis and Palestinians.

Robi Damelin

This story is part of a series called “Israeli, Palestinian Women: The Only Way Forward Is Together.” The series highlights Israeli and Palestinian women about their connection to Israel/Palestine, and how they are working to improve relations, and promote equality and coexistence between both groups of people. See the links at the bottom of this article for each article of the series.

The day Robi Damelin learned her son David was killed is etched in her memory for eternity.

Soldiers from the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) knocked on her front door to inform her that a Palestinian sniper had killed her 28-year-old son David. The sniper was hiding in the hills behind the Ofra checkpoint, a checkpoint known to be political and dangerous, where David, who was in the army reserves, was stationed. Six other soldiers and three civilians were also killed. (Two days after the killings, the checkpoint was removed.)

But despite her agony and despair, Damelin turned to the soldiers and said, "You can't kill anybody in the name of my child."

"I have absolutely no idea where that came from," Damelin, who currently lives in Jaffa, Israel, said. "I mean, yes I do, I have an idea. It's my background and why I am the survivor and not a victim."

Damelin was born and raised in South Africa during apartheid by a fiercely progressive, liberal family. Damelin said her uncle defended [Nelson Mandela](#) during his first treason trial. (Mandela and others were accused of "high treason" by the South African apartheid government's response to adopting the Freedom Charter at the Congress of the People in Kliptown on June 26, 1955. All accused were found not guilty.)

Damelin also said one of her distant cousins walked with Mahatma Gandhi from Pietermaritzburg to Johannesburg during one of his marches opposing discriminatory policies in South Africa. ([Gandhi](#) moved to South Africa from Bombay in 1893 for work. Here, he was exposed to racial discrimination and worked to change policies with peaceful demonstrations, strikes, and marches.)

Because her family vocally opposed the South African government, Damelin said, it wasn't safe to remain in the country. People, like those in her family, often went missing for months or disappeared entirely because of their vocal anti-government stances.

All of this would influence Damelin's eventual decision to move to Israel in 1967, when she was in her 20s, with the hope of "saving Israel" during the [Six-Day War](#). (The Six-Day War occurred in June 1967 between Israel and Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. The war resulted in Israel seizing the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the

Golan Heights from Syria.)

But she got there too late. The war was over. So instead, she moved to a kibbutz (a communal settlement in Israel, typically a farm) and learned Hebrew.

"I remember saying to the people on the kibbutz, 'Wow, what an opportunity now for Israel to give back all of these territories and make peace,' Damelin said. "But you see, that's all very well for somebody with a big mouth, who hadn't lived here during a very dangerous time and didn't think that her life was probably going to end. I mean, they [Israelis] were digging mass graves before the Six-Day War, and it was a very difficult time."

"And so there was this major euphoria after the Six-Day War, where Israelis couldn't actually believe what happened. Who was I to say to people who'd been through fear and danger, 'Give it all up now,' even though that would have been the most extraordinarily good thing to do. In my opinion, this was the beginning of many troubles for Israel and a lot of moral dilemmas."

Damelin's first job in Israel was for the Jerusalem Post, when, according to her, it was a much more "liberal" newspaper. Then, she moved to Tel Aviv, got married, and had two sons — Eran and David. Damelin said as her sons were growing up, she couldn't believe they would eventually have to go to the army. (Everyone in Israel must serve in the military when they turn 18.)

Because her boys were only a little over a year apart in age, they served in the army together. Damelin said being in the IDF was traumatic for them, and after they completed their service, they both went abroad for a gap year, or as she says, an "escape year," to heal from their experiences. When they returned, Eren went to the university to study economics and David to study the philosophy of education and psychology at Tel Aviv University.

But then David was called to the reserves — and to serve in the Palestinian occupied territories. The occupied territories include the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. These are areas Israel overtook during the Six-Day War. The West Bank and East Jerusalem are run by the Palestinian Authority but militarily by Israel. Gaza is lead by Hamas, the Palestinian resistance group classified as a terrorist organization by the United States. Many soldiers, like David, don't want to serve in the occupied territories because of the moral dilemma they face policing Palestinians.

Israeli soldiers have been accused of tormenting, and embarrassing Palestinians at [checkpoints](#) in the territories — something David wanted to prevent, which is why he decided to conduct his service. (If a person refuses to go to the army when called upon, they could be jailed.)

“David said if I go, I will treat people [Palestinians] with dignity, and so will all my soldiers,” Damelin said.

So David served again before the tragedy that unfolded on March 3, 2002, when a Palestinian sniper killed him.

"It was then I knew almost immediately that I wanted to do something to prevent other families from experiencing all this pain," Damelin said.

Three months after David's murder, Damelin attended a demonstration and spoke in front of more than 60,000 people about her son and her hope for Israel to depart from the Palestinian occupied territories. Here, she made an impression on members of [The Parents Circle](#), a grassroots organization of Palestinian and Israeli families who lost immediate family members due to the conflict. She joined the organization and said it slowly consumed her life.

Damelin went from owning a public relations office and working behind the scenes for her clients to being the face of The Parents Circle and speaking worldwide with a Palestinian partner. She's delivered speeches to countless communities in many different countries; she's even talked in front of the United States Congress.

"I have a sense of gratitude that I could be a part of the change for other people... almost saving their lives in a very strange manner and changing this attitude of hatred to something completely different," she said.

And then, a little over two years after David was killed, Damelin learned they caught the Palestinian man who killed her son. It was in October of 2004.

"That was a really testing time to see who I am," Damelin explained. "You know you can say all of these remarkable things about peace and reconciliation, but now there's a face. What am I going to do with this person? Can I do this work? So it was a really difficult time for me."

After three months of sleepless nights, Damelin wrote a letter to the

parents of the man accused of killing her son. Some of the Palestinian members of The Parents Circle delivered the letter.

In the [letter](#), Damelin told them David's story and also spoke about the Parents Circle.

"I said we believe that there has to be a framework for a reconciliation process to be an integral part of any political future peace agreement, and that we believe in no violence, and that Israel has to get out of the occupied territories for the good of Israel, and for the good of the Palestinians," Damelin said. "And even if you don't care about the Palestinians, and I care deeply, I think if you don't understand the repercussions of occupation for so many years and what it does to your society, then you have no forward-looking mind."

Then, a few years ago, Damelin was in South Africa where she met a woman whose daughter was killed by the African National Congress military wing. The mother had gone through a truth and reconciliation commission and eventually told the man who killed her daughter that she forgave him.

"I wanted to know what she meant by forgiving, and so then I went to meet her, and she said, forgiving is giving up your right to revenge. And then I met the man who sent the people to kill her daughter, and he said by forgiving him, she released him from the prison of his inhumanity. What more does a person need than that?" she said.

Damelin went back to Israel, thinking that maybe she would try to meet the man who killed her son. She spoke to the then Minister of Justice, who agreed. But before a date was set, multiple elections and political upheaval occurred, and her story fell through the cracks. She's still waiting, unsure if the meeting will ever happen.

But she isn't worried because no matter what, Damelin will continue spreading her message along with her Palestinian counterparts.

Despite their progress since The Parents Circle's inception in 1995, every time an escalation occurs, like the latest escalation in May between Israel and Hamas, their work is impacted.

"Next to my house, they were burning cars, and the rockets were falling, and it was extraordinary, and the noise of the sirens and the banging and you think to yourself, 'Well here I am in my safe room, but there are people in Gaza with no shelter. Some people can't

make it to their shelters on time. There are so many things that one needs to think about," Damelin said.

"And for me, the worst part is the children. All these children that were killed are gone, but who is left? Who are they going to grow up to be? Who will these people be when they grow up? These children are living in Gaza with no hope and very little future. And the children in Ashkelon, Ashdod, and other Israeli cities who don't sleep at night, and pee their beds at the age of 12 and 13."

"Everybody is in trauma, I mean this whole nation. Both of us are in trauma."

Damelin and her counterparts, through various initiatives, are working to end the Israeli occupation, provide a space for Israelis and Palestinians to come together and speak about their collective experiences and traumas, and improve society in Israel/Palestine.

The stories, Damelin says, are what will change society for both groups.

"Narratives and personal stories are the basis of most of the work that we do," Damelin explained. "In fact, it's always a factor in whatever we do, and you'd be amazed how even the hardest of hearts are affected by hearing a story."

"That's the essence of the work that we do because it's firstly listening to somebody who you disagree with, but with empathy. And it doesn't mean that you all love each other at the end of it, but it's the beginning of a conversation."

Previous articles:

[Israeli And Palestinian Women: The Only Way Forward Is Together](#)

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[Ashager Araro, Israeli Activist, On Israel/Palestine: 'The Best Way For Us To Move Forward Is To Listen To Each Other'](#)

[Arab Israeli Educator On Israel/Palestine: We Must Invest In Our Community Inside Israel](#)