

The Unbroken Bridge

Myra Cohen Klenicki, her late husband Rabbi Leon Klenicki and Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish have been friends for years. She recounts for *Perspectives* a recent conversation with Abuelaish, a 2010 Nobel Peace Prize nominee, about his work as a physician and peace activist.



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Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish

When it is your children who have become “collateral damage” in a seemingly endless conflict, when you have seen their bodies torn apart, their young lives obliterated, how do you not hate? How do you not rage?

“Religion and deep faith,” is Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish’s answer. On January 16, 2009, Dr. Abuelaish, a well-known Palestinian peace activist and physician, lost three daughters and a niece when an Israeli tank shell mistakenly shelled his home in Gaza.

Israel’s army took a military action in Gaza in 2008 against militants who had been firing thousands of rockets into Israel.

Richard Kemp, an expert on warfare and former commander of British forces in Afghanistan, was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that the Israeli army in Gaza “did more to safeguard the rights of civilians in a combat zone than any other army in the history of warfare.” Even so, a large number of civilians were killed and wounded and many homes destroyed.

The Israeli army has been unable or unwilling to offer an explanation as to why Dr. Abuelaish’s home was shelled. He and his house were well known and neither he nor his many Israeli friends can understand how or why this happened. Nevertheless, Dr. Abuelaish has been able to forgive and continue to work for peace and coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians.

In addition to his faith in Islam, his profession has also helped Dr. Abuelaish forgive. “Being a physician also has a role,” he says. “It is to work for humanity the same way a doctor relieves the suffering of patients.”

He calls hatred a disease. “It is something bad for your body to carry,” he says. “I don’t want to be poisoned. If I want to move forward, I must be healthy and to be healthy, you must get rid of this disease. And this is the right way as a human being.”

My late husband, Rabbi Leon Klenicki, and I have known Izzeldin for many years. He has been a friend and an inspiration. He is an extraordinary man who has experienced tragedy of Job-like proportions, yet he remains grounded in his faith in God and

his belief in the humanity of all people. “We are similar; we are equal,” he says, “and the beauty in life is to help others.

I met Izzeldin in 1997. As soon as I heard about him, I knew I had struck PR pay dirt: a Palestinian doctor, no less, who was a resident at the teaching hospital of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (BGU), the Israeli university for whose American fundraising organization I was the director of public relations.

Many BGU donors embraced the university’s philosophy that helping Israel’s neighbors and fostering understanding between Arabs and Jews could help bring about peace. For years, BGU had engaged in joint research with its neighbors, including the West Bank and Gaza, and its student body included Israeli Bedouins and Druze. Now the staff of its teaching hospital, Soroka Medical Center, included a Palestinian from Gaza. And he was coming to the United States.

Izzeldin was to attend seminar at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Maryland. I arranged to have him come to New York City after the seminar for meetings with donors in New York and New Jersey. Unfortunately, he would be arriving in New York on the Saturday of a long holiday weekend. Our office would be closed until Tuesday, and many of our donors would be out of the city. He would be stuck in a hotel room in a strange city, and I concluded that I would have to “baby sit” the good doctor.

I booked him into a hotel a block from our apartment and informed my husband that we would be entertaining a Palestinian doctor over the weekend.

"A Palestinian?" Leon gasped, raising his eyebrows almost to his yarmulke. "I feel very uneasy about this." To be honest, so did I.

Leon and I were both ardent supporters of Israel. As Director of Interfaith Relations for the Anti-Defamation League and its representative to the Vatican, Leon's work included battling anti-Israel sentiments. He, like Pope John Paul II, believed that anti-Zionism was often a façade to disguise anti-Semitism.

Before working for AABGU, I had spent 16 years at the Consulate General of Israel in New York as director of the Israel Broadcasting Service in America. My job was to write and produce radio programs and videos to promote Israel's image in the US. To Leon and me, Palestinians were epitomized by the leering face of Yassir Arafat holding a gun as he addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations or gloating over the deaths of Israeli kindergarten children massacred in a terrorist attack.

Izzeldin was a revelation.

When I met him in the lobby of his hotel, the genuine warmth of his greeting and the breadth of his smile instantly won me over. Then there were the gifts: a beautiful embroidered scarf and a scroll with a cloth stating, "Home Sweet Home," embroidered by his mother: I treasure them both to this day.

That evening, as we dined with Izzeldin in our apartment, Leon was also utterly disarmed by his sweetness, his kindness, his charm and his all-encompassing love for humanity. He told us that he had accepted a residency at an Israeli hospital to be "a bridge for peace and mutual cooperation between the Israelis and the Palestinians."

He was forceful in expressing his conviction that the Palestinians had a right to a homeland. But, he said, it was a homeland he believed must co-exist with Israel rather than replace it.

"Palestinians and Israelis should cope with each other to find the solution," he told us. "And there is no solution other than peace for the benefit of our children and the peaceful future of our two peoples."

Growing up in a Gaza occupied by Israel had not been easy. Born in the Jabalya refugee camp, Izzeldin was the oldest son in a family of six boys and three girls. He told us that when he was 14, his family's home was one of more than 1000 others bulldozed by order of Ariel Sharon, Israel's commander in the region at that time. To help his family earn money to buy a new house, Izzeldin got a job in Israel.

He worked for a family in a moshav, an agricultural village. From six in the morning until eight at night, he cleaned chicken coops and labored at various farming

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chores. The Israeli family he worked for was kind to him and he says, "I discovered we are all human."

In forty days, he was able to earn enough to make a substantial contribution toward the new house for his family. He returned to Gaza but has stayed in touch with the Israeli family to this day.

Izzeldin studied medicine at Cairo University in Egypt and specialized in Obstetrics and Gynecology in Saudi Arabia in collaboration with the Institute of Obstetrics and Gynecology, University of London. While doing his residency in Israel, he received a postgraduate diploma in fetal medicine

from King's College Hospital in London in 2000.

He received a Masters in Public Health Policy and Management from Harvard University in 2004, and in 2006, became a PhD candidate at the Centre for Health Planning and Management at Keele University in England.

His ability to continue to work in Israel was curtailed when in response to suicide bombings and missile attacks, Israel closed the border with Gaza. He has been working with various governmental and world health organizations to improve medical care to people in Yemen and Afghanistan as well as in Gaza.

During these years, Leon and I met with Izzeldin for dinners, lunches and coffees either in Israel or in New York. The last time I saw Izzeldin in Israel was in 2000. I was there to shoot a video on water research and management, and Izzeldin asked me to visit his home and meet his family. On my day off, I took a taxi from Beer-Sheva to the

border checkpoint. Once I told the polite but puzzled Israeli soldiers why I wanted to enter Gaza, they let me through. Izzeldin was waiting for me on the other side to take me to his home.

I met his mother, his wife, his eight children, and a large number of his brothers and sisters and their children who also lived in his house. Izzeldin's children spoke Arabic and Hebrew. I, like a typical American, spoke only English. Nevertheless, we managed to understand each other and to laugh together as I struggled to eat the endless, heaping portions of delicious food his wife and mother kept loading onto my plate.

I particularly remember Izzeldin's oldest daughter, Bessan. She was curious to see the United States, and I teased her, threatening to put her in my suitcase and take her back with me. Years later, she did visit the United States when she attended the Creativity for Peace camp in New Mexico. The camp brings together Israeli and Palestinian teenagers and young women to promote understanding and build leadership skills. Jews and Arabs both have a saying that states that when you educate

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a woman, you educate a family, and the camp's goal is to train the next generation of female leaders and peacemakers. Bessan would have been a superb and dedicated leader for peace, but she was one of Izzeldin's three daughters who were killed when Israeli shells slammed into their home.

Creativity for Peace executive director in America, Dottie Indyke relates that after reading the diary of a young Jewish girl who was killed in the Israeli-Palestine conflict, Bessan told a friend that should she ever suffer such a fate, she wanted to be remembered for her efforts to achieve peace. Her father has established a foundation to ensure that she will be.

Izzeldin is establishing The Abuelaish Foundation, Daughters for Life, in memory of his daughters – Bessan, Mayar, and Aya – who perished on that tragic day in January. Its international mandate is to provide education and health access to women and girls in the Gaza Strip and the Middle East to prepare them to assume leadership roles.

Izzeldin says, "No country will develop if women's status is not there. We need women to be enlightened. I want other girls and women to achieve what my daughters did, to develop the skills to be leaders."

Over coffee in New York in October, Izzeldin told me that he believes that women can play a vital role in bringing peace to the Middle East. "Quick," he asked me, "can you name five women in the history of the world who started wars?"

I knew there were some, but the names didn't pop into my mind.

"It's not easy," he smiled. "But you can name 100 men who started wars, can't you?"

I could have, and easily.

"We don't want to replace men," Izzeldin said, "but we want to help women take the lead and take their part in negotiations."

The parliament of Belgium has nominated Izzeldin for the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize. If he wins it, he will use the money to help finance the foundation.

Izzeldin now lives in Toronto, Canada, with his five surviving children. He is associate professor at the Dalai Lama School of Public Health at the University of Toronto and is also running research projects between Israeli and Palestinian institutions.

Through his work and through his very being, Izzeldin continues to foster peace and

understanding. He says, "What I have lost, it will never come back. I lost the three, but I have other children who need me as well as my people and people in the world for whom I can make a positive difference."

I asked him if he believed we would see peace in the Middle East in our lifetime.

"Nothing is impossible in life with good will," he replied. "But God will never change the situation unless we change what is inside our souls and our hearts. We must fill our hearts with love, with respect, and to want for others what each of us wants for himself. There must be respect and an understanding that the dignity of Palestinians equals the dignity of Israelis. Then we can live in partnership and collaboration and share the Holy Land!"

Myra Cohen Klenicki is a freelance writer and producer in the United States. She spent three months in Cambridge with her late husband Rabbi Leon Klenicki, who was Hugo Gryn Fellow at CJCR, in 2001. Myra has stayed in touch with CJCR since then, visiting on an occasional basis.

Further reading

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