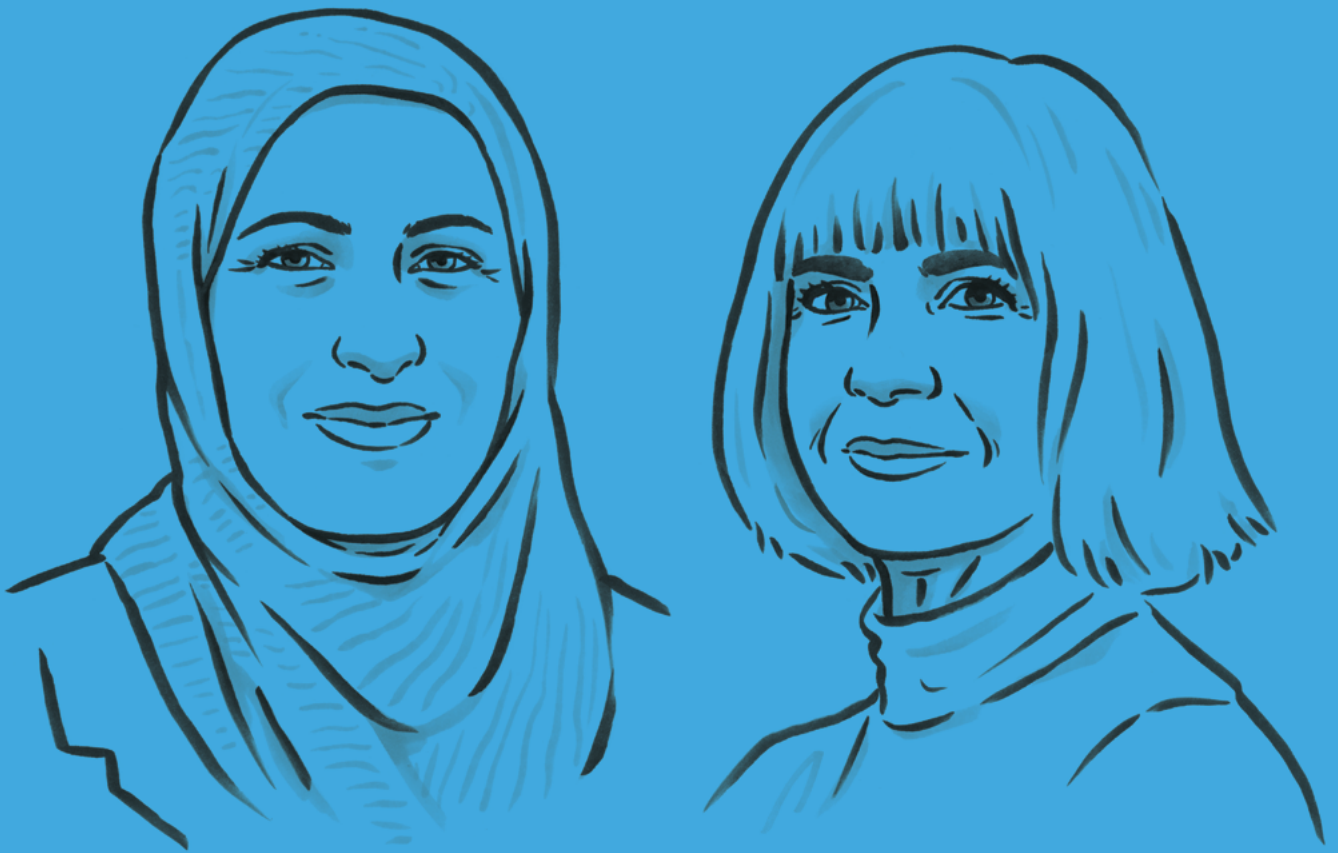


interview with
Lama Abuarqoub and
Hamutal Gouri

Palestinian and Israeli peace activists



**“When I hold their baby,
I say a blessing for life”**

Lama Abuarqoub is a Palestinian peace activist who lives in the West Bank. Hamutal Gouri is an Israeli peace activist who lives in Jerusalem. In September 2024, they participated in a conversation hosted by the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and the On Being Project in which they discussed the idea of motherhood as political action.

In this interview with Van Leer Foundation CEO Michael Feigelson, Lama and Hamutal share how their own experience of motherhood has shaped their activism, how they go about supporting new mothers in their communities, and how, as mothers and peace activists, they have experienced the war.

How did becoming a mother shape your activism?

LA In the first Intifada, I did the things that people used to do. Throw stones. Participate in demonstrations. I had horrific experiences. But when I had my first baby, I looked at her and thought: What did I do? This lovely baby girl. What have I done bringing her into this war zone where I can hardly breathe? And that was 25 years ago, when it was much easier. It changed me a lot. Now my main concern was to protect her. If soldiers came to the house, what were we going to do? What if the house was attacked? What if there was another war?

And then came the second Intifada. By that time I had another child, a boy. I literally saved their lives several times – their father, me and them. And after that I started thinking: What about other mothers? There are mothers on the other side. These soldiers also have mothers. Maybe they talk to them before they go on raids. Maybe they will go easy on us because they also have mothers.

Then I had my last child, my late son. He was born with a very rare disease, and I had to go into Israel for the hospitals. For the first time, I met people who are not soldiers in uniforms or behind guns. My son was in a wheelchair and sometimes the soldiers were very nasty at checkpoints. And sometimes they were very nice. I lived in Israeli hospitals for months. And I met other mothers, Jewish mothers, sometimes mothers from settlements. I had always thought that they wouldn't talk to me or look at me and I wouldn't either. But I was there, and I got to know the people

on another level. And I started thinking that there must be something. To reach out to these people and do something. I would say mothering took me into activism. My first baby made me into an activist.

HG My story is a little different in that I was already a peace and an anti-occupation activist when I was in high school, but I identify with Lama in that becoming a mother added depth to my activism. The sense of being so responsible, knowing the life of someone else depends so completely on me. I felt this especially with my eldest son when he was born. He's 35 now, but when he was born, the first thing I told him, and many Jewish mothers of my generation did this, the first thing I promised was that he would not have to go into the army when he turned 18. I promised him we will end the wars. We will make peace. That was the promise I made to my son, and that many other mothers of my generation made, especially to their baby boys. And of course, I completely failed him. I did not keep my promise.

“Mothering took me into activism. My first baby made me into an activist.”

Looking back at this now, it feels so unnatural. You give them life and raise them with so much love and care. You are afraid they'll catch a cold or that someone will bully them in school. And then they turn 18 and they're off to the army? This has come to feel so unnatural to me. It has shaped my political motherhood.

I want to come back to political motherhood but, before that, I know that for both of you activism is not just about politics and policy. Could you say a bit about how your activism looks in your support to new mothers in your communities?

LA When a woman has a child in Palestine, with that child comes the fear that they will be shot or that they will be imprisoned when they grow up, especially if it's a boy. Even in the best of times, the fear is there. So, besides helping with daily life, I try to give mothers confidence. To tell them they

will be supported. When I hold their baby, I say a blessing for life. I tell them life is the most precious thing. Especially for first-time mothers, I tell them you're not this or that name anymore. Now you're the mother of Ahmed. The mother of Yara. The mother of Mohammad. The name of the daughter or the son I'm holding. And, if you really hear me, everything in your life is going to be different. The most important difference is everything is now about how to work for a better future for this child.

“I tell them life is the most precious thing.”

Sometimes I see a smile. The mother that hears me, she smiles a smile that brings joy to my heart. She hears her own name differently. Sometimes she doesn't hear me because the circumstances are too hard. In those situations, I try to tell her she has the ability. We are here with you. We will help you in any way we can, but it's within you. The power. Take your time, do what you need to do. It's the time to show how strong mothers are in this crazy place.

HG So many things Lama says resonate with me. What new mothers and parents really need is other people around them. To help with practical things, but also to convey that they aren't alone. Also to reinforce the kind of moral commitment Lama talks about, a personal promise to do everything to make this world safer for that baby. I make this personal promise to mothers as well. You know, you are on such an emotional rollercoaster. You're in love, you're terrified, you're committed. And when there is war all around, this is amplified a million times. It's even more important to convey they're not alone. You know what you're doing or, if you don't, you'll figure it out. Until then, I'm always here to hold the baby.

I think it's important to say though that the situation is so much harder for most Palestinian women. Just to share one example, I work with a group called Mothers Against Violence and, after October 7th, we created a connection with a community in the West Bank and started to visit them because the

situation was so horrible. The first time we visited, we gathered in the home of one family in the village and, at some point, we asked to be just with the women. There was a woman there with a newborn and a woman who was seven months pregnant with a very high-risk pregnancy. She explained that there was this medication she needed, but because of restrictions on movement, there was no way for her to get it.

We were able to help, but the point is that, even during a war, access to quality medical care during pregnancy is something most Israeli mothers can take for granted. It's not something most Palestinian women can count on. Certainly not in Gaza amid the destruction, but also not in the West Bank where movement has become even more restricted in the last year.

Coming back to the topic of political motherhood, can you share your thoughts about the role mothers can play or are playing in ending the current war?

LA I think we have to start in our own homes and communities. In my house, I raised my children to think that everything is negotiable. Everything can be talked about. Solutions can be figured out without resorting to violence. But after the bombing of Gaza started last year, especially the first few months, something in them changed. They were in a kind of shock. I remember one night when I heard my son and he was watching the TV and he started screaming. I heard him screaming and yelling and cursing. I grabbed his hands. I turned off the TV. And I said, first of all, sit. Relax. Try. Try to tell me what's going on.

My son has friends. My daughter has friends. I have siblings, extended family. We sit together. We talk. And we get to reason. Sometimes we help people return to their senses when they are angry. The most important thing is to allow people to be in the moment. Let them be angry, let them express their feelings.

I waited patiently with my son when he was upset. He relaxed. He had something to drink. We talked about his feelings, and then I tried asking him questions. Helping him see that the way he felt was probably similar to what some of our Jewish Israeli

friends felt when they woke up on October 7th. The point is not to accept what's happening in Gaza, but to help him reach a balance between his feelings and how he wants to react.

HG I agree with Lama that this starts at home, with our own families, but I also think that, at least for Jewish Israeli mothers, we have to bring attention to the suffering of Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank. I often think about this case of a father in Gaza who went to register his newborn twins and when he returned his wife and babies had been killed by a bomb. This story, like many others, was heard around the world, but not in Israeli media. I don't deny the pain of October 7th for Israelis. I lost my friend Vivian Silver. I have dear friends who lost loved ones. I'm not denying my own pain or the pain of my people, but when I look through this motherly lens, I also have to see the suffering of the Palestinians.

There is a poem by Aurora Levins Morales called *Summons* and it's all about mothers raising their voice against war. There is this line: *there are no leaders who dare to say every life is precious, so it will have to be us*. In the conversations I facilitate, I find there is increasing discussion in Jewish Israeli society about motherhood in the context of sending your children to fight a war that you do not support. Since October, there are several groups of mothers who've started to organise. Some are openly anti-war. Others don't want their children to be involved in war. There is a need to grow and evolve these movements. It shouldn't be just about not wanting our children to fight or die in a war, it should be about *all* children.

One final question. When you think about the future and all of the anger and pain mothers and others are holding, how do you start to process that? What role do relationships like yours, relationships between Palestinian and Israeli mothers, have in helping to heal the many layers of trauma passed on through generations?

LA In one Zoom gathering of Israeli and Palestinian mothers, the facilitator asked the question: When you think of October 7th, what do you want? One of the Israeli women, someone I know, said "revenge". She knew this was a very strong thing for me to hear and after the meeting she sent me this famous text

from Shakespeare's Shylock: "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" So I sent her back the same text and she said, what are you doing? You're sending me the same message? And I said yes, actually.

"We have to start in our own homes and communities."

There are many women, many mothers in Palestine and in Israel, who are speaking this same language so I think the question is: You and me together, what can we do to reach a point where these women, these mothers, do not want revenge any more?

I think one part of the answer to this question is the pain. You know, pain can be very educational when it comes to activism. My son died in June, and I can tell you there is nothing worth going through that pain. He died from his illness – it was not violent, we knew it would come, and still the pain is unimaginable. And it changed what I see. When I go to a funeral, when I watch the funeral of an Israeli soldier, now I look at the mothers, especially how the mother cries or speaks in the cemetery.

I don't think we should sacrifice our children for a homeland. It's the other way around. We should sacrifice everything for the wellbeing of our children. Even if it takes going out in public, risking our lives. In some communities today, it's life-threatening to talk about peace, to talk about ending the war, to talk about negotiations. And still, we have to do it.

HG When I first met Lama, I heard her talk about her son and I fell in love with this boy who I had never met, just looking at him through her eyes. As a mother it was easy for me because I know this kind of love exists. So when Lama and I – or more generally when Palestinian and Israeli mothers – meet, the very primal first connection is often this shared identity of motherhood. If you think about it, what Lama says about the mothers of soldiers, it's really a very high spiritual level of connection. As a mother, to think of another mother losing her child, it is a sensation of physical pain, something I can almost feel in my womb.

I think one of the things that motherhood teaches, that caring for a baby teaches, is the understanding of how another person's wellbeing can be so connected to your own, and I think this is something that we can apply to other parts of our life. It's something that, when Palestinian and Israeli mothers connect, they can understand about each other, and about each other's children. The anger is understandable. Revenge is a primordial feeling. But these relationships with our children and with each other teach us how to let go, to give these feelings up, because the wellbeing of our children is more important.

Is it complicated to be in dialogue at this moment as Palestinian and Israeli mothers? For sure. Is it difficult? For sure. Is it challenging? For sure.

But when you are committed to the relationship, when you understand that this, that being in this relationship may shift or somehow help to eventually resolve the conflict – and when we see that our lives literally depend on it – we take the time to listen. We take the time to understand.

“Revenge is a primordial feeling. But these relationships with our children and with each other teach us how to let go.”

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