**Holocaust Memorial Day Podcast**

* **An Israeli and a Palestinian working for peace**

**April 27 2022**

**Josh Mangelson** 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

**Andrew Bolton** 00:33

A warm welcome to this Grounds of Peace podcast, a series that is part of Project Zion.

In our conversation today about ISRAEL PALESTINE. It’s very important that we start by defining what we mean by Zion, in Community of Christ, a religious movement that began in 1830 in the United States. Zion originally was defined as a people have one heart and one mind, dwelling in righteousness with no poor among them. And today, we might say, Zion is renewing and greening the earth to bless all generations, embracing the worth of all persons, no exceptions, and working to end racism, bigotry, sexism, poverty and war. If we were to use biblical language, Zion is the kingdom of God on earth, for the blessing of all peoples. Zion is a term Community of Christ began using before Jewish or Christian Zionism meant to return of the Jewish people to the Holy Land. However, we were also affected by Christian Zionism, something we're now repenting of, because it has led to the marginalization and oppression of Palestinians.

I'm your host Andrew Bolton, currently living in Leicester, England, one of the most pluralistic cities in the world, and the only city in Europe with a non-white majority. Today's Grounds for Peace episode is a collaboration with the international Peace and Justice team of Community of Christ, working for just peace in Israel Palestine, guided by our church’s World Conference resolution of 2016. Today, we're looking at peace with justice and ISRAEL PALESTINE. Our guests are Bassam Aramin. Did I say that right?

02:25

**Bassam Aramin:** Bassam Aramin, A r a m i n

**Andrew Bolton** 02:34

Bassam Aramin, a Palestinian and Rami Elhanan, an Israeli. They're both members of Parents Circle, an organization which supports parents who have lost a child to the violence in Israel and Palestine. Bassam and Rami have each lost a daughter. They work together for peace so no more families, Palestinian or Israeli, lose a child. April the 27th each year is Yom HaShoah or Holocaust Day in Israel, and in many Jewish communities in the United States and around the world. The Holocaust was the Nazi genocide against Jews that resulted in 6 million Jewish men, women and children dying in the period 1933 to 1945. Rami, your dad was in Auschwitz. Can you tell us a little bit more about his story, please.

03:36

**Rami Elhanan:** My late dad was born and raised in Hungary, in a small Jewish town, by the name of Kich (?) Walder. Me and my son have been there in 2014. I went to the Jewish cemetery to say Kaddish on the graves of my ancestors, but no one left over there. The whole town was destroyed and annihilated. My father was ultra-orthodox religion origin. He was sent by his family to Budapest. And then he started leaving the religion and become you know, another person. And then one day he was he was captured by the Gestapo in Budapest in 1944 and was sent to Auschwitz where he spend one year. He was 17 years old.

**Andrew Bolton** 04:49

And then somehow he got to Israel after that.

04:52

**Rami Elhanan:** And then he survived Auschwitz he found out that most of his family was destroyed. He found his brother they together they came here to Israel. His brother was a prisoner of war in the north with the Syrians. And he [my dad] fought in the Old City of Jerusalem. He was very badly wounded. And the nurse who took care of him was my mother.

**Andrew Bolton** 05:26

So a romantic story at the end.

05:28

**Rami Elhanan:** This is their picture. He was looking like this.

05:33

**Andrew Bolton** Ah, right, very good.

**Rami Elhanan:** Yeah. Yeah. Young beautiful couple. Yes, yes, yes. Yeah.

**Andrew Bolton** 05:40 Right, good. So Bassam as a Palestinian in prison for I think, seven years? How do you see the Holocaust? What's your relationship to this terrible event?

05:55

**Bassam Aramin:** In that, in that time, the Holocaust, for me, it's a big lie, it never exist. But I know in my background that someone called Hitler killed 6 million Jews, but it's a big lie. And I never thought about it, it's just like a number 6 million. And you know, in advance, it's a big lie, of course, without learning about it, without searching about it, just to hear. And I don't know, from where I hear this news. So this was my relationship with the Holocaust in that time before I go to jail.

**Andrew Bolton** 06:34

And then in prison. What happened?

06:38

**Bassam Aramin:** And now in prison during the prison time, and the beginning, in fact, I watch a movie about the Holocaust. It was by chance, because we have, we have TV, I believe in that time, it was the Holocaust Memorial Day. So they screen some movies related to the Holocaust. And I understand this movie is about Hitler and the Jews, which I know in advance, it's a big lie. But I want to enjoy in fact, seeing this movie, as kind of revenge to see someone torture those who wish, kill them, at least them occupy them, whatever, because they occupied us, because I am in their graves, the very person are living [?]. But what happened in fact, after a few minutes, I found myself crying, get sympathy with those innocent people, I started to ask myself questions. I don't believe that they are human beings can do the same to other human beings, even in my worst imaginations. It's very difficult to describe my pain at that time to see kids and women's naked. It's the most horrible thing was for me, because according to my culture, to my religion, as a Muslim, you cannot imagine that they have we have people in our world who would [do] the atrocities. So what happened that I decide I want to understand more about this event , if it really happened? If it is a big lie, if it's just a movie.

**Andrew Bolton** 08:23

So you researched more but when you came out of prison, you're a different person, right? And your life began to move in a different direction. So what was your change of course, how now was your life different?

08:41

**Bassam Aramin:** In fact, when I get released from jail, of course, it's another story. But in general, I still believe in armed struggle, as the only way to talk to those occupiers. I don't know them, our relationship is to hate each other. They have a brutal behavior, they try to kill our humanity every moment in jail. And it was [our] mission not to break down. We need to to be strong to continue our struggle to achieve justice and peace and liberate our land. When I get released, in fact, what happened was Oslo [peace] agreement after one year, and it was it was like suddenly we have peace. And we start to see the same killer, terrorist with blood on his hands, a dangerous man means a Palestinian prisoner. He became a general in the Palestinian security forces. And he started to make coordination with his Israeli jailer, Israelis, the occupier. It means it was a paradox for me. And I started to ask myself, so why I spent seven years in jail. Just for auto hardware, I mean two cans. Why they didn't make it like 10 years ago, 20 years ago, otherwise, I'm not going to be in jail. And in the same time, they will save 1000s of lives from the Palestinians and the Israelis. And this was, in fact, my turning point to understand that, now we have peace, it was really that time. And we need to prepare ourselves to live together or side by side, but in peace, then you start to think in a normal way, if you live in a normal situation, for that I get married, and I start to have kids because I believe that we need to prepare normal life.

**Andrew Bolton** 10:41

And you in fact that at this time, did you join Combatants for Peace?

10:47

**Bassam Aramin:** No, it was very far away from Combatants for Peace. [It was then] 1993. [It was later] in 2002 and three. I was already active in my society, the personal side without any connection with the other side, because we try it, in fact, more than 100 years, trying to kill each other to defeat each other. And the result until today, Israel is not safe, and Palestine is not free. Just more pain, more victims. Until 2003 when I hear about the refuseniks,in the Israeli media, I wish to meet those soldiers and officers who refuse to serve in Palestine, and after two years in 2005, we have the first meeting between four Palestinians, except prisoners, I was one of them with 7 ex-Israeli soldiers and officers. Rami’s son Ilikwas one of them. This is how I get to know this noble enemy Rami in 2005. Yeah, I was lucky.

**Andrew Bolton** 11:56

The noble enemy, your friend.

**Bassam Aramin:** Exactly!

**Andrew Bolton:** So you came to Britain, and did a master's degree in Peace Studies at Bradford University. And in fact, you did your thesis on the Holocaust? Could you say a little bit more about that?

12:15

**Bassam Aramin:** You know, I understand that if you know more, you act better. If you don't know. So simply you don’t know. And always, it's good to agree with yourself, with your narrative, with your history, with your story. And don't see the other side. It's also okay. And, but when you start to know, you'll start to suffer, because you discover new facts, or discover the other side, and you cannot keep silence. For me it was I don't want to teach the world about the Holocaust. I want to learn myself about the Holocaust and other events through the peace studies. It was I want to say that I feel sometimes kind of shame because I don't know about it. In fact, it was no opportunity to know about the Holocaust in my case, because we don't read it in the schools not because of the Palestinians, because of the Israelis themselves. From [19]67 to [19]93 we learn with the Jordanian schoolbooks, then Gaza, Egyptian schools. So nothing mentioned there about the history of this region – Palestine or Israel, the Palestinians or the Israelis - nothing. Yeah, this is what happened, how I know about the Holocaust. I feel after that. And always I said, like what I learned from peace studies and conflict resolution. In fact, we start to be professionals how to make more conflicts around the world, not to solve the conflict! Because 1000s of people who study conflict resolutions, and we still have a lot of conflicts there. But in fact, it's a very good tool, in fact, to know how to start a negotiation process, to start from the grassroots movement. To start dialogue, of course, it's very important from my experience, and also to learn that it will add to your experience a lot of tools and theory to start to be more active, more effective.

**Andrew Bolton** 14:51

So for our listeners as I should say that Bradford University when you were perhaps there, had the largest pieces department in the world. So the academic study of Peace Studies is a very hopeful discipline to be engaged in.

15:09

**Bassam Aramin:** So it was the most the most strong department, right.

**Andrew Bolton** 15:17

Yes, yeah. Started by the Quakers. So Rami, you were a soldier in the Yom Kippur War if I remember rightly 1973? That was a difficult experience for you, wasn't it? Do you want to say a little bit about that?

15:34

**Rami Elhanan:** Well, it's a life changing experience, it's one of the worst experiences of my life, almost the worst. It's something that you are not prepared for it. We started this war with a company of 11 tanks, and we finished it with only 3. in our lost many, many close friends over there, and in the desert of Sinai and of course, the Suez Canal. And until today, I wake up, sometimes with cold sweat, remembering the experiences of this crazy period. The effect on my life was a determination to detach myself from any kind of commitment. I was so disappointed, I was so angry, I was so disillusioned, that I found myself a kind of an anarchist, with contempt to any kind of political, or social, or any activities. And this went on I was doing I was a graphic designer, I do graphic design for the right wing, for the left wing, I was completely cynical. And this went on until what happened to me in 1997.

**Andrew Bolton** 17:00

So, both of you are fathers, both of you are family men, each of you lost a daughter. Can you share something about that very difficult time for each of your families? Perhaps we can start with you Rami, because you're on the edge of that in 1997, I think,

17:20

**Rami Elhanan:** Well, it's something that blows up your mind, but especially blows up the bubble that you're living in. I was having a very comfortable and beautiful and safe life. And this event, rocked myself, my family, my entire being and created a new personality. The change is so dramatic. That until today, 24 years later, I still don't believe it happened. And I have to, to punch myself to remember that I'm in a different place now. And the pain is there. The time does not heal the wound. And it's, it's something that stays on your mind 24 hours a day, 59 seconds of every minute it is there, it will never go away. It will never rest it will never come down. And this is a destiny. And it filled me with the energies that I didn't know I could have. And I have to wake up every morning and make a decision. what am I going to do with this energy?

**Andrew Bolton** 18:59

So is that photo of your daughter behind you?

**Rami Elhanan:** Yeah.

**Andrew Bolton:** What was her name? We should say her name.

19:11

**Rami Elhanan:** Smadar on the left. And Abir [Bassam’s daughter], on the right. So 10 years between Smadar and Abir.

19:21

**Andrew Bolton:** Yeah. So …

19:25

**Rami Elhanan:** Smadar should have been 37 years old today. Yeah. Abir should have been 27 years old.

**Andrew Bolton** 19:34 And she was about 12 or 13 is that right?

**Rami Elhanan:** Smadar was 14 years old

**Andrew Bolton:**14 okay. So Bassam, can you share something about what happened to your daughter?

19:46

**Bassam Aramin:** And as my brother Rami said, you will never heal. And in fact, this day is your life before and after. It's totally a big change. You will never be the same before, it's an open wound, forever. But as Rami said, you need to know how to deal with this pain, how to deal with this energy, positive way, in a negative way. This is our commitment to the memory of our beloved daughters, that their killers will die. And they will live longer than their killers because we will continue to talk about them to keep them alive all over as long as we live. The owner of this tragedy for the people who lost their beloved one, they know what we're talking about. You never rest, it's effected all your life and all livings, and you'll find yourself with big responsibilities to keep others, your other kids, your wife. And you need to keep yourself. As Rami said, until today, sometimes we shout her name, when we want to call her sister for example. So sometimes you don't believe you want to buy something from the market, and you remember, she loved this thing and you bought it for her sister. Yeah, it's a line of pain forever.

**Andrew Bolton** 21:38

So you, you both belong to Parents Circle - a joint grassroots Israeli Palestinian organization of over 600 families who have lost a loved one. Can you share something about the vision of Parents Circle and your work through Parents Circle as bereaved parents trying now to make sure that other families don't lose a loved one. Can you share a little bit, perhaps Rami you can start and Bassam you can continue.

22:13

**Rami Elhanan:** Ah, the Parents Circle was founded in 1995 by Chuck Frankenthal a bereaved father, whose son Arik was kidnapped and murdered by Hamas, he started this activity of joint effort of Israelis and Palestinians together. And the mission is to try to avoid, to prevent this unbearable pain from other families. This is not a psychological support group. This is a political group. We our common denominator, what combine us together then understanding that this situation in which one peoples dominating the other, in which one people is occupying another, cannot go on. And we lost our children because of this abnormality. So the Parent Circle is not a political group in the sense that we do not draw lines or maps. And without phrase, articles have disagreements. But we are very much political in this understanding of opposing the occupation. And what we do is designed to put cracks in this walls. The walls are not the concrete walls, the walls are the walls within the heads of the Israeli Palestinian educational system. And what we are trying to do the very sight of us speaking to Israeli and Palestinian kids is kind of an earth quake that create this crack in the wall. And through this crack a little light comes in. And a little light can drive away a lot of darkness. And some will tell you about the activities.

**Andrew Bolton** 24:04

So Bassam do you want to continue?

24:07

**Bassam Aramin:** Yeah, in fact, I want to say that our long term target electoral circuit is to create reconciliation process to be an integral part of any peace, future peace agreement. Because if we don't have reconciliation, we will have only ceasefire until the next time. And I wish to have a ceasefire, at least right now. And that is Rami mentioned, all our activities is designed to make this crack in the wall to prepare a ground to accept the reconciliation process after any peace agreement, after of course there is no reconciliation under occupation the means we need to have a peace agreement. Then we need to start to work together towards reconciliation. And those activities like the summer camp for our kids and their friends, the women groups, the ambassadors for peace, the narrative groups, more than 1200 alumni, more than 10 years. So, we have a lot of activities designed to make this target in Palestine and Israel, to know the other, to understand the other, and to start to make a partnership between both sides to fight against their common enemy, the occupation, the fear, the hatred.

**Andrew Bolton** 25:44

So for our listeners, Parents circle, Israel, is easy to find on the web. So I recommend you look up the web page, look up the English portion, obviously. Do either of you have any quick comments on the February 2022, Amnesty International's report on Israel's apartheid against Palestinians?

26:13

**Bassam Aramin:** You know, for me, like after 72 or 50 years, Amnesty or others discovered the apartheid regime. This is not the issue to describe the Israeli brutal occupation as apartheid, as fascist, as far as then I don't know what. This is not the issue. If we don't describe it as apartheid means it's okay? It's less brutal? No at all. It's more than apartheid. It's more than fascist. But Amnesty as an international body respected by Israel, and by United States. Now they became [accused of] anti-Semitism directly, because they criticize Israel, and they go too far to describe the Israeli occupation. I believe it's more for the Israeli people, not to the Palestinian people, because we live under this discrimination when we born until today. So it's for them to understand that it's racist. It's apartheid. It's discrimination. And they need to refuse to continue this occupation together with their Palestinian and international partners - to solve it. And I believe it's very clear, very strong. Of course, I support it.

**Andrew Bolton** 27:52

Rami, do you have any observations?

27:56

**Rami Elhanan:** First of all, I agree with every letter that Bassam has just said. I think it is much worse than apartheid. I think you just have to look at the reality today look at what's going on in in Ukraine now. And this monster of Russians occupying another country and bullying and bombing and harassing and the world is uprising against it. Where is the world towards the Palestinians? Where is the world towards this moment, 50 years of Israeli occupation in the West Bank in Gaza? So it's double standard everywhere. And especially Israelis are trying to look the other way. They are very comfortable in sitting in their coffee houses and having a good life, not knowing what is really happening 200 meters away from them in their name. Every day there is a kid killed in the West Bank, every single day. And the Israelis prefer not to know. And the Israelis, the Israeli media cooperates with it. And they hide the atrocities that are happening in the West Bank. And when someone tells them that you are doing an apartheid, they are all alarmed. How can you call us, us Jews? How can you call us apartheid? Well you can.

**Andrew Bolton** 29:37

When I met you seven or eight years ago, I You were very clear then about the occupation was the problem. So thank you for sharing about that. I'm glad I asked that question. There's a book written about your shared story called ***Apeirogon***, Bloomsbury 2020 by Irish writer Colum McCann. And of course, people in Ireland have a sense of the injustice of the Palestinian situation they suffered from the British,

**Rami Elhanan:** Some of them!

**Andrew Bolton** So yes, yes, I understand that! [Note: the Catholic Irish, not the Protestant Irish suffered from the British]. The heart of the book is your testimony, your story, in your own words, and the other parts of the book tell your story, but in a novelized form, how would you rate the book? Are you happy to endorse it?

30:35

**Rami Elhanan:** I think it's a masterpiece. I was reading it on my way to the United States for the launching of the book two years ago. And I was mesmerized to it I was, I forgot it's about me. I read it as a novel. It was fascinating. It was, you know, so many layers, so many directions, the 1001 little stories combined together to in many ways, I felt that I'm listening to myself being recorded. And the voice sounds a little peculiar, but I think he was doing a marvelous job with an artist and of the way he described our loss, our pain, our mission, our way of dealing with the situation, and I really admire him for it.

**Andrew Bolton** 31:39

Thank you. Bassam, do you have any observations about the book?

31:44

**Bassam Aramin:** In fact, I read it after one year. After that I get hundreds of messages and emails from people around the world talking about this great book. So I decided to read it, what's written there. And as Rami said, in fact, it's a very strong work. And if you did not detach yourself, like you are reading a novel, in fact, I love Rami and Bassam in this movie! Yeah, we have a saying, ‘If you love yourself the right way, people will love you.’ It's not kind of selfish, you know, this was our goal to spread this message as wide as we can. And this was the target of the goal. And the philosophy of the chapters 1001 chapter, like Scheherazade [in Arabian Nights] with the fact that she told the story again and again, for 1001 story to keep alive, to survive. And this is exactly our goal. We told our story, sometimes seven times a day, five times a day, in order to keep our daughter's memory, to keep them alive.

**Andrew Bolton** 33:05

So I want to add a post note to this book.

So I read it, after my wife had read it. And then I suggested it – I am part of a book club here in England. A very good friend, a college friend, Miles Hillman, introduced me to the book and he started the book club. And Miles’ dad, by the way, was arrested by the Gestapo in 1933 because he was causing trouble as a Social Democrat, working in the shipyards, and so on, and then as a student. So he escaped to Britain. So Miles identifies with the story, that you are both telling as well. And the book club - six or seven men- who didn't think they would like the book, were really impressed by the book also.

To call it clever is not the right word I don't think. It is very intelligent, very artistically well done, I think. And yet it's also so truthful, because at the heart of the book, in your own words, is the story that you've been sharing in this podcast. But I wanted to make sure that you endorsed it that you didn't have any reservations about it.

**Rami Elhanan:** No, we don’t.

**Andrew Bolton:** So for our listeners, ***Apeirogon*** by Colum McCann, is a very good read if you want to follow [up]. So when I first heard your stories, some seven and a half years ago, I remember the place it was a hotel. I was tired, I nearly didn't go. And yet the meeting with you both was one of the most profound experience In my life. And so that's why I'm so enthusiastic about promoting your story.

Rami, you said to our small group, that we had not ask the most important question. So I felt kind of slapped by the teacher almost after we paid such attention to your story. So you said I'm now going to ask the question for you: “What can we do?”

So what can I do here in Britain? What can our listeners to this podcast do around the world? Rami do you want to go first, and then your noble friend, Bassam, perhaps can add some words to your story?

35:45

**Rami Elhanan:** Well, this is the way I finish every lecture spread, especially to foreigners. Ah, by this message, the most important question is **What can we do?** What is the lesson that you take from this meeting? What are you going to dream about tonight, and what will be the action that you will take tomorrow morning. If you remember, my father is a Holocaust survivor, and an Auschwitz graduate. And 75 years ago, while they took my grandparents to the ovens back in Europe, the free and civilized worlds stood aside, never lifting one finger. And today, so many years after that, while these two crazy nations of ours are massacring each other without any mercy, while these atrocities taking place in Ukraine and , and the genocide in Syria, and people are drowning in the Mediterranean, or wherever you look atrocities, and the free and civilized world is really standing aside doing nothing, which is a crime because standing aside, while a crime is being committed is also a crime. So what we ask of you is not to be pro Palestinian or pro Israeli, this will not help us, we demand of you to be pro peace, and to be against injustice, and against this ongoing situation in which one people is dominating another, one people is occupying another, this is the essence of the problem, it must change, it can be changed. And then I finished with a message of a Jew, and I am a Jew with the utmost respect for my people, for my history, and my tradition. And I will tell you that ruling, and oppressing, and humiliating, and occupying millions and millions of human beings for so many years without any democratic right, is not Jewish. Period. No two ways about it. And being against it is not anti-Semitism. And if you get into an argument, you can quote me.

**Andrew Bolton** 38:00

Thank you. For that evening, seven years ago, I wrote down every word of that you said. Bassam, we're going to give you the last word.

38:12

**Bassam Aramin:** I agree with Rami word by word in fact, and I want to add just no one can enjoy justice and democracy, and prosperity alone in his bubble. We are very connected to each other around the world. And just today, I started to see of course, my heart is with Ukrainian people, and specially the Palestinians, we are against all kinds of oppression and occupation around the world. Because we have been tasted the pain of bitterness of this occupation. I started to see videos how the Ukrainian soldiers, for example, participate in Iraq, the war in Iraq, how they deal with civilians in a very brutal way together with the British and the Americans. And I say to myself, How can I ask the Iraqis to empathy with the Ukrainian people, for example? So always, I said, as Martin Luther King says, “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.” Don't keep silence because bad things could happen to you tomorrow. So absolutely, you will find me shout and raise up my voice for you. And always think of others. I will say this for this song for Mahmoud Darwish our late poet. And he says,

 **Think of others.**

“As you prepare your breakfast, think of others,

 don't forget to feed the doves.

 As you conduct your war, think of others,

 don't forget those who seek peace.

As you go to pay your water bill, think of others,

 of those who only have the clouds to drink from.

As you go home, your own home, think of others,

 don't forget that people have tents.

As you speak freely with metaphors,

 think of others of those who lost their right to speak.

As you think of others, distant others,

 think of yourself and wish you are a candle in the darkness.”

Thank you

**Andrew Bolton** 40:33

So think of others. Thank you from the bottom of my heart, Bassam and Rami for being willing to share your story with us today.

40:42

**Rami Elhanan:** Thank you for enabling us to tell our story. We really appreciate it.

**Andrew Bolton** 40:47

You are welcome. So here we've had a conversation between a Palestinian and an Israeli and there is no gap between their efforts to work jointly for peace with justice in Palestine and Israel. We respectfully join with Jews around the world remembering Holocaust Day, April 27. And we hope this podcast will help you understand a little of the suffering that comes from the continuing occupation of Palestinians by Israel. This is Grounds for Peace, part of Project Zion Podcast. I'm Andrew Bolton. Thank you for joining us.

**Josh Mangelson** 41:40

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