

# LETTER FROM ISRAEL

IN OUR REGULAR REPORT ON LIFE IN ISRAEL, PAM PELED APPLAUDS A DOCUMENTARY THAT GIVES A VOICE TO THOSE GRIEVING FROM BOTH SIDES OF A BRUTAL CONFLICT

## A NARROW BRIDGE OVER A VERY BROAD ABYSS

On Israel's 75th anniversary in April, flags hung happily from rooftops as we tried to celebrate our homeland's multitudinous marvels. Similar flags fluttered defiantly at mass demonstrations as just over half of the population implored our deranged government to halt the march to destruction and get a grip.

As Benjamin Netanyahu pits religious against secular, left against right, Sephardim against Ashkenazi, straight people against gay people, there is not much space for reaching out restorative hands between Arabs and Jews. How almost other-worldly, then, is director Esther Takac's *The Narrow Bridge*, an extraordinary documentary about healing.

Five years ago Takac, a psychologist who studied in Jerusalem and who takes a month out of her Australian life each year to work in Hadassah Hospital, joined an alternative Israeli-Palestinian ceremony to mark Yom Hazikaron (Israel's remembrance day) for families on both sides of the endless conflict who have lost loved ones to terror and violence. This bereaved family organisation is a grassroots peace-building project on the most elemental level. Rami Elhanan, for example, is a member of this emotional community; his young daughter, Smadar, was killed in 1997 in a Palestinian suicide terror attack in Jerusalem; Bushra Awad's young son, Mahmoud, was shot dead by Israeli soldiers on a raid in Beit Ummar in 2008.

"I felt this compelling story of hope should be showcased abroad," recalls Takac. The fact that aching parents and children could transform their own trauma into growth fascinated the psychologist in her; despite much rolling of eyes (including her husband's), she determined to make a documentary about it. "I had little knowledge of filming and, initially, my family funded everything, but I knew I had to do this," says Takac. It was a steep learning curve. Ultimately crowd-funding and small grants added up, young cinematographers worked on a shoestring budget, and *The Narrow Bridge* was shot.

The film follows four individuals



who could easily be me or you: Elhanan, a vibrant Jewish Israeli dad; Awad, a thoughtful Palestinian mother; artist Meytal Ofer, whose father, Yaya, was axed to death outside his home in 2013 by two young Palestinians; and Basam Aramin whose daughter, Abir, was shot and killed outside her school in 2007 by an Israeli border policeman. In a series of harrowing, yet strangely hopeful interviews, the bereaved protagonists recount their anguish and pain, remember their loved ones, and explain how they found a blessed measure of healing in the inclusive organisation.



The timing of this doc could hardly be more auspicious: Israel appears to be imploding. Horrifying incidents of terrorism are shattering the nation; cabinet ministers call to destroy Arab villages; wild settler hooligans rush to do just that. *The Narrow Bridge* demonstrates how even the most affected people on both sides of the divide have a common humanity. The minute enemies can comprehend the pain of the other side and reveal their own suffering, peace-building can begin.

For Israelis who often view Palestinians as dagger-wielding, gun-slinging murderers, and for Palestinians for whom Israelis are brutal soldiers

and occupiers, the 'other' is usually a dangerous, hated menace. But, as the Israeli author David Grossman declared at another joint Israeli Palestinian Memorial Ceremony, "I know that within the pain there is also breath, doing good. That grief does not isolate but also connects and strengthens. Here, old enemies – Israelis and Palestinians – can connect with each other out of grief, and even because of it." Grossman knows this on his skin. His own beloved 20-year-old son Uri was killed in his tank in Lebanon in 2006, just two days before a cease-fire.

This attitude compelled Takac to sink time and money into making her film. And audiences everywhere are listening. The documentary has won numerous awards, including last year's Audience Award at the 42nd San Francisco Jewish Film Festival; this year it won the same award at the Jewish International Film Festival, and the Docs Without Borders Award of Outstanding Excellence. In September it's slated to hit the UK Jewish Film Festival – rush to book your tickets.

This inspiring story is also told in Colum McCann's novel *Apeirogon*; Stephen Spielberg is said to be considering a movie. In these insane times in Israel, let us fervently hope that *The Narrow Bridge* helps in even a small way to get us over the gaping abyss. ■

Dr Pam Peled lectures at IDC and Beit Berl. Visit [thenarrowbridge.com](http://thenarrowbridge.com) for more.