

Sunday 1 January, 2012

Logins

[RSS](#)
[Twitter](#)
[Facebook](#)
[Archives](#)
[Subscribe](#)
[S & P](#)
[About](#)

THE JEWISH CHRONICLE ONLINE

[NEWS](#) [SPORT](#) [MSFL](#) [BUSINESS](#) [COMMENT](#) [ARTS](#) [LIFESTYLE](#) [COMMUNITY](#) [JUDAISM](#) [TRAVEL](#) [BLOGS](#) [PROPERTY](#) [SIMCHAHS](#)
[COMMENT](#) [COLUMNISTS](#) [ANALYSIS](#) [LEADER](#)

The one sure way to achieve peace

Intense negotiations will not necessarily work; intense empathy will

By Simon Baron-Cohen and Avi Machlis, June 4, 2009

[Follow The JC on Twitter](#)

With plans under way for a new US-backed peace process, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators will soon be busy preparing check-lists of vital interests, intractable demands and red lines. But no peace agenda can possibly succeed without addressing the bilateral erosion of empathy. Israelis and Palestinians have fears and concerns that seem diametrically opposed. Bridging those gaps requires empathy --- the ability to imagine someone else's thoughts and feelings. But after a century of violent conflict, both sides appear incapable of empathising with the suffering of their neighbours.

Where are the Palestinians who protest against the killing of innocent Israeli victims of suicide bombers or Kassam rockets? Where are the Israelis who criticise the air force raids that inevitably kill ordinary Palestinian families? The near total silence on both sides suggests both have lost the natural empathy that should act as a brake on our capacity to cause death and suffering.

In Israel, attempts to express empathy with Palestinians are often dismissed as treason. Just weeks after the Gaza war, Israeli animator Yoni Goodman released a short film called Closed Zone, showing the plight of a boy trapped within the Gaza Strip. Every time he tries to escape, a real human hand emerges to block his way. Responses to the film on websites suggest that many Israelis felt threatened by the film, as if acknowledging the suffering of Palestinian innocents somehow undermines Israel's legitimate grievances.

Empathy entails stepping out of a single perspective and taking an aerial view. And empathy can give rise to a moral code that is not based on laws or rules but on a consideration of how it would feel to be on the receiving end of our own actions.

When we lose our empathy, others are treated as objects that can be disposed of. Psychologists and psychiatrists are all too familiar with what happens when people lose their empathy: it produces "disorders" like that of the psychopath who experiences no visceral reaction to someone else's pain, no natural desire to alleviate another's distress, and no capacity for compassion or sympathy. Psychopaths are produced as a result of genetic predispositions and environmental triggers. War has the same power to erode empathy.

The 1990s Oslo Accords included provisions for projects designed to foster empathy by bringing together Israelis and Palestinians with common interests. Tragically, these projects never happened on a large scale. Some grassroots projects, however, have survived.

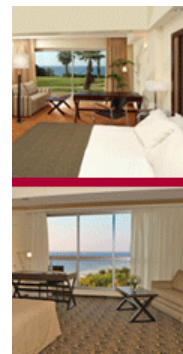
The Parents Circle is a group of bereaved Israelis and Palestinians from which two fathers, one Israeli and one Palestinian, tour synagogues and mosques to publicly grieve the loss of their sons. They met by one having the courage to phone the other, to say: "I know how you feel. I too have lost my son". Today, they are close friends. Efforts like these do not cost billions of dollars. All they cost is the courage to show ordinary humanity.

Empathy can be encouraged in any arena where Israelis and Palestinians can reach across the political divide --- from universities to factories. Political leaders must set the example and overcome their fears that expressions of empathy will be perceived as political weakness.

When Egyptian President Anwar Sadat became the first Arab leader to visit Israel in 1977, his address to the Knesset was a remarkable act of empathy aimed at reassuring Israelis that the Jewish state could be recognised in the region. Imagine if Netanyahu agreed to

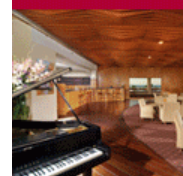
SEE ALSO

[Jewish American titan from the ghetto](#)
[The Jews who can distinguish antisemitism from anti-Israel](#)
[Between a shul and a hard place](#)
[Young blood flows well in UK](#)
[Fireworks? I'd prefer honey cake](#)



THE SHARON
Beach Resort Hotel

SPECIAL
Summer rates for
the refurbished
rooms at the
Sharon Hotel
Herzliya
Tel: 00972-9-9525777



[Want to Intern in Israel?](#)

Looking to intern in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem? Contact us today!
www.wujsisrael.org

AdChoices

[UK Ship To Israel](#)

Find Europe Cruise Holidays from the United Kingdom. View Specials!
www.HollandAmerica.com

AdChoices

[Lose 4 Stone in 3 Months?](#)

Discover the Shocking Truth About Britain's Hottest Diet...
[Fundamentalbody.com/...](http://Fundamentalbody.com/)

AdChoices

open a new peace process by addressing the Palestinian parliament in Ramallah? Or if Abbas publicly expressed sympathy with Israeli victims of terror? Actions like these show moral strength, neutralise hostility and make it easier for negotiating partners to offer concessions.

Israelis and Palestinians must be reminded that, when we reach out to acknowledge the other's feelings, we cease to demonise him, and begin to humanise him, and we can expect a response in kind.

Simon Baron-Cohen is professor of developmental psychopathology at Cambridge and director of its autism research centre. Avi Machlis was a correspondent in Jerusalem for the FT and Jewish newspapers in the US from 1995-2002

Last updated: 3:52pm, June 4 2009

[Next article](#) [Previous article](#)

[Subscribe](#)

[About](#)

[Advertise with us](#)

[E-Paper](#)

[Terms & conditions](#)

[RSS feeds](#)

[Send us a photo](#)