

Lihi Levian Joffe



A Feminist Perspective of Peace in the Middle East

Jewish and Palestinian women united against Israeli occupation—Young people encouraged to nonviolent action for human rights

Lihi Levian Joffe, born in 1985, has been active in the Israeli Coalition of Women for Peace (CWP) for many years. She has been involved in nonviolent action of women within Israel and at the border to the West Bank, thus giving protests against military occupation a feminist perspective. As an expert in gender mainstreaming, she has held seminars at KURVE Wustrow together with her Palestinian colleague Fida Nara, and both have also trained KURVE Wustrow's partners in the Balkans. Furthermore, Lihi is one of the organisers of the Alternative Youth Summer Camps which teach young Israelis sustainable lifestyles and equip them with action tools for promoting peace and human rights.

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omen can achieve a lot when they work together, and their feminist perspective can help to transform society as a whole. This is of particular importance in Israel.” For Lihi Levian Joffe, a feminist perspective implies empathy and solidarity as well as the willingness to learn from each other with an open and inclusive mind. This can help to promote peace and the observance of human rights in a country prone to military confrontation. “Women need to be encouraged to stand up for their rights as a group”, stresses the long-standing board member of the Israeli Coalition of Women for Peace (CWP), a KURVE Wustrow partner. “The certainty of not being alone gives you the confidence needed to get involved in effective nonviolent action.”

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To prove her point, Lihi recalls an experience at the time of the Arab Spring in 2011 which inspired women from all over the Middle East. Jewish and Arab women from Israel demonstrated for peace at the Qalandiya border post to the occupied West Bank. Palestinian women on the other side of the border joined the protests. “We created a big circle of women and started to sing and dance which took the military totally by surprise. It was a very impressive demonstration of solidarity which gave tremendous hope to all those participating. No wonder that this event is still being

remembered until this very day”, Lihi rejoices.

For her, this was a powerful example of nonviolent action working effectively. The situation could have easily turned nasty, but it didn’t because of the peaceful character of the demonstration. So the event had a lasting impact, even though on a small scale only. “We obviously couldn’t end the military occupation of the West Bank”, Lihi admits. “However, we motivated many women to stand up for their rights and beliefs which in itself can be seen as a great step forward on the way to a possible solution. It showed that women are important in the context of peacebuilding.”

Lihi lives in Neve Shalom Wahat al Salam which means “oasis of peace” in Hebrew and Arabic. It’s a cooperative village where Jews and Arabs prove on a daily basis that peaceful coexistence is possible. To spread her specifically feminist perspective of peace, Lihi has become a training expert in all aspects of gender mainstreaming. She has held several seminars at KURVE Wustrow in order to sensitise peace workers for the need to consider gender issues at every step of their project planning and implementation. If they want to promote human rights, they unequivocally have to observe the rights of women. They have to end discrimination at all levels of society and foster equal chances for all



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living beings. For Lihi, this includes animals as well. Therefore, the professional dietician eats only vegan food.

KURVE Wustrow has always seen it as a bonus that such professional training is being offered by experts from outside Europe, thus proving how very beneficial worldwide cooperation at eye-level can be. This became particularly evident when, in 2018, Lihi and her Palestinian colleague Fida Nara conducted a gender workshop for KURVE Wustrow’s partners in the Balkans. “This was absolutely amazing, powerful and inspiring”,

Lihi recalls with enthusiasm. “We learnt so much from each other and understood better than ever what opportunities a two-way exchange can offer. And we have certainly put the gender question on the agenda of all the participating organisations.”

Gender issues also feature in the Alternative Youth Summer Camps in Israel, organised every year by volunteers, including Lihi. Up to 100 young people aged 14 to 19 years are brought together at a camp site for up to six days in order to experience solidarity and cooperation in a sustainable environment. There is only solar electricity, vegan food is prepared by the participants themselves, ablutions take place in ecological bathrooms. Workshops focus on a great variety of topics like healthy living, human rights and animal rights, climate change, alternative energies and economies, democracy at large, the political situation in the Middle East and the options for peace. There is extensive space for discussions and trainings in nonviolent action with the provision of vital tools like organisational skills, strategic thinking, safety awareness and introduction to support networks.

Lihi stresses that these camps are also ideal for acquiring personal and social skills which often become stunted when communication takes place mainly via the in-

ternet and hardly at a personal level. Admittedly, the participants are predominantly Jewish youths from liberal, left-leaning families like her own one back in Tel Aviv. However, those coming from West Bank settlements or religious backgrounds are integrated as well. Israeli Arabs hardly ever take part because of language barriers, since all workshops are being held in Hebrew. Occasionally, there was an exchange with similar summer camps organised by Palestinian groups within Israel, but they were not as frequent as one might have wished.

Nevertheless, Lihi is convinced that the impact of these camps goes beyond the actual participants: "Every year, there are up to 100 young people who have been made aware of alternative lifestyles as well as different ways of thinking. This is something they certainly won't forget as their subsequent activities have proven at numerous occasions. They become multipliers of alternative ideas and shared values, including the power of nonviolent action."

Often, these youths are later seen at demonstrations of the Israeli peace movement. Frequently, they organise protest marches themselves. "What helps them is the certainty that they are not alone at such events", says Lihi. "This gives them confidence just like I've seen it hap-

pen within the women's movement. Some even felt bold enough to refuse military service, facing up to all the negative consequences. Obviously, we then try to give them as much support as possible."

Some of the participants later also become trainers in the Alternative Youth Summer Camps. This in itself is proof of the impact, as Lihi emphasises: "It's like a breath of fresh air to watch young people realise how important it is to accept diversity and work for a peaceful society. And I'm very pleased when they want to give something back of their own experience. Whenever these youths become agents for social change, I think we really have achieved something."