

Introduction by Osama

First, I want to start by thanking all of you for coming and thanking the organizers for organizing this event. Thank you for giving us the stage to meet you. Thank you for giving yourself time to feel other people's pain. Because if you feel your pain, you are alive. And if you feel other people's pain, you are human. And in these days, we are missing humanity a little bit. So, we are inviting you to put your political thoughts and everything you came with away for a second, all the news you have heard from the newspapers, and to try not to be always right or the only right one. I'm not asking anyone here to be pro-Palestine or to be pro-Israel. Because being pro-one side is one-sided and it will never serve us. We are asking you to leave your political conflicts aside and to unite as human beings. To unite, to stop death and massacres against humanity, not because of their nation or their religion. And we are inviting you to stay. We are here to trigger you. We are here to tell you what you have to hear, not what you want to hear.

So, if you agree with us, please stay. We need you and we need your support. And if you don't agree with us, please stay and trigger us and ask your questions.

Our stories shouldn't fit everyone, but it fits us and it works.

And the first thing and the last thing: You have to know that we both care about each other and our people. I live with Israeli friends more than Palestinians, and he lives with Palestinian friends more than Israelis. We are sharing the land we created for ourselves in this environment. Where we

could live in peace. We did not wait for politicians to sign a paper for us. To find the human on the other side.

And we're going to share with you our path, how we reach this place, and what we think is right. Our stories shouldn't fit everyone, but it fits us and it works. And we believe it works for our people, too. We're going to share our personal stories, and my request here is to listen.

Like most of the talks, I share my personal story and all the details. And in the end, someone asked me, you live in Israel or Palestine? Because they were looking for answers. They were defensive. They were not listening to me carefully. So, just give rest to your minds and walk in our shoes when we talk about our story.

Thank you again for coming and for giving us this opportunity. I feel that when people ask me about where I get hope, even though people are dying and the conflict is growing, I always say, this is my hope. Thank you.

Rotem's story:

So, I will share my personal story. Again, it's a unique story. It might surprise you, but it's real. This is what motivates me, because I experienced it in my own body, this transformation from fear to love.

I was born 33 years ago in a small village not far from Tel Aviv. This village, like all the villages and towns that were established by the Zionist movement or later by the Israeli government, was established for Jews. So, we live separately. Separately, Jews and Palestinians. As a child, I didn't really know who these Palestinians were. I heard about them in schools, from the news, from TV. My family sometimes talked about them, but I didn't know any real person to relate to.

And then it was the time of the Second Intifada. I was around nine or ten years old and I started to hear about bus explosions. I remember a shock and I was like, what? Why do people kill themselves to kill me? It couldn't understand it. I remember that I used to take buses from place to place as a child and if someone spoke Arabic next to me, I didn't understand what they were saying. I was scared. And I used to get off the bus because I was too afraid that someone might explode themselves.

We have the National Memorial Day. Maybe you know about it. This day, it's like the most sacred day of the year. We hold ceremonies in schools and soldiers come to the schools with their weapons. And I remember as a child I used to see how they were respected and appreciated and loved by the teachers, and by adults. I had this feeling that, wow, one day I want to become like these soldiers. I want to be as appreciated and loved by adults because they were my role models. And they became my heroes, the

soldiers. Later, my parents took me to our family ceremony because the cousin of my mother was killed as a soldier during his service. And again, the soldiers from his specific unit used to come to hold the ceremony. I remember having this dream of going to be a soldier in his specific unit, because he was the hero of our family who sacrificed his life so we could live in our homeland, protected. And I had this dream to be like him.

At the age of 17, like all Jewish students, we traveled to Poland with our school to see the concentration camps, the death camps, to learn and to never forget what the Nazi regime did to our people. I remember this experience as a very intense experience that made me even more convinced of the idea that we Israelis, as a collective, have to go and serve in the army, because if we don't do it, the past will happen again. The Palestinians might do the same as the Nazis did. Of course, the timing is critical and is chosen carefully. So, the next year, when I was 18, I was recruited into the Israeli army. Like all my friends, and all my family, I didn't really know that someone can refuse, that there is an option to object to it. For me, it was

until the age of 18, I did not know any Palestinians

more like you go to this unit or you go to that unit. But everyone is enlisted. I was enlisted into a pilot course.

„Guys, you are soldiers, you do what you are trained to do and told to do, and this is the end of the story. “

Until this age, the age of 18, I didn't know any Palestinians, I only knew Arab-Israelis. This is what we use to call Palestinians who have Israeli citizenship, Arab-Israelis. So, the only Arab-Israelis I knew was the woman who used to clean our house and the guy, the mechanic, from the nearby village who used to fix the car of my father. Again, I couldn't really connect Arab-Israelis to Palestinians. These were different identities for me.

And then I was recruited to a pilot course. For the first year of my service, I served in a pilot course. After one year, they realized that I didn't know how to fly the planes, thank God. Then they moved me to the unit where the cousin of my mother used to serve, the cousin who was killed. I was so

proud of myself. The reactions of my family and friends were supportive, and I felt like I was doing the most moral thing I could do with my life. I was very proud of myself.

A year later, they took my team to the West Bank, to a village south of Bethlehem. At that point, the West Bank was this dangerous place for me where my father had never taken me to. He always told me that the West Bank, the territories on the other side of the wall, is super dangerous. There is occupation, there are settlers, and it's not for us. He never took me there. He even told me you shouldn't go there. And then, at the age of 20, they [the army] took my team to this village in the middle of the night, with weapons and everything. We crossed the village. In the center of the village in the middle of the night, there was no one in the street. The commander told me and another guy to take the sound grenades and throw them into one of the yards of the houses, and we just did it. I took the grenade. I threw it, big boom. Then we went back to the base fast.

On the way back to the base, the other guy called me and he said, you know what I think? We shouldn't do these things, it's not right. I agreed immediately. I was a bit confused and I felt shame. How didn't I think about it myself? Then the commander came. He heard us talking about this and told us, guys, you are soldiers, you do what you are trained to do and told to do, and this is the end of the story. You don't talk about it anymore.

A few months later, I was released from the army after three years of mandatory service. I decided to go and travel and to use my privileged passport to see new places, to take care of my soul, and to get rid of the mindset of a soldier. As a soldier, for three years, I was trained to just follow orders, not to think, not to ask questions. This gets very deep into your psyche. So, I took a year to be out of this place. And then I came back to start medical school and met a friend. This friend told me that he was going to participate in a dialogue seminar in Germany with a group of Palestinians from the West Bank. I was very excited. Wow, is it possible? Can I actually meet people from the West Bank and talk to them? Wow, that sounds interesting. I loved to join because I was always told that they [the Palestinians] are dangerous for me and the only time I went there, I was the one who was violent, not them. I was very curious to join this trip.

And then, 11 years ago here in Germany, my life was changed. I met a group of 20 Palestinians from the West Bank, many of them lived in refugee

camps, and they were talking about a different reality than the one I knew, the one I was living in. They said that they live in refugee camps – I didn't know that there were refugee camps. They were talking about a Nakba – I didn't hear this word until this day. I was asking them, what do you mean by Nakba? And they said Nakba means catastrophe in Arabic. We use it to describe what happened to our people as a collective when the Jewish state was established in 1948. I was asking, what happened? So, they told me that 500 villages were destroyed, 700,000 refugees were displaced from their homes, and Jewish refugees came and took over their houses and destroyed many villages. I was very confused. How come I heard such a big part of the history of my homeland only in Germany, at the age of 23? How come I didn't know words like Nakba?

I went back to Israel and started to read more and more. I realized quite quickly that there is a law in Israel that prohibits schools from teaching about the Nakba, even mentioning this word. It was shocking for me.

They said they were living in refugee camps - I didn't know there were refugee camps.

**They spoke of a Nakba
- I had never heard that word before that day.**

I encourage us, here, to imagine a Germany where the majority prohibits schools from teaching about the catastrophe of the minority. Or the Holocaust. I think a very crucial part of reaching reconciliation is for the one who perpetrated, or who was violent, to take responsibility and ask questions. I don't know whether asking for forgiveness is right, because I don't know if we can forgive such atrocities. But we can maybe acknowledge the past, and say, yes, this is true. This is part of the history.

There are two narratives and I was very confused because no one was willing to talk about it. I was trying to talk to my family and friends, but everyone was very defensive, very rejecting of this whole narrative. And I felt a lot of pain. It felt like, in a way, I lost my community. No one is willing to talk to me about this or to help me understand what happened. I

felt like I lost my supportive system, and I was looking for new people who could support me.

I met many Israeli and Palestinian peace activists, and I started to go to activities and demonstrations and to build this alternative community of Israelis and Palestinians who have the inner strength to acknowledge both narratives to work for a better future. At some point, I started to visit the West Bank more and more. I met friends there, and I eventually moved to the West Bank, and learned the language, the Arabic language. I found a lot of healing during this process of crossing the wall to the other side, making friendships, learning the language – and realizing that, when they speak in Arabic next to me in the center of Bethlehem, they are not planning to attack me, they are actually looking for a restaurant.

Since then, I've been trying to create an alternative reality and to make it bigger and bigger, to bring more and more people, and to spread this message of love and justice in the homeland. And this is it, more or less.

Osamas story:

Thank you, Rotem. I want to share a different story with you. Even though we share the same land and the same space, there's a different story.

My story starts with my grandmother. I was born in Jerusalem, but my grandmother came from a village called Lifta, which is close to Jerusalem, and was destroyed in 1948. When I was a kid, she used to tell me stories about this village, about the horses, about the olive trees and the spring. I always heard that the Jews came and kicked us out and took our land. I grew up with a lot of fear of the word Jews, even though I never met them. In 1967, my family went to Jordan, and none of them was allowed to come back because Israel closed their borders. My grandfather is the only survivor of the family in the whole land. After a few years, my father went to work outside Jerusalem. There is a law in Jerusalem for Arabs only that if Arabs lived outside the Jerusalem municipality between 3 to 5 years, the government can cancel their residency. So, they can't live in Jerusalem anymore. That's what happened with my father and so we moved to Jericho. Actually, it was nicer there. It's flat and there are a lot of fields.

In Jericho, I started to see soldiers in front of my school during the First Intifada at the end of the 80s. I was looking at these soldiers and I was hearing that they don't speak my language. I didn't know why they were standing in front of my school. When I got back to my mother and I asked her about them, she usually said Jews. So, the image of Jewish people, for me, was scary. And in the end, the only image I had was fully armed soldiers in front of my school. And if one of the students threw stones, they targeted the school with tear gas. Some students did it on purpose not to

study. And we always used to run through the backyard as kids, with our back bags on and bits of onions in our hands. They were always in our bag, even though it was stinky. But onions help against the tear gas. After a few weeks, they decided to close the school. It was the happiest moment in my life.

But the violence did not stop by then. The clashes used to happen in the middle of the streets in Jericho, in the city, during the night. I used to wait until the soldiers came and then I heard the bullets from my bed. And we smelled the tear gas. And we had onions, too. Usually, we turned off the lights and didn't move because if the soldiers saw light inside the house, they would enter and search, and take everyone over 16 years old. It worked

Administrative detention means that we live under military rules in the West Bank.

many times until I didn't and they broke into our house to take my father. I saw violence. I was terrified to defend my father. And it felt like the soldiers were abusing my father, who was the hero of my life, who was supposed to be the safe place in my life. And I felt this fear turning to hate, and I kind of discovered the enemy. The real enemy. I wanted to resist, to do something. I was 14 years old. I bought spray color and started to jump out of the house after midnight to write "Free Palestine" on one of the walls, to feel happy. To be honest, I did not know what Palestine was and I did not fight for Palestine, I didn't even write this against Israel or the Jews. My real enemy was the soldier who was standing in front of my school. That's it. I didn't know him, but he scared me, my family, my teachers, and everyone else. And then I wanted to do more. So, we built a Palestinian flag which by then was forbidden. It was before the Palestinian Authority. We bought shirts, we cut them and we tried to build the flag. We didn't know exactly how to do this flag, whether to put the black on the top or the bottom. I didn't know the meaning of the flag either; it was just resistance against the soldiers or revenge from the soldiers. For this, I was arrested under a law that is called administrative detention in Israel.

I learned everything bad about Israeli people in Israeli jail.

Administrative detention means that we, in the West Bank, live under military rules. We don't have a country like Israel-Palestine which is written like Palestine existed. Ask the German diplomats, they didn't recognize Palestine as a state yet. So, we don't have a country. We have cities that are controlled by the Palestinian Authority. And I didn't know what to do. How to resist these soldiers. I didn't have an army. I didn't have a country. I didn't have anything. So, I built the flag and I was arrested. As I said, this is the law for the Palestinians who live in the West Bank, it's called administrative detention. It means the army commander, who can also be a judge, can decide to put any Palestinian in jail for one day up to three years without charge. Without court. Today, there are 4,000 Palestinians in these jails. They don't have a charge. Because of the 7th of October, 4,000 Palestinians were arrested in the West Bank, not in Gaza.

To be honest, in jail, I lost my childhood. And I learned how to be a real hater. I learned everything bad about Israeli people in Israeli jail. I hated them more than before and wanted to continue the revenge. When I was released, we had the Oslo agreement and I saw the Palestinian flag everywhere. It wasn't dangerous anymore, it was legal. I liked the idea of the Oslo agreement, supported it, and joined the Palestinian police. After a few years, one of my friends was killed by the Israelis and the Palestinian Authority couldn't do anything. I felt weak again. I felt disappointed and left the police. I wanted to resist and to take revenge again. But they prevented me, prevented us, because of the peace agreement. I was always looking for ways to do something.

In 2000, the Second Intifada started. In 2001, I was in an internet cafe with some other people. I think they were wanted. Then, the special units came to this internet cafe and started to shoot. Five people were killed, one of them was wanted and the rest were just people who happened to be there. I was arrested for five days. I was abused and beaten for five days. I did not do anything. I was researching for my studies, that's all. I went out of this situation with a lot of hate and I joined the resistance again, until 2007. Then, another peace agreement happened, we accepted it and the case was dismissed. I was wondering about different groups of fighting. And I believed in violence because everything we experienced was violence. I grew up in an environment of violence. I didn't grow up in Switzerland. Every day someone was killed, and every day houses were demolished. Now, I don't want to start asking who to blame. But as a child, that was my life. And that made me who I am.

How come they can see my pain?

In 2010, I was in Bethlehem. It was snowing and it was really cold. Our public transportation is not good, even worse than the Deutsche Bahn. So, I was waiting at the entrance of Bethlehem to find a ride, and someone stopped. It was my friend and he was going to Bethlehem, and he told me to go to this conference, too. I said, okay, this is the only opportunity [for a ride] and there is good food. When he said peace conference, I was excited to practice my English again and to talk to people from all around the world, mostly white, good people. Excuse my racism.

And then I went to the conference. When I went inside the hall, I saw someone sitting there with a Kippa. I stood back and I said, Ahmed, this is not our room. He looked and said, it is our room. And I asked, there are Jewish people here, how could that be our room? He tried to convince me that some Jewish people believe in peace. I responded with two things: First, they killed their prime minister because he signed a peace agreement.

How is it that they can see my pain?

Second, since we signed for peace, we were losing land, piece by piece. So what peace are you talking about?

I went out. It was snowing and I couldn't leave. Suddenly, I heard Israelis talking about occupation, talking about the rights of the Palestinians. They were talking about the settlements and the violence of the settlers. I saw in the Israeli community people who saw me and saw my pain. And my suffering.

The Israeli state decided, during all these 30 years, to show me how powerful they were, how many weapons they could have, all these things. But they never tried to show me the humanitarian face of Judaism. The mercy face of Judaism. And suddenly Jewish people were talking about me. They said we can't allow this to happen. They said we are attacking Gaza with an iron fist. This is not our Judaism, and that's why we are here. I was surprised. How come they can see my pain? And I went back with a crack in my head. Is it possible that I can find, among these people, good people?

I was really curious. I went to these meetings again and met a lot of Israelis. Step by step, they introduced me to a different reality. And they told me about something I never heard before, the Holocaust. Not because I'm responsible for the Holocaust, but if you want to connect to people, understand them, live with them, and share your land with them, you need to understand and recognize their suffering, their trauma, and their fears.

I don't have a very good passport like my neighbors. The settler who lives five minutes away from my house, has an Israeli passport with full rights, a government, and an airport. I don't. Despite that, I somehow got a visa for a peace activist and I flew to concentration camps, for the first time, to see these people's lives. And it was difficult. It was hard. To see how easily human beings can ignore other people's being. It's easy for us not to feel each other's pain and to keep blaming others while forgetting ourselves. I went back and I created a group called Visit Palestine. This group had three messages: First, I wanted Israelis to come to the West Bank to see that we wake up in the morning, wash our faces, and go to work as human beings. We don't sharpen our knives trying to find Jewish people in the street. We have a life, we have schools. We are the most educated people in the Middle East. Every single Palestinian has a degree. We have the best olive oil and the best farms. Even though we don't have water, most of the water is confiscated. We have beautiful land. We love life as long as it's possible. Second, I wanted to show them what life is like under occupation. What it means to live in the oldest city in the world, the first settlement called Jericho, without water, even though we have five water springs around the city. It was an oasis ever since and now, because of settlements around me and the discrimination, I don't have water. I'm not against your Judaism. I deserve rights like a human being. Third, I wanted to show Palestinians, at the same time, that Israelis are not always armed soldiers. I wanted to educate people.

Another thing. This is my message to my people and a message to the Germans: Judaism has nothing to do with occupation. That's how I accepted Judaism because Judaism has nothing to do with occupation, and being against occupation has nothing to do with anti-Semitism. Thank you.

Now I want to invite us to close our eyes for 30 seconds and to try not to react to these stories. But be quiet.

And we want to invite you to ask questions. Thank you.

Floordiscussion

MODERATOR: *When you told us about your stories, I was thinking about the role of religion in your work. Is there any aspect of religion in your stories and in your personal life?*

OSAMA: Thank you for the question. Religion, is a complicated topic for me because I grew up as a normal, typical Muslim child. After meeting a lot of religions and a lot of people, I found out that I don't need the normal, traditional way to connect to God. I can find God inside me and in many other places. Sorry if that's very hippie. And I wish we were acting according to religions, but I think we are using religions to unite against other groups or to separate each other. I don't think we are really believing in the mercy of religions. I will give you an example: The 7th of October happened by Muslim group. According to what I studied in my school about Islam, Islam doesn't kill kids. Islam doesn't kidnap women. Islam doesn't attack people in their houses and doesn't burn them. If I want to talk about my Islam, this is the Islam I have learned in school. But for me, it feels like we are using religions in order to create conflicts. Exactly like in the case of the Aqsa Mosque. When Jewish people go to the dome of the rock, they usually go there with a lot of soldiers and a lot of police around them. That doesn't allow the Muslims to feel safe, and they attack each other. And this is a place of God, a place where everyone should be allowed to worship God. So unfortunately, religions are playing a big role in our conflict. But not only by adding to our conflict, but also when people on both sides say, I

don't believe in God, but I believe God promised us this land.

[Clapping from the audience]

ROTEM: I was born and raised in a secular home and religion wasn't a big part of it. But my uncle, he became Orthodox, and many of his children are settlers in the West Bank. There has always been this conflict in my house, like, should we go visit them or we shouldn't? And for me, the problem is that the system was established to serve one group and discriminate another upon religion. If you are from this religion, from this race – your privilege. If you are not from this religion, from this race – then you will be treated like, in the best case, second-degree citizens, and in the worst case, animals. I think we should separate these things, because when we say the system is for the Jews and we see laws that are being enacted like the Jewish state law in 2018 saying that Israel is the homeland of the Jews, it shows that this system was established for Jews first. We see discrimination by the law. There, the resistance and violence start, because as long as people are not equal by law and they are being discriminated by the system and they don't feel included, they will resist. Some will resist non-violently, some who know only violence because this is what the system shows them, will choose violence. It's our responsibility to actually see the source of the violence and to change it, because there is the solution. For me, as the one who was privileged and I was raised in a beautiful place, I didn't see violence as a child that much. I heard about buses, okay. But it wasn't really close to me. I wasn't really seeing soldiers in front of my house beating my father. So, I believe it is our responsibility to change the system, to make the system inclusive and equal for all the people that live between the river and the sea.

MODERATOR: *Can you tell us a little bit more about your work at Combatants for Peace: What kind of organization is it? Do you have cooperation with other organizations? And perhaps, what is your reason for coming to Germany?*

OSAMA: Combatants for Peace as an organization, was established in 2006 by Israeli soldiers who understood that weapons don't help Israel to be safe and Palestinians in jail who understood that violence is not the way to go.

They met and they shared their narratives, their own stories, and they accepted each other's narratives. And that's where peace exists: when two narratives can accept each other. From there, we first started with secret meetings because of the situation and then we started to go in public. We believe that we, Israelis and Palestinians, have the right to resist the occupation system together because it endangers the lives of Israelis and Palestinians on the same level. No one is free until we are all free. And we are using non-violence tools. We have two schools, one on the Israeli side and one in the West Bank. Our organization is the only democracy in the Middle East where Jews and Muslims have the same rights. We all vote together, and we make decisions together. We disagree, and we accept and love each other even when we disagree. We created an environment of connection before correction. A space where we connect on a human level before we correct each other. So, we are mostly working in area C, we have two schools which are non-violence teaching schools to Palestinian youth, and we have a drawing school which is working on educating Israeli youth about life in the West Bank, life under occupation, and meetings between Israelis and Palestinians. Our main goal is to bring people together because our worst enemy is the separation that makes us fight each other without knowing each other. Now, since I know Rotem, I can't justify the death of his family or celebrate it, and the other way around. We have many activities on the ground like building playgrounds for the Bedouin communities in Jordan Valley and South Hebron Hills, to help them live their life and survive, and to show the kids of the Bedouin Palestinians that these settlers who are attacking them and acting with violence, that they don't represent Judaism. Our people represent Judaism differently. We show them that there is another narrative and give them ways to live. We bring them water and electricity because sometimes we don't have solar panels. We also have two big events, one called Nakba Day that we have been negotiating for three years. Should we do Nakba Day or shouldn't we do Nakba Day? Then, we said let's try, and we tried. It worked and it was amazing. Our biggest event, and this is our message to the world, is called Joint Memorial Day. Rotem already mentioned that in Israel, they have Memorial Day where they mourn all the Israeli soldiers who were killed since 1948. We in Combatants for Peace decided there is no difference between blood and blood, and there is no difference between tears and tears. And more importantly, there is no competition in pain. So, we decided to make this joint Memorial Day where

we mourn the human beings who were killed, the victims of the systems who were killed during these years, our brothers and our sisters on both sides, on the same level. When we see the Palestinian mother, the Israeli mother, the father, and the friends hugging each other and crying together and listening to each other's stories, this is our peace. And as I said before, again and again, our main enemy is that we are not equal and we don't meet each other. We study in different schools, we speak different languages, we have different rights, and we use different streets, most of the time. I want to end this by stressing how important it is to meet with the words of Mahmoud Darwish, a Palestinian poet. Before he was expelled from his city Dair al-Asad in the 1970s, he was in love with a Jewish girl. Her name is Tamar Ben-Ari. She sent him a letter asking "When are we going to meet?". He says "After a year and after the war". She asked, "When will the war end"? He answered, "The time we meet". Thank you.

ROTEM: To finish the answer, we came to Germany on the 16th of October. Our trip was planned during the summer, but only for two weeks. And then, the 7th of October happened and the Ben-Gurion airport was closed. I had to go to Jordan with Osama – we suddenly felt equal for the first time – and we traveled to Germany. We gave talks and we realized that it won't be easy for us to go back because Osama might be arrested on the border as he's active on social media. So, we decided to continue, and we also started to receive a lot of invitations to talk here and there. Since then, we've been touring around Germany and we will do it until, for now, the 20th of February. Then, we'll hopefully we go back.

[Questions are opened for the audience]

SPEAKER 1: *I have to say that I'm impressed. It's extremely courageous what you're doing and listening to you, it seems to me that fear is a big part of the problem. What is your advice to get rid of this fear? Do you think it would be useful if Israeli children would learn Arabic in school to know that people talk about finding a restaurant and not blowing somebody up?*

SPEAKER 2: *After October 7th, is your work in Israel-Palestine possible and what has changed since that day? Are there any cooperation partners?*

SPEAKER 3: *My question is similar, but traces back in time even longer. How did your respective social network react to the two of you meeting? How did the Jewish-Israeli network react to a Palestinian and vice-versa, how did the Arab-Palestinian network react when you were suddenly hanging around with Israelis?*

ROTEM: First, I think language is super important. For me, it changed my life to learn Arabic because suddenly I felt like I was part of this region and I was not only part of a Western bubble surrounded by Arabs. Suddenly, I could understand what they were saying, I could read newspapers in Arabic and I could understand how they see me and who I am for them. I remember I was very confused when I realized that they called me a colonizer. I was like, am I a colonizer? Wow, I didn't think about it, ever. Yes, I wish they would teach us Arabic in schools. It would be huge – I cannot even explain how huge it would be. Secondly, the reactions. My family accepted me. And I can say, personally, it's more difficult for me to accept them. I struggle with that a lot. One day, I took my parents to Jericho and Osama gave them a tour. He showed them the settlements, how the water was stolen, and everything else. And my mom came to Bajela. But still, at the age of 65, it's not easy to change your mindset, especially when this mindset is your identity. So, I'm trying to find compassion and to meet them where they are, not where I want them to be. But I have to say, it's not easy for me. And just today, I had a fight with my mother on the phone.

OSAMA: Firstly, I think that education is very important on both sides. Not only the language but also the narratives. If you go to any Palestinian school, you will see the map and it says Palestine, there is no Israel in it. And if you go to any Israeli school, you will see the same map with the David Star. It reads Israel, and Palestine doesn't exist. We have to understand that we have to share our narratives – and our languages. But to live in peace, you need to share rights, too. And that's the important thing. I can forgive the past, but I can't forgive the future. If you want me to live next to you, my kid deserves to have rights like your kid does. If not, he will

resist. He will even resist his brother if I give his brother more rights than him. That's part of our humanity, that's how humans act. Secondly, I'd like to answer how the situation changed after the 7th of October. The situation since the 7th of October has been really dangerous. It's scary. I, again, condemn violence and I condemn the violence of Hamas. I am also asking human beings to condemn the occupation, to condemn the discrimination, the apartheid. You still don't want to call it apartheid, but that's my life. When someone living five minutes away from me has different rights, different laws, and different nationalities – all the rights, and I don't – this is apartheid. Let's condemn these things because they are the reason we created people like those who did the 7th of October. If people have something to lose, if people have good lives, if people have good rights, they won't go to die and kill other people. And that is what we are trying to solve. Not because I care about Palestinians, but because I want to live with Israelis in the same place. But since the 7th of October, I feel less than them. Since the 7th of October, for example, all the Palestinian cities in the West Bank – where we don't have Hamas, we have Abbas – all the Palestinian cities in the West Bank have checkpoints and gates. During the day, you have to pass checkpoints and during the night, the gates are closed. More than 400 Palestinians were killed in the West Bank. More than 4,000 Palestinians were arrested. I can show you pictures and videos. I don't want to compare pain with pain and who's suffering more because we have been fighting over the question who is more victim for ages. This is not my message now. My message now is to invite the international community and the people and the world to go to the West Bank and Gaza and to Israel, and to see what's going on and to take responsibility and to allow the international law to work for everyone on the same level. There is no one above the law, that is what you taught us in the international community. So, these exceptions for some people when they can do whatever they want – and America can use their veto 56 times and Germany does only support one side and send weapons – that is not fair. This creates a lot of haters all around the world and is the source of the anti-Semitism growing now. The minute we live in peace, it will change the whole environment in the Middle East. It will make it easier. The two-state solution was offered to us by Germany and the USA as well as other Western countries, but no one is working on it, no one is looking at it and no one is taking responsibility at the moment. I think the solution comes when we take responsibility and call

things by their names. We must see what's going on and support both sides, on the same level. And built schools for us in the West Bank where we can teach Israelis and Palestinians Hebrew and Arabic instead of sending rockets and weapons to kill each other. That's the solution. Thank you.

[Clapping from the audience]

Speaker 4: *I have one question about violence. In the media, we hear a lot about violence on both sides, of physical violence. But what you mentioned, Rotem, in your story, was this moment when you threw the sound grenade into a Palestinian house in the West Bank. My question is, what are the effects of violence on the perpetrator, especially on the Israeli soldiers who are now joined by 300,000 people in the military reserve? What are the effects of this violence when they are coming back to their personal lives? I'm thinking about trauma and how it affects communities. And the other question, out of curiosity, what was the organization you visited here in Germany ten years ago where you met the Palestinians?*

[The second part of the question was answered by one of the mentioned organizations members directly]

HELGA: *Good evening, I'm Helga Dieter. I come from Frankfurt and I coordinated the meetings between Palestinians from the West Bank and Israeli citizens for 13 years. We agree that peace can only grow bottom-up and from both sides – not during international conferences where politicians meet to sketch maps. The concept of Combatants for Peace sounds very easy, they meet to talk. But this is not possible the easy way, because Israeli citizens are not allowed into the occupied territories, especially not in Area A, and Palestinians are not allowed to leave the West Bank for Israel. It sounds easy when you explain these meetings, but we were organizing these conferences for 13 years abroad here in Germany because Palestinians and Israelis couldn't meet back home. It's not clear to me at the moment how you do it. The other thing is, we say that personal contact and dialogue are the way out of this situation, but it costs a lot of money to initiate these dialogues. Abroad, no matter whether in Germany or in Aqaba in Jordan where we hosted seminars – Rotem participated there, for example – every participant cost around 1,500€. If we want a group of 30 people for*

communication purposes, you can imagine how much that is. At the moment, the money is spent on weapons and not on peace projects. One more thing in this context and regarding normalization, the BDS movement in Palestine is against dialogue projects because these projects could create the impression that these meetings are normal and therefore, they put social pressure on people working in these projects.

ROTEM: Firstly, of course, there's post-trauma. You can find it in huge numbers on both sides. It is not easy because we don't have good solutions for PTSD. And we must also think about the bigger effect on society because what we see today in Israeli society is not just PTSD. It's also the fascistization of society. We witness very scary processes of how a society that is used to occupation and military service is militarized. We see how many weapons there are now in every second house, like in America. Today, I read that they want to spread RPGs in the West Bank because this is their solution on how to protect us from the Hamas. PTSD is a huge problem, but the bigger problem is what is becoming of this society. When we see videos, I sometimes can't believe what I see from Gaza and also from the checkpoints in the West Bank. Today, I saw a demonstration of Israeli settlers blocking aid trucks of humanitarian help from reaching Gaza. The dehumanization we see on both sides, of course, is scary because when you dehumanize a collective this way, you can justify everything. Right now, the government is talking about mass displacement. This is their solution, the destruction of the whole Gaza Strip. And of course, it's a reaction to the system because the system teaches us, as Israelis, that this is normal, as if the occupation was normal. You don't question it. They teach you to become a soldier when you are 18. All your childhood is about how to make you ready to be a soldier when you turn 18 years old. So yes, there are many problems to deal with and of course, we need treatment for PTSD. We don't need weapons, that's for sure. When you send us weapons, we're traumatized. People in Israel now, during these days especially, they are convinced to fight the evil. They are calling on social media that the Gazans were Nazis. This is the new terminology now. So, when Jews are convinced that they are fighting the Nazis, they will use any number of weapons you will send them because they are fighting for their lives. And it's time to stop feeding this weapon industry. Stop making a profit from this war. It's crazy how much money these countries like Germany, the United States, and

Israel of course, generate from this conflict. I cannot imagine even Israel without the industry of weaponry. Half of the population is somehow connected to this industry. It's not just Israelis and Palestinians, you are making a profit of it, and the Americans making a profit of it. And we have to unite and say "No, enough is enough. This is just feeding the fire."

OSAMA: The question was, how do we finance to meet? Usually, we grow from disasters, we create hope from disasters. In the West Bank, I don't know if you know what the West Bank looks like, but 62% of the West Bank is under full Israeli control although it is supposed to be under the control of the Palestinian Authority since 2000. It means that the streets between our cities, the way to my land, the way to my sister, the entrance of my country, the water springs, the agricultural land – everything is under full Israeli control, and so are the borders. Apart from this disaster, we have some places in the middle of Area C where we both can meet. For example, there is a German school in Beit Jala called Talitha Kumi, and we usually go to Talitha Kumi or meet next to the Dead-sea, or here, or there. We find our ways to meet. The important thing is to meet. Sometimes, we also meet inside the West Bank in our cities. Our Israeli friends come and we meet inside and sometimes, we also ask for permits to meet inside Israel. So, we create an environment to meet. Our money is coming. We are not a rich organization as we are mostly volunteers, like the two of us. We have a small group of someone who is like the CEO and another one the office manager as well as the media people and the translators, they get paid. And many organizations around the world support us. Sometimes, we write proposals for the German government, for example. The ZDF used to support us, Bread for the World... Now, after the 7th of October, because we, the peace activists, are marked guilty, Germany stopped our support. They don't want to give us money anymore. So yes, we have some supporters, we have some donations and that's our way to survive. We are surviving, hardly. Sometimes we have a very hard time and we still travel around the world. Not for the money, actually. We travel around the world because we believe in the power of the people, not the people in the power. We believe that people make wars and people make peace, not the weather. We believe that you, and you and you and you and me, we can make change. And that's why we are here.

SPEAKER 5: *All you told us is very reasonable and it sounds very good. I think it is a really good way to bring people together, to go against fear, and to connect and learn from each other. My question is about the occupation. Many governments supported the occupation or the Israeli government. And my question is, is it only for fear or for religion? Or is there also an economic reason to stay in the occupation? Many people understand that Israelis in this area are not safe with this occupation. They live more in danger, as you told us. Can you tell us anything about that? The settlers don't pay very much for the lands they occupy in the settler areas. I don't know how is it now but what is the idea of governments to support the occupation all these many, many years?*

SPEAKER 6: *I have two questions. One is about the language you use when the two of you talk to each other and the other question is more political and related to the previous contribution. I respect that you are here. I'm very grateful that you are here. I agree with everyone. It is wonderful that the two of you show us how communication is possible, and I agree that communication has to happen, but I do not agree that we can wait until reconciliation happens from bottom up. I think there has to be a political perspective as well. What could that be? I am so helpless, I do not see how the two-state solution can work when 62% of your land is occupied, as you said, and the settlers multiply. They're growing and so are the militant Palestinians. And the Israeli government is doing everything wrong.*

ROTEM: When we speak, we speak in Arabic or Hebrew, we try not to speak in English. Regarding solutions, we are not politicians. We are not here to give you a solution. There are many solutions and I have my favorite solution, but I don't think it is of much relevance here. I think a solution to be lasting and to solve the conflict, has to include total equality for everyone from the river to the sea. Freedom of movement, freedom in general. Just that everyone will feel as free as the others. Justice, I don't know how, but we need justice. There are many ways. The Germans, for example, paid money for the Jews. You can also give back the land. There are many ways to solve and to create justice. It has to be accepted by both sides. It's impossible that one side will come to the other side and says "Take this, this is justice, bye". So, we have to talk about what justice means and what safety means because as long as someone is not safe, no one is safe. And as

long as someone is not free, no one is free. These are the main blocks, you can play with them, but it has to include these things. I agree, we don't like the occupation that is 75 years old, and as you mentioned, the problem is that many people benefit from the occupation and many people will lose their jobs, will lose their control, and will lose their power once the occupation ends. We have to create an alternative system; this is why it is so scary for Israelis. It's our responsibility to create a solution that includes the Palestinians. But I agree, we don't have time to lose. We have to unite now to show the Israeli government our way. We shouldn't wait for the Israeli government, because they don't really care about it, and they are not even trying to solve this conflict. We should unite as the international community and tell them this is not acceptable. They cannot continue this way. And you have to put pressure on the government. And many people will call us anti-Semitic, but this is not anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is racist, it is racism towards Jews. What we do is put pressure on an oppressive system to change it. We are not against Israelis. We are not against Jews. We are fighting to protect Israelis as much as we want to protect Palestinians. And we believe that the change of the system will be the best way to protect Israelis.

SPEAKER 7: *I'm a little shocked about the language and this evening today, especially, as what you have just said could have easily been said before October 7th. I suspected that something had changed ever since. I hear that there are hardly any changes. I'm a little shocked that, on the one hand, great attention is, rightly, paid to a sensitive use of language, and on the other hand, all the buzzwords of apartheid, colonialism, and the fascistization of the Israeli system are dropped – and Israel is now only referred to as a system and not just Israel anymore, it is only presented as a “system”. This creates incredible reluctance and sensitivity during conversations for each other and with each other. And that is difficult for me. I also realized that it is not perceived as a problem here... at least according to my perception. But I have a real problem with that, because the completely justified need for security for both peoples, those in the West Bank and Gaza as well as in Israel, was completely broken on October 7th. So much trust and vision has collapsed on this day. And of course, you can always talk about the fascist system in Israel where, after all, there have been many demonstrations for the last three quarters of the year to prevent*

exactly that from happening. Okay, this was a monologue. Do you have a suggestion for a more sensitive language regarding apartheid, colonialism, etc.?

ROTEM: I didn't choose the word apartheid. The human rights organizations chose it. B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights organization chose it, Amnesty International, and Osama. But he chose it after these organizations were looking into the question of whether Israel is an apartheid system. I guess you have been to the land, but if not, go to the West Bank and see the settlers, the settlements, the pools, how much water and how many trees they have, how much freedom and how many rights they have – they even have an airport and can travel everywhere because they have the same passport like me and I can do whatever I want. I can import, I can export, and I can travel around freely because I'm free in my homeland. He doesn't have it. The Palestinians who live under Israeli military occupation don't have the same rights. When I must go to the court, I go to the civil court. He goes to the military court. So, we use this word because, again, big organizations are looking for this question and they chose this word to describe the situation. Personally, I can say that I agree with them 100%. I think it is time to be brave and to call things by their names. I know, they will attack us with anti-Semitism for that. But again, if we don't call the things by their names, we cannot change the reality. First, we have to acknowledge what is happening and then we can correct it. And we are not against anyone. It's just about freedom, justice, equality, and safety for everyone. As long as you have an apartheid regime, no one is safe.

OSAMA: I will answer in one word, I'm sorry. I want to say that I'm sorry this word, apartheid, bothers you. I live under occupation, and I choose peace. And I live in a land where I have fewer rights. And I wish I didn't live in this situation. And I just want to tell you that you are invited to my house. Come and I can show you, with your own eyes, what you didn't see or you don't want to see. I did not choose apartheid – I live apartheid, Sir. Thank you.

SPEAKER 8: *Since you talk with each other in Arabic, I could also speak Arabic now, but that would not be fair to the other guests.*

OSAMA: We also talk in Hebrew.

SPEAKER 8: *I cannot speak Hebrew and I want to be fair, so I speak in broken English. I am very, very happy to hear what you are saying, that peace is the only way to solve problems, and that violence only creates problems but doesn't solve them. So, now my question is, how many people on the Palestinian side and on the Israeli side think like you? In the media, we always hear about hard-liners, but we don't read or hear a lot about civil society organizations, and I think your organization is a civil society organization. And it is not the only one in Israel composed of Israelis and Palestinians. Now, if we talk about all the civil society, mixed organizations that dream of peace and of living in an equal society, which percentage is that on the Palestinian and the Israeli side? And what is your strategy to invite others to join your thinking? Thank you.*

SPEAKER 9: *What do you guys think about the demand for land back and the demand for a right to return, which is articulated by the Palestinian people around the world?*

OSAMA: So, the question is how many people we are, how many people believe in our thing? Okay, I want to say that it depends on the period you're asking about. For example, as a Palestinian who grew up in Jericho, I remember the Oslo agreement. I witnessed that 80% of the population in Gaza, in the West Bank, and Jericho, were celebrating 24 hours after signing the Oslo agreement. They were so happy and celebrated their freedom. Finally. Most of the people, about 80%, supported this agreement, except for some groups. As I said, after the Oslo Agreement which was supposed to freeze the settlements, the number of settlers increased from 150,000 to 650,000 people. Palestinians started to lose hope and to lose peace. Then our water became less, our situation became worse. Then our people went and attacked Israelis inside Israel violently. That made the two peoples not believe in peace anymore, it was difficult to believe in peace. But there are still some believers and we believe in a different way. We believe, that if we don't live in peace, peace lives in us. And that's how we can make change. We are not a majority, but you don't need a majority to change systems. You need 3% of the population to change systems because most of the people are

busy. We are a small group. But we choose to be the salmon fish and swim against the stream. And we believe that we're going to make a change. We believe that we're going to live in peace, and we're going to live together in peace. And if you think that we are too small to make a change, try to sleep with a mosquito in your room. Thank you.

ROTEM: So last question, the right of return. This is a big topic; I think the biggest question. Israeli governments are not willing to even talk about it. In the Oslo agreement, it wasn't mentioned, although it is at the core of the conflict. And I dream about the day we will not need these borders anymore; the day refugees will have the right to return like every Jew. And as long as only Jews have the right of return, again, apartheid. Different rules upon race. So, for me, it is important to remind us that it is the most existential fear of the Israelis to bring the refugees back. They will lose control and won't know what will happen to them. I believe we should think together about how we can create a situation or a process, gradually, that will build trust. And once we trust our neighbors, we are not scared anymore if they come to live next to us. And yes, we need to have a dialogue about it. Of course, this is the first component of a solution, because as long as we're not willing to talk about the refugees, it will not be a real solution. And we need to figure out how to create trust so that the Israelis will not enter into a panic attack of "No way, we cannot live with them" – this is the situation right now. So, of course, I support it. But it's also about how to be smart, not only right, and about how to engage with both sides. It's not a unilateral decision. Of course, they will come back. But we have to look at how we do it so that our people trust each other.

MODERATOR: *Dear Rotem, dear Osama, thank you very much for sharing your stories, your opinions, your ideas, your visions with us. Thank you very much.*

Long-lasting applause

ROTEM: It gives me so much energie and motivation to continue. So, thank you. I want to ask , if you want to support us, we are not supported by anyone and we collectinations, so that we can continue in this truth, so there

is a box. And please spread this message: we are willing to come to any spot in Germany to talk and to listen.

OSAMA: We inviting all the people who are pro-Palestine and all the people, who are pro-Israel write on slogan an go into the streets: “from the river to the sea – everyone should be safe and equal and free!”