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What do you say to a mother who has lost everything? Jump into the sky.

by Dr. Alice Rothchild

Today I return to the Aisha Association for Woman and Child Protection to learn more about the impact of war on women and their families. I am joined by a social worker, a translator, and six women who are engaged in a group therapy/sharing session that is the beginning of their work with this extraordinary center.

Afaf Abu Ajwa is from Shejaia and “before the aggression I was very happy.” She has seven sons, three at university, one working as a teacher, one an engineer, and one in high school Her close family and relatives all live nearby and once the war started, she was afraid her sons could die “at any time...all suffering from the bombs.” It was hard for her to leave her house but because her house was half concrete and half aluminum, people repeatedly advised that she leave for safety. “I faced death every day but where I go? Every place I will go suffers from the same problem I suffer from.” Her two sisters sitting next to her at the conference table both agree and argue with her as she speaks; these are three tough, outspoken, defeated women.

“On the black Sunday, [July 2014] it was not a night, it was a suffering from Israeli occupation when they hit our houses, kill our children.” She uses the word *Yehud* and Israeli interchangeably; I do not blame her. In her world they are synonymous. “At about 7:00 pm, *Yehud* bombs hit the house continuously like the rain, and they start light bombs, burn the house, and light up the street. It was Ramadan and she put *iftar* on the table but they were not able to eat. Although she has diabetes, (spending about 400 shekels a month for medications), she still could not eat. Today she starts crying as she recalls her husband urging her to eat so she will not lose consciousness, but she was “just looking at my child as if it is the last time I will see them... one second to lose one relative of yours.” Bombs hit her house, but she didn’t know what to do. She went to the bedroom; her husband shouted to come back to join her sons. The room was immediately totally damaged. Ultimately the family asked the Red Crescent to come and rescue them, but the Red Crescent refused because the Israelis would not permit the ambulance passage.

“If we stay in our house we will die and if we leave our house we will also die.” Her neighbor opened the door for her and her young sons and as they fled the Israelis immediately bombed the street. Her husband and other sons were in their own house, two sons came over to the neighbor’s and the Israelis bombed her home again. Her husband “he start shouting and tell me not to be afraid. I thanks God that my sons are still alive” and from the neighbor’s house they can see the damaged second floor of her home; there is no safe place, there are 30 people in one room, houses are crashing down on other inhabitants, “*Yehud* becomes crazy,” When glass falls on a newborn, the grandfather grabbed the baby and started to run in the street. He was killed

and the baby injured. 80 people in her neighborhood died. She used to save money for her son, but now when she wants to save anything she asks, why save, another war is coming.

As the memories of that time explode into the room, Afaf is getting more angry and outraged, her voice rising with a fierce sense of fury and hopelessness. With bombs all around, her husband was ready to leave, but there were no ambulances, no Red Crescent, “there was no hope to live; the streets were crowded with women and children.” Her husband asked her to shout for people to go out with them, “it was like ’48 *nakba*.” Women fled without their hijabs, many were in pajamas, blood was everywhere. She injured her foot running towards an UNRWA school for shelter, but once she arrived she realized she had lost one of her sons. She ran back to Shejaia but this time the place was totally different. “There were no humanity, people dead in the streets, like Sabra and Shatila, (two refugee camps in Lebanon that were the sites of horrific massacres in the 1980s). She saw disembodied hands, bodies without heads, a dead woman clutching her dead child, eight women crushed under a house, their faces frozen in fright. The bombs were dropping, she found her son dead. One neighbor had a long haired son who was lost during the escape, people assumed he was a girl and it took over 2 weeks to match his severed head with his damaged body. Afaf suffered from extreme shock, “I start to ask God to take revenge of who is the reason for what happened, no humanity, in five years, three aggressions. Where are men’s and women’s rights, Palestinian rights?”

“If there is woman’s rights, how can they leave us in the shelters in this bad situation, it is impossible for a five year old child to live through three aggressions. Israel didn’t fight just one people, they fight humanity. It is our right to struggle for our land, I ask the world to stand with us because Palestine is for us. And the right of return is our right, and we have to achieve it soon. We don’t have a house, and mice walk on our bodies, in our clothes, we have no work, no life. Our children were totally frightened, they stopped playing, they just play Israeli occupation and Arab. What can we say? How do you think if we do not have job or house, or water, from where can we get money for rent, clothes or to eat. I am still living in the [UNRWA] shelter which isn’t suitable for a viable life... We want to leave now, give us our rights. We don’t want food or clothes, we just want our rights.”

Afaf’s sister, Samar Abu Ajwa says that everyone has a different story. She and her husband (who I think is the brother of Afaf’s husband) and their children, lived in a single room for 15 years, saving money and borrowing 15,000 dinars to finally build their own house. “Thanks God we can build a house...I just live in my house for one year, and then the aggression came. Around my house there were no houses, after my house there were farms. Six bombs hit the farms around me.” She is now weeping uncontrollably, describing her enormous level of fear, her sisters hold their heads in their hands. “My brothers ask me to go to live with them but I told them, no, it is my right and it is my right to live in my house. My house is near the border with *Yehud*, I can see Israeli jeeps. I went to live in my brother’s house on July 20th, I left the house, my brother coordinate with the ambulance to come and take us and the neighbors and to leave

with us. My neighbor was in a car with his family and the bomb hit them, the car totally burned with the people inside it.

“I went to my family [parent’s] house and with the first cease fire, I go to Shejaia, I used to go with one taxi but this time I used three taxis. When I arrived at Shejaia, there was no Shejaia. There were no people, no houses, no trees, nothing but blood all around. I just want to see my house, my sister asked me to go back, but I refused. I didn’t know where it is, I start walking over damaged housing looking for my house, my dream house. I just live in it for just one year; can you imagine, fifteen years in one room and when I have my house, it is damaged, it is suffering. My little child asked me about his toys, I don’t know what to tell him. He said that he want to die, he is three years old. He asked me when I die, don’t cry please. What Israel did in this war, they turned a child into a soldier and women became unafraid of anything. Where can I go, now I am living in a nylon place, they are living in a plastic house, [ie a tent]...Do Americans [not] prefer Arab people, because American control the world?”

The third sister, Etaf Farahat is also from Shejaia; she left the house when it was too difficult to stay. There were 30 people in her home, they wanted to leave; it was Ramadan and everyone was fasting. “The houses around were totally empty, but we don’t know where to go, we stick together to the last moment at 8 am July 20, Sunday. We were at home, bombs were exploding all around us, in the streets and houses. The bombs hit our house, a huge part of the [building was] damaged...One room is okay, there were 13 persons in one room like the one we are in, they don’t know how to go, how to drink water, how to eat, how to do anything. They were too much children, (15 children), four families, four sick people, one suffered from diabetes and she lost consciousness. The entrance of my house was totally damaged, my husband doesn’t know what to do. There is a huge number of people in the house, death all around.”

“At 4 am July 21, my husband Zohair Farahat start to stay *allah akbar*, so people can hear him so people can leave the house. At this moment his mother was with them, she is 80 years old and it was hard for her to run and leave the house. Etaf’s sons refused to leave the grandmother alone, so they carried her and started to run in the road while the bombs were falling.” Her hand gestures are becoming more expressive and dramatic and I can hear the fear and rage in her voice. They saw bombs all over, people lying in the street, limbs missing. They walked over bodies and blood. They couldn’t see each other, “can’t see, just hear bombs and shouting of people.” They found the ambulance and Red Crescent cars at the beginning of Shejaia but cannot reach them; the ambulance carried the injured people but the bombs also hit the ambulance so the driver and the injured were dead. They continued to run and shout their names, they couldn’t see anything until they reached a taxi area.

By the time they arrived at the school/shelter they were wearing bed clothes, pajamas, and some women had improvised hijabs and skirts. “We do not have money. We have no food. We didn’t eat for Ramadan. We found thousands in the UNRWA shelters, injured and dead. Some people looking for their children; they were dead. They went to the hospital and stay around the hospital in the garden, about 50 days in the garden, Shifa Hospital. They sleep in the hospital. Her

daughter was in the university, her sons were shocked because of the blood. They stay in the entrance of the hospital and just look for relatives dead or injured.” Her voice has an insistent, steady rhythm recounting the mounting disasters; her sisters look increasingly saddened and weary. “When aggression ends, they count 47 of her families and relatives houses totally damaged with no place to build. We still live in the UNRWA shelters, Tal Al Hawa. We do not have money, house, anything, about 15 relatives in one room in shelter. The food is canned food, I have two sons in university and four in schools, husband not working, I lose everything. I don’t know how to live and now everyday we just eat rice for past three weeks. [I see all the women nodding in agreement.] “We bored with rice, we didn’t take money for rent, and we lost the house. We want to leave shelter but we don’t know where to go, and people who leave the shelter they give them rent for one month. I just want for you to look after the money for rent, how to get child to school. We just want to live, no more wars. We just want to live like countries around the world. Why we are living just like this, different from people around the world?”

Zahra Ereif’s husband Mohammed who is the son of Fatma, the older woman at the table, died in the war. Her child sleeps in her arms as she begins to speak. “I was living in Shejaia, I had very happy life, five children, the oldest in 3rd grade, the little one is four months. I graduated from journalist department [at university]; I would love to watch the news. At the beginning of the aggressions, ...husband also watching news, she felt something different will happen today. What? My husband wanted to see his father in his farm, the brother-in-law was also in the farm. My husband want to buy something for the child, I was still pregnant, I told him that it’s aggression do not go out. He said it is safe, my father just came, bringing figs. He told me that he will come in five minutes.

He went to the farm and found a friend dead.” The tears come flooding and at this point everyone is reaching for tissues. “The bomb hit his father, his father dead and he want to help him but the bomb hit his knee. People come to tell me what happened. They said that my husband has gone, but people tell me that that the grandfather died.” The grandmother is now crying. “My husband was injured, I has full of hope that my husband was just injured,” Tears are streaming down her face. As people became aware of the deaths, they came to tell her. “They took me to the hospital and I went to the fridge to take his body. I was shocked. My children start to ask where my father? Where my grandfather? After July 12, bombs hit around them, my child ask why? Why the aggression happened? What we did? Why they took our father and grandfather? My little child thought father traveled and will come back.”

“On July 20 the aggression become harder and ambulance came to take them. We didn’t take anything with us, we just left our house. People said what are you doing in the house, leave Shejaia.” During a ceasefire, “I went back to the house, half of our house was damaged. My child used to say where is our dad. When we went back to our home, they ask about their toys and about their rooms, if their father will come to take them, when will we see grandfather, *alhamdulillah*,. They were totally frightened by what happened to them. Ever since we tell our child what happened, my little daughter didn’t understand father had died, until now, she think that he is traveling. My son, thinks his father is in paradise with grandfather, he is in heaven and

they are just suffering from their loss. My little daughter four months, when she grown the first word she will speak is where is baba?” Zahra has repaired her house and is living with children. “Who will look after my child? Many questions, no answers...I lost everything in my life. God give me patience”

Shadia Al Sabagh was living in a rental apartment at the beginning of the war; the owner of the house was wanted by the Israeli Defense Forces. At the first day of Ramadan, a rocket landed nearby and her husband asked her to take her child and go to her family. “I was living in Salateen in Beit Lahiya and while they were breaking the Ramadan fast, “Israel bombed a garden around my family house, my brothers took their wives and leave the house. I went to live with my sister’s house. Once I was walking with my child, no one in the street, bombs were all around. I didn’t feel comfortable in this house, [interpreter explains there were interpersonal stresses and conflict within the family including physical violence]. I become nervous and start to hate my child. I asked my husband to take me from this house to a shelter, Al Set Soura Shelter. After two weeks my father-in-law came to the shelter, hit me and I leave the shelter with my child. My husband hit me and broke my arm; he treat me badly. My mother asked me to go back to my husband.” [The social worker interjects a comment here, not sure what.]

Shadia is now in a UNRWA shelter, “the bathrooms are dirty, food came to the school at 11 am and they ate in the afternoon, canned food. The shelter used to buy it but now they bring rice. [It seems that everyone is mostly living on rice and they are so done with rice.] The shelter wants her child to attend a different school than she is used to. “I don’t where to go, I buy poisons to kill myself many times, my child become bad in school, no longer get high marks. My husband takes drugs [tramadol] and beats me always. My furniture burned and the owner of the house gave me no money.”

Fatma Erief lost her son and husband in the war. Her face is lined and weary and she weeps in great waves of pain. She was living in Shejaria, “bombs all around, we were afraid to go to the bathroom. We were living in one room. We were totally frightened, [this is the same house as the earlier interviewees] On July 12 bombs falling, we feel that this will hit us, bombs from sky and from the ground. Many people died around my house. When my husband and my son want to pray in the mosque, I told them not to pray due to bombs. He said, no I want to go. In the morning when he want to go to mosque, he was wearing a white *galabeya*. “I told him he looked like a white flag and planes will see him. I ask are there many in the mosque, he said says yes. He left my life to his God. I was preparing for the dinner [after fasting all day for Ramadan]. A bomb hit my husband in the farm, my son was just looking for his father. I go in the streets, didn’t know what to do. People brought my husband and son, people making ululations. People take me in the ambulance. During the ceasefire, we went to our house, it was partly damaged.”

The three sisters are resting their heads on the table, heavy weariness pervades the room. Fatma talks about being alone, how the people she depends on have passed away, how she didn't take anything from anyone. "Who will take care of all the children? Now they don't have anyone to take care of the family." She has 20 grandchildren, a son with metal in his arm from an accident who is unable to work. She suffers from hypertension. In the winter "we suffer from nylon over the roof, cold in the winter, rain in the house. I ask God to let Arab countries help us." She wants her grandchildren to go to university. "Who will take care of them? God give me life, our lives are totally damaged and meaningless." Three of her neighbors, older women, drank gas and committed suicide. She shares a joke, "Gaza is like heaven, there are no jobs," but adds, "Death is better than this life."

There is quiet and as I absorb these stories, I worry that I have intruded into these incredible women's deepest traumas and I have nothing to offer. In fact, it is my tax dollars and a country that claims to speak in my name that has destroyed their families and their lives. My sense of utter inadequacy clings to my tongue as I look at their tear stained faces, but I manage to offer my deepest sympathies and promise to tell their stories (at this point shout is probably more where my heart is) and bring Gaza home. I brace myself for some angry comments, demands for aid, anything, but suddenly the mood changes and the women are smiling, thanking me for coming, listening, embracing me as one of their own. It is almost more than I can bear. They will be back next week for more speaking bitterness, maybe some individual counseling, job training, and they thank Aisha for standing with them in their time of unbearable need.

Feeling pretty depleted, I return to Marna House and join some of the delegates for a drive to Beit Hanoun, the northern most city tucked into the eastern shoulder of Gaza, just adjacent to the Israeli border, ie., not a good place to be these days. We drive through death defying traffic, a constant game of playing chicken with folks who already feel they have nothing to lose. There is pavement and rocky dirt roads, donkeys trotting along with massive piles of grasses, flowers, and produce, multiple rotaries, mountains of rubbish. We pass Salahadine Street, a route thousands of years old from Morocco to Turkey, industrial areas, a huge building with bags of cement (Gaza gold), sheep trundle across the road, there is a bombed out juice factory, (juice? really?) massive bomb craters and piles of harvested rebar that is painstakingly straightened and reused. Everywhere Palestinians are living their normal lives, going to school, in the markets, walking the streets, sweeping the dust, mundane life goes on despite the post-apocalyptic surroundings. We pass one of the UNRWA schools being used as a shelter, clothes and rugs, hanging from the balconies, the smell of unwashed bodies. There are 29 of 89 UNRWA schools still be used as emergency housing.

We pull up to a massive scramble of crushed concrete jutting out at all angles, house after house crushed into deformed skeletons of a former life, hills of dirt and sand and toxic military waste, garbage, "You're very welcome to Beit Hanoun." We park in front of Banksy's famous cat; a

British graffiti artist who is rumored to have arrived via the tunnels and painted an enormous kitten on a slab of vertical concrete, a wall to somewhere, a bullet hole in the cat's neck. He knew that people would repost a photo of a cute kitten a million more times than a hungry displaced Gazan child. We are soon surrounded by those very children, barefoot, dirty, ragged clothes, beautiful open faces, blank stares, borderline terrible teeth, sullen teenage boys flirting with us uncovered wild Western women. An Arabian horse gallops across the horizon, donkeys graze in open fields, a truck with a familiar jingle, oh my God it's Fur Elise! Ice cream? No this is the water tanker making the rounds. There is no running water here. A horse trots by with a cart piled with fragments of concrete to recycle. Someone asks if I am Israeli. An older man, face dark and creased with some kind of leg deformities sits cross legged on a mattress surrounded by some of his family. He is mostly toothless but has a warm smile and a twinkle in his eye. He has two wives and 42 children and grandchildren. A UN prefab "house" is tucked in the concrete rubble, what kind of bombs create such massive destruction?

But we are actually here to see an amazing group of young men doing a form of acrobatic gravity defying skydiving called Parkour. They mostly wear black sweatshirts with PK GAZA: Gaza Parkour and Free Running. They dream of starting a school to teach their skills, of buying a video camera to record their feats, of entering Parkour contests all over Europe. They understand that jumping off of buildings, flipping backwards, forwards, twisting their supple bodies in various gravity defying acts is actually a positive channeling of their enormous energy and macho aggression. When too much of a crowd interferes with the show, not much entertainment actually happens here, they insist we drive to Shejaria, the devastated city that was described to me by the six women this morning.

I will not attempt to put into words the experience of walking into a nightmare, massive amounts of concrete rubble, floors collapsed onto each other, bomb craters many stories deep, in every direction. Young children clamber over this military jungle gym, living on the edge of serious injury and death. The eleven young men seem unfazed and soon, totally against my better judgement, I am holding on to the powerful hands of various young men, hosting my aching back and tired knees onto a ragged pile of rubble so that we all can have an excellent view of incredibly brave, athletic, crazy Gazans leaping across shattered roofs, tumbling and twisting through the air to precarious landings covered with rock fragments and jutting rebar. Their skill and energy is captivating, their hands are soon oozing blood. They explain that when they jump, they feel like birds, forgetting the war, exercising their powerful male power, connecting with Parkour groups all over the world. Just watch: (photos and youtube thanks to Seema Jilani)

<http://www.theguardian.com/cities/video/2015/mar/10/banksy-parkour-gaza-shadia-mansour-video>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QaFessBfCw4>