

PEACE IS COMING, BUT IT'S UNDER THE RADAR

Person-to-person contact spreads goodwill from Israelis to Arabs

RON FINKEL

The most powerful weapon we have to achieve understanding between people is quiet diplomacy. You might think that's a pipe dream given the news we receive from the Middle East, particularly when it comes to the Palestinians and Israelis.

Their dispute has been the subject of more heated discussion and questionable resolutions at the UN and its agencies than any other. It would be easy to assume — and most do — that no end to the conflict is within reach.

But I disagree. I have witnessed first-hand what can be achieved through quiet diplomacy.

What I see today began more than 100 years ago in pre-Mandate Palestine through the activism of Henrietta Szold. She was an American who believed an effective and lasting healthcare service was the key to building interpersonal relationships.

Her self-appointed jurisdiction was Palestine in the early 1900s. Her example is universal and timeless, yet cutting through the competing interests is more difficult today than it has ever been.

Through Szold's example even the most intractable political and religious conflict can be resolved.

Szold worked with people blighted by poverty and disadvantage and with a barely functioning health system. She lacked the resources to change the first two, but had the will and experience to confront the third. She introduced First World healthcare to the country, which eventually found expression through Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem.

Her philosophy was simple but far-reaching: healthcare must be available to everyone, irrespective of their gender, religion, nationality, politics or financial status. This became the template for all medical services in Israel and resulted in relationships with the Palestinian community in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza.

These relationships, mostly under the radar, have resulted in thousands of Palestinian doctors, nurses and therapists being trained at Israeli hospitals. Many return to their own communities to build the health infrastructure. These relationships endure, mainly through patient consultations and professional development.



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Most people are unaware that the doctors who operate Gaza's main cystic fibrosis clinic in Gaza City were trained by one of the world's leading specialists, Eitan Kerem of Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem. They maintain professional contact with Eitan and his colleagues

but despite the risks associated with crossing the border, Ziv is the only life-sustaining option for these critically ill children.

Even Australia is playing its part in finding a way forward to a future where reconciliation and mutual respect are the norm. Pro-

jects, in order to encourage their return to their communities. The principle of "train local, stay local" is important; too many training in Jordan, Germany and elsewhere have been encouraged to remain.

The second is to provide top-up funding for critically ill Palestinian children from the West Bank and Gaza in Israeli hospitals when funding from the Palestinian Authority has been exhausted.

The third is to raise funds for Road to Recovery, an inspired Israeli NGO that transports mainly Palestinian children from checkpoints on the border of Gaza and the West Bank to hospitals in Israel. This free service is operated by more than 1000 Israeli volunteers and will soon build a Palestinian cohort of volunteers after funding was raised earlier this year to employ a full-time West Bank-based co-ordinator. For many Palestinian families, the cost of taxis was beyond their capacity, especially for patients whose chronic illness required ongoing medical support.

The fourth is to fund the treat-

ment of children in Israel from centres of conflict in the region, such as the Syrian children.

Peace requires political will — that of the leaders and that of the people. If the day comes when leaders on both sides can agree on the terms of a peace agreement they will need to secure the support of their respective peoples. Project Rozana is contributing significantly to building that community on both sides: those who have come to know and understand the other and recognise their shared humanity. Mutual interests outweigh their differences.

Engaging in meaningful personal contact on a broad scale will help deliver the grassroots support needed to embrace any deal. The dividend of all this goodwill might be an end to the apparently insoluble complexities that stand between these peoples and peace.

Ron Finkel is president of Hadassah Australia and chairman of Project Rozana International (projectrozana.org).

Healthcare must be available to everyone, irrespective of their gender, religion, nationality, politics or financial status.

via Skype and, less frequently, through visits to Israel.

Even more surprising is the fact that half of in-patient beds at Israel's largest children's hospital at the sprawling Sheba Medical Centre near Tel Aviv are occupied by children from Gaza and the West Bank. In the northern Israeli town of Safed, the Ziv Medical Centre treats mainly Syrian children.

Local hospitals and clinics in southwest Syria have been destroyed in the ongoing civil war,

ject Rozana was established by Hadassah Australia in early 2013. It is an initiative that is bringing Australians of many backgrounds together in a common endeavour to make a difference in a region where the gaps between people seem unbridgeable. It has since expanded to the US, Canada, Israel and the Palestinian territories. Its first core principle is to financially support the training of Palestinian doctors, nurses and therapists at Hadassah and other Israeli hospi-