

Maha Mehanna: Keynote Speech at the J Street 5th National Conference: A Clear Choice for a Better Future

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Good evening everyone.

Allow let me first to thank J Street for inviting me to address this important conference tonight. I am deeply honored to be here today with my friend Roni, from Netiv Ha'asara on the other side of the wall from my house in Gaza. I must be honest; I'm in awe at the size of this hall and the number of people here. Coming from the most densely populated place on earth, you can understand why.

I am neither a politician nor a VIP. I am just an ordinary woman, a dedicated peace activist and a refugee - living in the Gaza Strip, 360 square kilometers with more than 1.8 million people. It's one of the worst places to live. If you are sitting here today, you already know that Gaza is many times referred to as the world's largest open-air prison – and for good reason.

Reviewing those reasons would not be a good use of our time. If you are sitting here in this hall, you already know about them in greater or lesser detail. Israel's own historians have documented them very thoroughly.

My family, along with hundreds of thousands living in the Gaza Strip today, was forced to flee its home in what is now southern Israel, during the war of 1948. We are refugees in Gaza but it is not our home. My father's home was in a village called al-Masmiyya Al-Kabira, near today's Ashdod. My mother's home was not far from there, in Sawafir Shamiyya.

I know that those places no longer exist. There is no turning back the hands of the clock; history cannot be rewound. I honestly don't know what justice could actually look like today, for my people who fled those places in 1948 and for their families. But I know that justice must begin with a courageous acknowledgment of what took place, and with steps toward reparation and – where possible – return. We cannot build a shared future on more lies. We cannot build a shared future on more denial. Nothing of value can ever be built on lies and denial.

I would like to tell you about my friendship with Roni, my neighbor across the wall. But let me first tell you about my family's experience during the most recent Israeli military offensive on the Gaza Strip, last summer 2014, which very nearly destroyed my house... but not quite.

I still remember, very vividly, how the Israeli attacks on Gaza were escalating indiscriminately last summer. The Israeli navy was shelling from the sea. The warplanes were launching bombs and missiles from the sky. The tanks were shelling from the ground ... Nowhere was safe and there was nowhere to hide. There are no warning sirens or bomb shelters in Gaza.

Our house has three stories. I live with my parents on the ground floor, and my married brothers live with their families in apartments upstairs. With each bombardment, our house shook. It felt like an earthquake. Windows blew out and shattered glass fell everywhere. We were terrified. In total, we have 15 young children

in the family. All of us, including my brothers and their families, were staying in my parents' apartment on the ground floor, in the dark, sheltering there together. If we were going to die, we preferred to die that way – together. My younger nephews and nieces were very scared all of the time. They slept poorly. They refused to go to the toilet on their own, so we took turns accompanying them. The bombings continued, day and night, and we simply could not stop feeling scared. We hardly got any sleep.

Every day in Gaza was more painful and heart-breaking than the day before. Everyone was terrorized and traumatized from the never-ending bombardments. It was catastrophic beyond words, a “planned humanitarian disaster”, and a real crime against humanity. There is no need to compare it with other disasters and other crimes. It was a catastrophe. We had a hard time making sense of the situation as it developed. We had no way to know what the future might bring. We held on as best we could.

Truly, what I witnessed and experienced during the most recent military assault on Gaza is indescribable! But I am proud to tell you that my young nephews, when the bombardments finally stopped, volunteered to go out to the worst-hit neighborhoods like Al-Sheja'eyah to help dig survivors out of the rubble, to help friends trying to find their belongings, to help any way they could. Mutual support was, and remains, strong among Gazans. I am proud of that.

Somehow, despite this extremely difficult situation, we are still holding on, waiting for the siege on Gaza to end and hoping that the 48 years of occupation will also let go of our lives once and for all.

Naturally, I've had moments of despair while living the tragedy of Gaza. One thing that helps me stay sane is my friendship with an Israeli neighbor on the other side of the wall. My friend Roni and I have much in common. We share a desperate thirst for peace, freedom, justice and equality for all. Our friendship is unusual because Palestinians in Gaza and Israelis living nearby are more isolated from each other now than ever before.

When Gaza was under bombardment day and night, Roni and I relied on each other to remain calm. We developed a routine of calling and texting throughout the day and late into the night, whenever the electricity permitted and there was mobile service. We were checking to be sure the other was safe. It was a kind of lifeline for us both.

How sad that recent years have brought little but more separation and more war for people living where we do. As Roni is now forbidden from visiting Gaza, I can only come to Israel with a special waiver to get medical treatment for my nephews, who suffer from a rare immune disorder.

It was on one such trip a few years ago that I first met Roni, who was escorting Palestinians as part of her volunteer work with Other Voice. Other Voice is a grassroots volunteer initiative for a civil solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Other Voice promotes Israeli-Palestinian dialogue: literally, “another voice.”

Roni and I both live with the constant threat of death from above, but we don't talk about who is to blame for the violence. We agree there is no military solution to the conflict, and that real peace resides not in the hands of governments, but in the hands of the people. Our hands.

We do talk, however, about how the violence might end — through dialogue, understanding and leaders who make rational decisions.

Roni and I both believe that Palestinian and Israeli children and residents on both sides of the border deserve peace and normal lives. We call on the Israeli and Palestinian leadership to show courage and determination to seek an agreement for a two-state solution that can open up a brighter future for Palestinian and Israeli children. Stop fighting over who will control the future. Let the future breathe. Let the future happen.

Let us hope that our leaders will listen to our call ... and let us pray that sanity, peace and justice prevail in Palestine and Israel and that the children of both sides will not be traumatized any longer.

Finally, I would like to thank two other Israeli friends who are here with us today: Oded Adomi Leshem who introduced me to his friend Eric Yellin, the chairman of Other Voice, who in turn introduced me to Roni. Thanks Oded and Eric for changing my life.

I'll end my words with a quote from David K. Shipler as quoted in the **The New York Times Magazine** back in 1986, that conveys my message clearly - and it is just as true now as it was thirty years ago:

"Whatever happens now in war or diplomacy, whatever territory is won or lost, whatever accommodations or compromises are finally made, Arabs and Jews will remain locked together in this weary land, enmeshed in each other's fears. They will not escape from one another. They will not find peace in treaties, or in victories. They will find it, if at all, by looking into each other's eyes."

Thank you all very much and I wish you a successful conference.