

Combatants for Peace by Alia Khalil, Westside High School

“The single clenched fist lifted and ready,
or the open hand held out and waiting.

Choose:

For we meet by one or the other.” - Carl Sandburg.

This is a quote to live by. It can define who someone is, and what he stands for. Often times, we do not give others a chance. Based on anger, past experience, and upbringing, we often prejudge one another. It is easy to stereotype strangers before getting to know them. However, we sometimes must choose between what is right and what is easy. Choosing to take Sandburg’s second option allows us to pave a path of peace, even though that path may be a difficult one. Two such men made a choice in their lives to meet others with an open hand. Their names are Bassam Aramin and Yonaton Shapira.

Bassam Aramin was born and raised in Palestine. Growing up, he felt much resentment towards his perceived occupiers, the Israelis. By the time he was a teenager, Aramin was actively fighting the Israeli occupation as a member of an armed faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization called Fatah. At age seventeen, he was arrested and spent seven years in an Israeli prison.

While in prison, Aramin was taught the horrors of the Holocaust for the first time by his prison guards. While watching footage of a concentration camp he found himself in tears. From that moment on, he became a changed man. “I realized that there is suffering on both sides, everyone suffers, not just me,” he said. He decided that his days as a fighter were over.

Growing up, Yonaton Shapira knew he wanted to be an Israeli soldier. He eventually became a prestigious pilot in the Israeli Air Force. Shapira was proud to serve his country and his people.

One day, after life-flighting Israeli children injured by a Palestinian attack, he felt extreme anger towards the Palestinians. He wondered how anyone could be so cruel. A few days later, a fellow was ordered to drop a one-ton bomb on Gaza. Because of the

massive size of the bomb, over a dozen Palestinians, mostly children, were killed needlessly. Shapira recalled his emotions when the Israeli children were harmed. He felt extreme empathy for the Palestinian children, the same empathy he had felt towards the Israeli children. He realized that both the Israeli and Palestinian children died in vain and that too many civilians were being killed for no reason. Shapira could stand it no longer.

Shapira made a decision in his life- he would no longer be an Israeli pilot. He left the air force in protest to the unnecessary bombings of Palestinian civilians. Both Aramin and Shapira had left their old lives behind. They had been transformed from combatants to peace activists.

Together, Aramin and Shapira founded the Combatants for Peace with the goal of creating peaceful cooperation between Palestinians and Israelis. Aramin and Shapira stress the importance of non-violence and tolerance in pursuit of a harmonious state. Hundreds of citizens, once fighting against each other, are now fighting together, for something much greater.

After the Combatants for Peace was founded, Aramin suffered a great loss. His 10-year-old daughter, Abir, was killed after being shot in the head by an Israeli rubber bullet. Aramin was tested. He began to question his efforts in the Combatants for Peace. However, in the end, his daughter's death became testament to his cause. He was determined to continue what he started. "I want my daughter to be the last victim. There are partners on the other side who believe what I believe."

To me, these men are the definition of moral courage. Moral courage is having the bravery to stand up for what is right, and to make sacrifices for the greater good. Aramin and Shapira have made many sacrifices in hopes of creating a peaceful state. They have lost friendships for cooperating with their "enemies." Shapira lost the prestige he once enjoyed as a pilot, and Aramin lost his daughter. Both men are in constant danger from their own people for reaching out to each other and suggesting that no group is superior in the world. Both have lost prestige in their communities. At the same time, they have gained the respect of many.

I have been truly inspired by these men's stories. As an Arab-American, I am immersed in talk of the Middle East. Having visited the Middle East, it is amazing how much

hatred is present on both sides. While visiting Lebanon, I have seen the lasting effects of war. I wonder what Lebanon could have been, or what our world could be, if everyone had the moral courage of Aramin and Shapira.

Character is defined by actions. It is easy to speak about making changes, creating unity, and achieving world peace. But few people put these words into action. Perhaps too much moral courage is required of them to even hold out an open hand to a stranger. But two men did possess moral courage, and that has made all the difference.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Derfner, Larry. "Brothers in Arms?." The Jerusalem Post 17 August 2007
Myre, Greg. "Father of Dead West Bank Girl Seeks Peace with Israelis." New York Times, 23 January 2007
Shapira, Itamar. "Personal Stories." Combatants for Peace. Combatants for Peace. 28 Jan 2008<<http://combatantsforpeace.org/story.asp?lng=eng>>.