

The Palestinian teaching young Jews in Britain

Galilee-born Sana Knaneh is bringing a fresh perspective on the Middle East



Sana Knaneh

As a Palestinian citizen of Israel, Sana Knaneh has brought a new voice to discussion about the country on the communal circuit. Six months ago, she started work as development director for the Friends of the Bereaved Families Forum (FBFF), a UK charity supporting a network of more than 600 Palestinian and Israeli families who have lost children in the conflict but who call for reconciliation rather than revenge.

More recently, she acquired a second hat, as Arab-Jewish relations Israel educator for the UJIA, responsible for teaching Jewish youth about Israel's minorities. "I don't think they've ever had a Palestinian on board," she said.

While FBFF has been active here for a while and had speakers in churches — Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby included an item from one in his Christmas anthology this year — Ms Knaneh is keen to extend its reach.

"I'd like to have people who don't normally meet get to meet," she explained. "I'd like the British public listen to first-hand experience from the Palestinian side and the Israeli side. Because many people here think for us and about us. I'd like us to speak for us."

When Palestinian Bassam Aramin and Israeli Robi Damelin returned to the UK last week on a new FBFF speaking tour, their schedule included P21, a Palestinian gallery in London which promotes art from the Arab world, and Haringey Mosque.

Now 37, she grew up in Tamra, a small town in the Western Galilee. "My parents raised me to be ambitious. My mother always said you should not be on the margins watching, you should be in

the centre leading.” Her father imbued her with a passionate interest in Middle Eastern politics.

When she was 16, she completed her final two years of high school, taking the International Baccalaureate at the United World College, an international school in Pune, India. “It offered me everything I wanted — community service, creative activities, discussions about global affairs and human rights, living with people from different cultures. As a result of my UWC experience, not only do I love diversity, but I couldn’t live in a place that is homogeneous.”

After returning to Israel, she was determined to follow in the footsteps of her sister, who had studied at the Hebrew University in the Jerusalem in the hopeful aftermath of the 1993 Oslo peace accords. But not long after Ms Knaneh had arrived on campus, the Second Intifada broke out.

At the Hebrew University, she became cultural events co-ordinator for the students’ union. “It wasn’t always easy. Sometimes racist things were said. But there were also like-minded people who supported equality and justice.”

And she was no shrinking violet when it came to discussions of current affairs. “I could still bring my voice. I am a proud Palestinian who is not afraid to say what I think and believe.”

When she started working as a pharmacist, people would sometimes take her as Jewish. “I remember a woman saying to me during the Gaza War of 2012, ‘I’ve got a prescription from an Arab doctor but I don’t trust him, what do you suggest?’ I said, ‘Well, now you’ve got an Arab pharmacist, how can I help you?’”

For all Jerusalem’s charm, she felt sometimes “there was no oxygen to breathe” in the city. “It was a tough place to be. I could see how much tension there was during politically charged periods.”

She moved to Tel Aviv, working for Merck, Sharp and Dohme, a multinational pharmaceutical firm, at the same time keeping up her other pursuits. She completed an MA in international relations at the Hebrew University, grateful for the support of two “amazing” professors, Elie Podeh and Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov.

She also became involved with an independent think-tank, which looked to advance Israeli-Arab peace, the Mitvim Institute, and produced for it a paper on how Israel’s Palestinians could influence its foreign relations. “I felt the Palestinian citizens of Israel are not heard enough on the international stage and people don’t know who we are,” she said.

By now her extra-curricular interests had persuaded to change career. In 2016, she arrived to do an executive masters degree in strategy and diplomacy at the LSE. She was no stranger to London, having visited several times, including once with Seeds of Peace, an organisation bringing together young people from the Middle East.

Keen to make contact with British Jews, she felt that as a minority, they should have empathy with the situation of Palestinians living in Israel. “I connected with organisations like the New Israel Fund and Tafi (The Abraham Fund Initiatives). I think there are like-minded people who are great allies and we should get together to shape the future differently,” she said. “I do think diaspora Jews are important.”

Since she has been here, she has even taught “a Jewish kid of Russian origin living here Hebrew from zero and prepared him for his barmitzvah. At high school, I used to love high language, the language of the Tanach and Arabic poetry.”

While it may be up to governments to strike peace deals, grassroots projects can help lay the foundations for reconciliation. “Last month I was in South Africa, and a Jewish friend to whom I voiced my frustration that with all the grassroots initiative the conflict is not resolved, said, ‘We in South Africa didn’t believe how easily and fast apartheid could fall, and it happened’.

“We also don’t know when the occupation would end and we have an agreement, so we should always be prepared and continue to do this work,” she said.

While by nature she is “a hopeful person,” in her talks to audiences she does not gloss over that “my people in the West Bank and Gaza are suffering”.

In a world of sharper political division and growing populism, she feels, the need to create a “middle space” for people to meet and talk has become ever more urgent.

“I love everything I am doing,” she said. “It gives me a platform to do the things I believe in and want to do.”

RELATED STORIES

- [Community News](#)

Peace pair bring their message to the UK



John Fisher

Friday, November 17, 2017

[Peace pair bring their message to the UK](#)

- [UK News](#)

Bereaved Israeli and Palestinian parents united in grief



Ben Weich

Thursday, May 11, 2017

[Bereaved Israeli and Palestinian parents united in grief](#)

- [Community extra](#)

Masorti gets conversation started on Israel’s 70th



JC Reporter