

The Guardian

Only empathy can break the cycle of violence in Israel-Palestine

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I've spent my career studying empathy. It's a vital first step in conflicts where both sides have dehumanised each other

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Empathy is all about imagining other minds, appreciating that different people have different perspectives, and responding to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion. After a career studying autism and the nature of empathy, I see empathy as one of our most valuable natural resources. It has particular promise as an approach to conflict resolution, one that has advantages over viewing a problem through a chiefly military, economic or legal lens.

We can see this if we look at the Israel-Palestine conflict, where both communities have different views of the same historic period, both claim the same piece of land and both have valid emotional reactions to the conflict that must be acknowledged. I am not an expert in that dispute nor so naive to believe that there is a single, simple solution to it. But I do believe empathy can help.

So what are the two different perspectives? If you ask Jewish Israelis why their families came to Palestine before 1948, they'll likely refer to two major waves of antisemitism. The first included the horrific pogroms of eastern Europe in the 1880s and 90s. In the second wave in the 1930s and 40s, two out of every three European Jews were killed by the Nazis. Jonathan Freedland's reflection on the life of Amos Oz, Israel's greatest novelist, who died last month, mentions Oz's metaphor: the Jews were drowning, looking for a piece of wood they could cling on to. Palestine, which for two millennia they had thought of as their ancient homeland, was that piece of wood.

But what if you ask Palestinians for their perspective? They would probably refer to the fact that in 1897, there were more than half a million Arabs, Bedouins and Druze living in Palestine. They would say that the 30,000 Jews who arrived were really guests in their land. They might remind you that by 1935, the Jewish population comprised a quarter of the population of Palestine, and each year the number of Jews in Palestine rose by more than 10%. Arabs in Palestine felt, and were, displaced.

When Israel declared its independence on 14 May 1948 - following a UN vote to create two states, Jewish and Arab, six months earlier - there was a reason why, the very next day, five Arab armies invaded. Although this is the war that Israel celebrates as the war of independence, Palestinians have a different name for it: the *Nakba*, or the catastrophe. They never agreed to the creation of Israel.

They would point to acts of ethnic cleansing by the Israeli Jews against the Arabs during that war, as documented in Ari Shavit's book *My Promised Land* and elsewhere. Their view will have been further shaped by Israel's illegal occupation and settlement of Palestinian lands since 1967. What must it feel like to ordinary Palestinians to see these illegal settlements? Finally, they would likely raise the violation of their human rights, which is now well-documented in accounts of the suffering of ordinary Palestinians living under occupation.

The empathic approach to conflict resolution not only recognises these two different perspectives but also acknowledges that, during a conflict, both parties can lose their empathy for the person or community they feel attacked by. And when you lose empathy, you can act towards others with at best lack of interest or self-interest, and at worst cruelty. Under conditions of conflict, each side dehumanises the other.

Empathy-based approaches "treat" this psychological state by rehumanising the other. Although empathy should be a two-way process to lead to a lasting peace, in my opinion Israelis should take the initiative, because they are the stronger party. As one Palestinian friend said to me: "It's hard to empathise with someone when you are looking up the barrel of their gun."

Oz was an Israeli who never gave up on the search for peace with his Palestinian neighbours. Because he was a novelist he had a talent for imagining other minds, understanding the back story that drives their motivations and feelings. He used this talent when looking at the conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis.

He also spoke about fanaticism, and argued that the antidote to it is compromise, curiosity and humour. Compromise is obvious. Curiosity encourages us to try to understand the other person's different viewpoint, not simply to dismiss it as wrong. And humour is a wonderful response to a deadlock that ensues when each believes their own view is the only right one.

Like many novelists, Oz realised that the same event can be seen through two different windows, giving rise to two different descriptions - and both are correct, relative to their own

vantage point. He recognised that many Palestinians had been killed, injured or displaced during the conflict. But he also knew that many Israeli families had lost members to acts of violence during this long conflict. He searched for alternatives to the violent actions of both communities, ones that might guarantee the security of Palestinians and Israelis, and remained optimistic that the average Israeli might open their heart and mind to an empathy-based approach.

I share his optimism, based on the increasing number of examples of grassroots projects trying to restore empathy between Israelis and Palestinians. One such project is the Parents Circle - Families Forum. I met two women, Siham and Robbie, when they came to Cambridge, where I live. Siham is a Palestinian, and her brother was killed by an Israeli bullet. Robbie is an Israeli, and her son was killed by a Palestinian bullet.

Both women could have reacted to their grief with the very human emotions of anger and a desire for revenge. Instead they took the brave and unexpected step of forming a friendship across the political divide, with the support of the project. Robbie phoned Siham, a stranger, and said: “You lost your brother. I lost my son. We are both victims. We both feel the same awful pain of loss. I just wanted to say how sorry I am that you are suffering. Let’s meet.” The two women cried together, talked, listened, learned to trust one another, and are showing how empathy can break the cycle of violence.

Although this is just one drop in a desert, it’s an example of what might allow the fragile seeds of peace to germinate. Empathy is a necessary step in rebuilding trust so that other difficult steps can follow: most importantly, the discussion about mutual security and self-determination for both Israelis and Palestinians.

Oz was one of a series of high-profile Israelis who fought in wars to defend their country. Through a lifetime of experience, they realised that military approaches led to more violence, and they gravitated towards empathy-based approaches. Amos Oz was widely tipped to be a candidate for the Nobel prize in literature, but he could equally have been a candidate for the Nobel peace prize.

. Simon Baron-Cohen is director of the Autism Research Centre, Cambridge University, and author of Zero Degrees of Empathy

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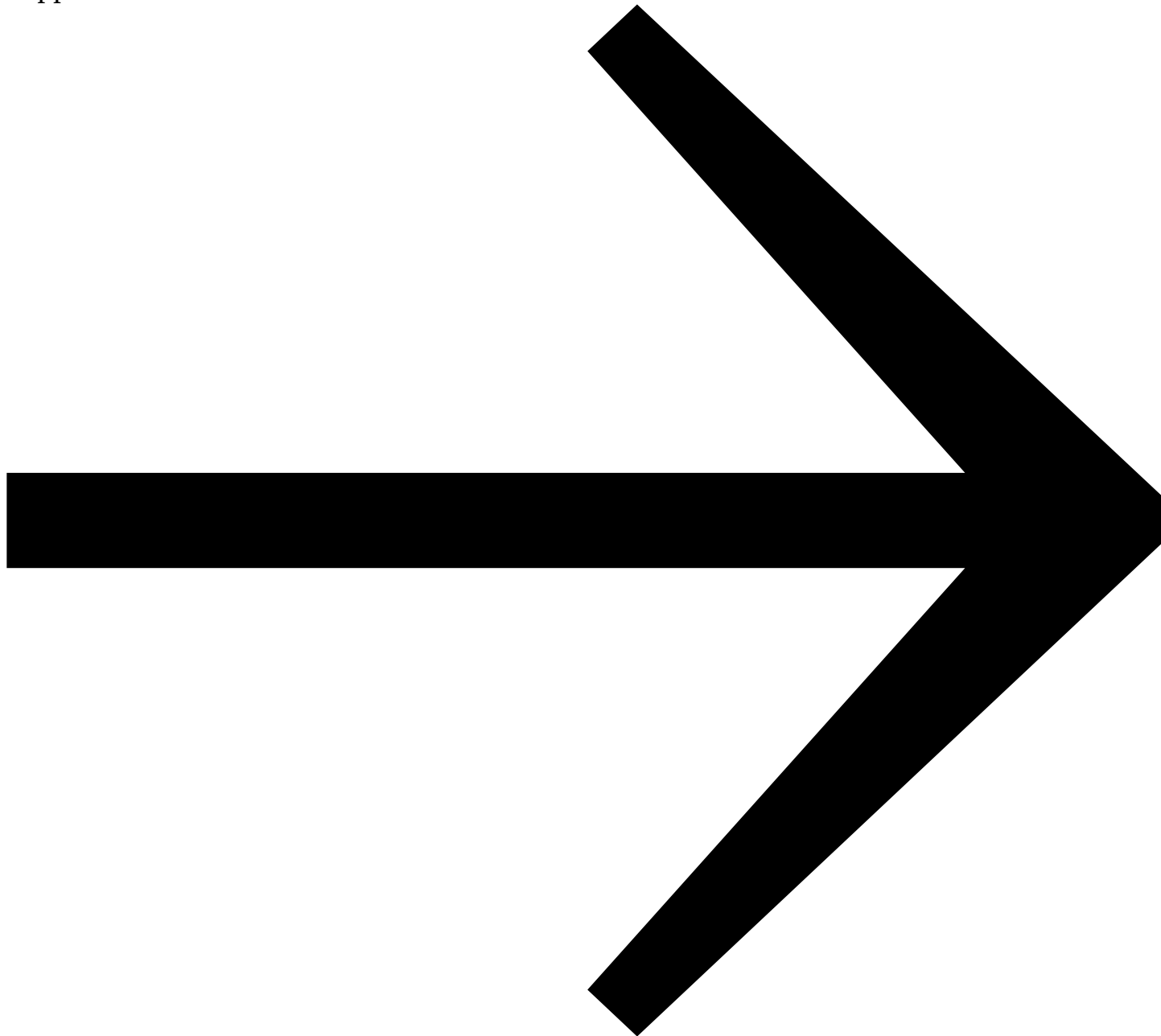
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