Leaving Patriarchy

Carol: The road went down. On either side, the sculpted sands of the desert, like a scene from Lawrence of Arabia. Except, this time, it was women crossing into what was in many ways, and yet also not, unfamiliar territory. Not the territory of our families, our cultures, our religions, our social classes or skin colors, our alignments with fathers. Rather we had come together to reconcile with one another as the daughters—the children actually, because men had joined us—to reconcile as the children of Sarah and Hagar, the Biblical foremothers in the Abrahamic traditions.

Israelis and Palestinians, Arabs and Jews, Jews and Muslims, young and old women, religious and secular women, women from moderate settlements in the West Bank, women from the hip urban enclaves of Tel Aviv. It was the fall of 2017. We were crossing the desert, making our way to the tent of reconciliation. We were women leaving patriarchy, along with the men who had come with us on this Journey to Peace.

The day was hot. I had been told to prepare for the scorching desert and was wearing white, the color worn by members of Women Wage Peace—a movement that began in 2014, in response to the war in Gaza. This cannot go on, a group of women said, gathering in Tel Aviv; this conflict must stop. We need a new language. An agreement must be negotiated, and following UN Security Council resolution 1325, women must be involved at each step of the process.¹

Donna Kirshbaum, a cellist, a rabbi, and one of the women who organized the march, had brought me the turquoise scarf worn by the women in the movement, along with a turquoise baseball cap. I watched her drape her scarf over her cap to form a make-shift shelter as we headed out of the welcoming tent and into the desert.

¹ UNSC Res 1325 (October 31, 2000) UN Doc S/RES/1325.
Fear no more the heat of the sun— the line from Cymbeline that runs through Mrs Dalloway. It was indeed hot, but the fear instilled in me by American friends who had cautioned me to be careful, to not take risks, and also by one of my Israeli companions who was anxious on the drive down from Jerusalem, had dissipated. Whatever brakes had kept us from acting in concert with one another as women had been released, and with that release came a feeling of exuberance.

We were in Area C, a part of Israel where Palestinians can come without a permit. We were at the lowest point on earth, the Dead Sea off to one side and ahead in the distance, the hills of Jordan. Thousands of women—the estimates varied: three to five thousand Palestinians, five to seven thousand Israelis. Either way it was impressive and made a statement. Women were joining as women across all the lines of division to wage peace, to press their political leaders, Abbas and Netanyahu, to negotiate an agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, to make ending the conflict their highest priority.

In addition to the heat, I felt the presence of the women around me. Israelis mostly in white, some with their heads covered, and Palestinians, most with head scarves, some wearing abayas, all looking joyous. Because we had come together, as the Beatles would have it, with a common intention; however disparate our lives, however different our backgrounds and our commitments, we had in common the determination that the time had come for women to wage peace.

It was the decision to take things into their own hands that mobilized the women of Israel and Palestine to come together as women across vast divides. “Why women and why now?” Donna Kirshbaum had asked in the piece she wrote in 2014, shortly after the
Gaza war. Because there was “an urgent need for different language.” A need to ask a different question: not what is just but how to respond.\textsuperscript{2}

Because it was no longer possible for women to sit by and watch efforts at negotiation fail without attempting to do something as women to stop the conflict and bring an end to the destruction. Because it was impossible not to take action as women to stop the sacrifice of children. Because as women we had for the most part been relegated to the sidelines; because as women, given our different experiences and situation, we might bring a different voice into the conversation.

There was, from the beginning, a commitment that there be a diversity of women, and looking around, that’s what I saw. We were women waging peace and this journey had led us to a place of reconciliation, a tent in the desert large enough to accommodate the thousands of women who had come to reconcile with one another in the conviction that however painful the past, it was possible to do things differently. We had come together as women to protect the future, to protect the lives of our collective children.

We marched the few kilometers from the welcoming tent to the tent of reconciliation, the road leading further down. I had followed Donna in using the cap as a frame for the scarf, but still the heat was scorching. Sweat ran down my face. I noticed a woman wearing high heels under her abaya and applauded her daring. And then, nestled in the sand below and off to one side, its top rising over the dunes, the tent of reconciliation appeared. Two tents actually, large enough when joined to accommodate

the thousands of women, Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs, who had committed themselves to end the conflict.

A tall order, my American friends had said.

It was early October, a Sunday—the first day of the week in Israel. The Journey to Peace had been making its way through Israel starting in the west near the Gaza border, moving from the south to the north and then to the east, to the Judean desert. That night, Sunday night, the journey would end with a rally in Jerusalem. As it turned out, 30,000 people gathered in the park not far from the prime minister’s residence—the equivalent to 1.14 million in the US in terms of percentage of the population. There was a stage and a program of speakers and singers. Yael Deckelbaum and her band played the “Prayer of the Mothers,” the song she had composed for the 2016 March of Hope, also organized by Women Wage Peace. Everything was said both in Arabic and in Hebrew, sometimes also in English. Among the speakers, Liora Hadar, a religious woman from a settlement in Samaria, the northern West Bank, said: “I believe change can come if thousands of women decide together they simply won’t live under the conflict anymore.” Shachiv Shnaan, a Druze former member of the Knesset who had lost his son Kamil, a policeman, in a terrorist attack, said: “We’ve suffered much. Israeli and Palestinian families have lost their loved ones and we’re left with wounds that cannot heal. I’m here to say: We choose life. We’re allowed to say it loud: we are lovers of peace.” And Huda Abu Arqoub, Regional Director of the Alliance for Middle East Peace, said: “As a Hebron resident and someone in contact with the people of Gaza, I’m here to tell you Gaza residents also believe in an end to the hostilities and are crying out for
peace … Wars don’t have any winners. We’re neither Palestinian nor Israeli—but mothers who’ll do everything for a better future for our children.”

We are women … we are families who have lost their loved ones … we choose life … we are lovers of peace … we are mothers who’ll do everything for a better future for our children.

A tall order, yes. It wasn’t that I didn’t agree. But as my friends would explain how hopeless the situation was and how naive it was to think that women could accomplish this and in this way (refusing to advocate for a specific solution to the conflict, beyond the determination that an agreement to end it must be reached and that a diversity of women must be involved at every stage of the process), all I could say was: Well, everything else has failed so why not try this. To which they actually agreed. Why not?

There was no reason.

In the tent in the desert, pipes strung along the canvas ceiling dripped a cooling mist. There was water and food and music. I was the only American among the four women who had been asked to speak; the others were a Palestinian peace activist, an Israeli Jewish novelist, and an Israeli Arab educator. We spoke different languages but our voices blended into a tapestry of reconciliation. The women sitting in front of the low platform on which the four of us were seated responded to all that was spoken, including the pain suffered by Sarah and by Hagar: the pain they had caused one another, Sarah by being the one who was chosen, Hagar by being the one who could bear children. Why is it always a zero-sum game?, I found myself wondering, thinking how often in the Bible there is one who is chosen and one who is not, thinking of my friend Tova Hartman who just a few nights before had been speaking about Esau, whose
birthright had been stolen by his brother Jacob, his mother’s favorite, and Esau’s question to Isaac, his father: “Do you have only one blessing?”

For all too long too many of us had succumbed to the myth that there is only one blessing—never enough to go around. If we were now to reconcile as the daughters of Sarah and Hagar, our Jewish and Muslim foremothers, we had to acknowledge not only the pain they had suffered but also the pain they had caused. Because although women have for the most part not waged war, we were not simply bystanders. We were the mothers, and however indirect our relation to power, we did have a hand in what happened. Or in any case, we did not stand in the way or lie down in the street to stop it.

“I hope you don’t write this,” a woman said after I spoke. She was Israeli, Jewish, which perhaps made her feel free to say what she had come up to say. Because I too am Jewish, and, as she told me, she was a great fan of my work and assigned my books in her classes. “I hope you won’t write what you said about Sarah,” she repeated, concerned that then people would blame her.

What I had said was that Sarah had started something which then snowballed: the willingness to sacrifice children for some higher purpose or cause. It was Sarah who urged Abraham, her husband, to send Hagar and Ishmael into the desert where presumably they would die, since until God miraculously appeared and produced a well in the sand, there was no water. My friend Tova, in the same conversation in which we had spoken of Esau, said that in the Bible Sarah disappears once the *akedah*, the binding—or sacrifice—of Isaac, begins. Once Abraham sets out to sacrifice Isaac, Sarah disappears from the story—we hear nothing of her until she is dead, when Abraham buries her in Hebron. But in the Midrashim, the Biblical commentaries, when Sarah learns that her husband is preparing to sacrifice their son, she screams.
In the dvar torah, the reflection on the weekly Torah portion that Tova gave in her shul on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, she said that in that moment Sarah dies because there is no more oxygen, no air. Because that is the moment when Sarah realizes that what she had done in her willingness to sacrifice Ishmael, Hagar’s son, so that her son Isaac would be the favored son, the chosen son, had in fact snowballed. The sacrifice of children was continuing, and now it was her son who would be sacrificed, also in the service of a putatively higher end, to prove Abraham’s devotion to God—although once again, in the Bible story, God intervenes to stop the sacrifice of children.

In waging peace and opposing war, women were coming together as women to say Enough! This has to stop. We will no longer collude in the sacrifice of children in the name of whatever higher purpose or cause.

As women waging peace, we had come together as women to help men by opposing war.

Long after the march, I continue to open my computer or search on my phone for the photograph of the unbroken line of women making our way through the desert toward the tent of reconciliation. It is a photograph of women leaving patriarchy.³

Why women and why now? Donna Kirshbaum took up these questions in 2014, the year Women Wage Peace began. By 2017, it was the largest grassroots peace movement in Israel. Under the tent on the shores of the Dead Sea, Huda Abu Arqoub, the Palestinian from Hebron, said it was time—time “for women to make their mark because women matter, because women are inclusive, because women gave so much trust to the

leaders here and the leaders failed us.” Patriarchy had failed women. But within patriarchy, women also have an advantage. Because typically girls are initiated later than boys, we are more likely to recognize patriarchy for what it is: a voice or a framework, a way of seeing and speaking about things rather than how things are.

This is what Donna referred to in addressing the questions why women and why now: Because initiation into patriarchy with its gender codes and hierarchy requires “losing one’s authentic [read human] voice and dissociating from what we know deep down to be true about life—that it is interdependent and always has an emotional component.” And because “girls tend to resist this initiation longer than boys, often by ten years or so.” I am quoting Donna, who is citing my research.

“A Call to Peace” was hand-delivered to members of the Knesset on the opening day of the parliament’s 2017 winter session. Members of Women Wage Peace had formed themselves into a kind of women’s knesset to bring a different and more hope-filled voice into the typically despair-filled discussions of the conflict, buoyed by the conviction that there is a different way. Along the route of the Journey to Peace, the marchers had been joined by local politicians and nationally elected officials. Mayors had spoken at the rallies held in their cities, including the mayors of right-wing cities such as Dimona and Tiberias as well as the mayor of Tel Aviv. Now every Monday, diverse women from Women Wage Peace would join the politicians by coming to the Knesset and asserting the priority of negotiating an agreement to end the conflict.

Why women? Because as women, there are things that we know that can be helpful. As girls we have a longer period of grace before we are initiated into the gender

\[\text{\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{5} Kirshbaum, “Why Women and Why Now?”}\]
codes of womanhood and thus, as Kirshbaum—an American now living in the Middle East—put it, we “generally have more time to establish both a richer vocabulary and a better developed foundation for an authentic voice before it is lost to the demands of patriarchy.” Because “We are women who believe that our voices deserve to be heard and that a richly democratic culture could and should flourish here”; because, as women, we “learn to listen for the conversation under the conversation,” that is, we “learn to identify a speaker’s authentic voice often buried under the highly-scripted one learned in a patriarchal culture that expects both men and women to lose ‘their basic capacity to relate’.”6 Because it is usually not until a later age that we begin to dissociate from what we know deep down to be true about life. Because as women we have not been taught as men have been taught that violence is the royal road to honor, survival, and power. Because as women we know this is not true.

Naomi: Because as women we are so trained to listen, we are more likely to hear the human voice as different from the patriarchal voice—but we’re not supposed to know this.

Reading Carol’s description of the Journey to Peace, I am moved to wonder whether the path these women are charting in fact provides a road map out of patriarchy. War is the starkest and most violent manifestation of the cycle of loss that underpins patriarchy: violent conflict shatters relationships (at both a societal and familial level), and in turn this threat of destruction is used to justify further violence, often in the name of restoring masculine honor and protecting women and children. Women Wage Peace envisions a way out—a path to reconciliation that leads not simply

6 Ibid.
through debate or persuasion, but through dialogue and listening; not through the
doling out of punishments or blame, but by communalizing shared experience of
suffering and loss. In waging peace, they are protesting the losses inherent in war. The
very conflict that is said to divide these women thus becomes the bond that unites
them.

Lest we underestimate the magnitude of what Women Wage Peace aspires to, it
is worth taking a moment to reflect on the very real obstacles that stand in the way. The
members of Women Wage Peace have each, to varying degrees and in different ways,
had their lives ravaged by the conflict. These are women and men who have lost
children, siblings, friends, and lovers to war. It is not difficult to imagine the level of
rage, despair, and distrust that such loss and injustice leave in their wake. In this
treacherous terrain, the path to peace and reconciliation is fraught with pain and
seemingly insurmountable obstacles. We may find ourselves wondering, how is it
possible to find empathy for the person or people you deem responsible for your
suffering? We may even question whether empathy is the appropriate response,
wondering whether resisting injustice requires something more forceful in the way of
calling people to account.

Women Wage Peace teaches us the necessity for what we and our colleagues
have come to call radical listening a form of listening that goes to the root of what is
being said and holds a potential for transformation. It is a form of listening driven by
curiosity, where the goal is to understand, not to condone or to excuse. And
understanding is not a zero-sum game—we can understand another’s experience without
letting go of our own or losing sight of the pain or anger their actions may have caused

7 The Radical Listening Project, NYU https://wp.nyu.edu/radicallisteningproject/
us. In this way, listening becomes a radical act. It can move us away from rigidly held positions when we open ourselves and take into ourselves the experiences and suffering of others. In listening, we open ourselves to discovery—to the unknown, and also potentially to the recognition of a common humanity. By forging a path toward reconciliation through a shared desire to end the cycle of loss, Women Wage Peace has found a way to move from the anger of despair to the anger of hope.