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Palestinians and settlers tried to make peace on their own, and then this happened

6-8 minutes

Years of struggling against the Israeli occupation have convinced Ali Abu Awwad, a prominent Palestinian peace activist, that if he can't win the settlers over to his side, it's a lost cause.

- [Where Palestinians and Settlers Meet as Equals](#)
- [A Rabbi, a Palestinian and the Seed of Peace](#)

So about three years ago, he built a small shack on a plot of land owned by his family in Gush Etzion, one of the large West Bank settlement blocs, and invited some settlers to join him in a new grassroots initiative. They would look each other in the eye for once, talk about their fears and dreams, pray together, plant crops together, share meals together, hike together, and start thinking out of the box about how to live together. He gave the space this unpretentious name: "The Field."

"I know that so long as we don't talk to those on the right, those on the left won't make peace with us," Abu Awwad explains in a new Israeli documentary set to premiere next week at the Docaviv film festival in Tel Aviv. "There are 600,000 settlers who aren't going to disappear just because of some demonstrations in the Tel Aviv city square. If the Israeli left is weak and doesn't have the courage to talk to the settlers, then that is Israel's problem."

"The Field," a feature-length documentary produced and directed by Mordechai Vardi, follows Shoreshim (the Hebrew word for "Roots"), a grassroots organization Abu Awwad helped create,

during an unusually trying period for residents of this particular region. In the fall of 2015, barely a year after the initiative was launched, Gush Etzion was targeted in a series of bloody terror attacks. The fresh wave of violence challenges the bonds that have been painstakingly forged between the Palestinian and settler peace activists.

In a particularly charged scene, following the stabbing to death of a 25-year-old Israeli woman at the Gush Etzion junction, Abu Awwad tries to explain to a group of agitated settlers gathered in his shack why it is difficult for most Palestinians to sympathize with them. The two sides in this conflict, he cries out, are not equals.



Hanan Schlesinger (R), Ali Abu Awwad (C) and another settler peace activist from ShoreshimCredit: Mordechai Vardi

“After we leave this place, you go back to your nice settlements, and we go back to our refugee camps,” he says. “You call us murderers and criminals, but you are sitting on our places of livelihood, you are sitting on our homes, and you are sitting on our hearts – not as partners, though.”

In response to these harsh words, one of the settler rabbis in the group announces that he is through with these efforts at dialogue.

The Jewish activists in Shoreshim include many devotees of the late [Menachem Froman](#), a rabbi from the settlement of Tekoa who was a prominent activist in interfaith and peacemaking efforts

before he died and who supported granting full and equal rights to Palestinians in the West Bank. His widow, Hadassah, is a driving force in the joint Palestinian-settler organization. Tragedy strikes close to home when [her pregnant daughter-in-law Michal is stabbed in her home in January 2016](#). After her release from the hospital, when a group of Palestinian peace activists pay her a visit, she sends them off with the following message: “I want us all to think about how we can convince boys aged 13, 14 and 15 who are ready to go out with a knife that it is possible to live in peace.”

Abu Awwad evolved into a champion of non-violence rather late in life. His mother, an activist in the Palestinian Liberation Organization, then outlawed by Israel, was thrown in prison when he was 10 years old. Years later, his brother was shot dead during a spat with an Israeli soldier. Abu Awwad himself served a four-year jail term for throwing stones and Molotov cocktails at IDF forces during the first Palestinian uprising.

His change of heart, he recounts in the film, was prompted by an unexpected visit after his brother’s tragic death. “An Orthodox Israeli whose son had also been killed in the conflict asked if he could stop by our house for a visit,” Abu Awwad relays. “Surprisingly, my mother agreed. I was in shock when they came. They sat in our home and cried. Until then it had never occurred to me that Jews could also shed tears.”

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His lead partner in Shoreshim is Hanan Schlesinger, an American-born rabbi from the settlement of Alon Shvut, who was equally transformed by his first personal encounter with the other side. “I took a 10-minute walk one day and came to Ali’s land,” he recounts in the film. “I saw a group of about 20 Palestinians and 20 to 25 Israelis talking to each other there. You have to understand that this

is something that never happens. It was the first time I heard someone talk about being in an Israeli jail and about suffering under occupation with no rights. It was giving me a completely different narrative about the land that we live in.”

By the time the film was shot, more than 2,500 young Israelis had visited Abu Awwad’s little oasis, many of them hearing for the first time from him about how Palestinians view the conflict. That doesn’t include all the settlers whose homes he visits regularly to spread his message that “peace isn’t about signing a piece of paper – peace is about changing the conditions of life for people.”

Addressing a group of young Israelis on a pre-military gap year program who have come on a trip to his peace center during the height of the so-called “Intifada of knives,” Abu Awwad notes: “When a 13-year-old lunges at you with a blade, it’s a sign that he’s lost his fear of death, and it means he’s lost his love of life.”

At one of the parlor meetings he attends at a nearby settlement, an Israeli woman asks Abu Awwad whether, in his deep yearning for peace, he represents only a small minority of Palestinians. “I’m a minority when it comes to taking action but not when it comes to being willing,” he tells her.

In one of the film’s final scenes, Abu Awwad and one of his settler partners appear together on stage before an auditorium full of schoolchildren in Arab East Jerusalem. Noting that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has taken a turn for the worst, one of the students raises her hands and asks the speakers: “We just keep talking about peace, but what are we doing?”

The film quickly cuts to a new scene, leaving the answer hanging in the air.