



Nitsan Joy Gordon

Together Beyond Words

Women on a Quest for Peace
in the Middle East



Praise for *Together Beyond Words*

“This book and the incredible story it brings to us is so much more than a simple telling; it’s an offering of light and hope. Nitsan Joy Gordon’s work is visionary, wise and important. It’s a call for all of us to do the deep healing that must precede a lasting peace. She asks us to live beyond our stories into the heart of love. This is a message for the world.”

PAULA D'ARCY

Writer, retreat leader, conference and seminar speaker.

“In this powerful book, Nitsan Gordon takes us with her on her amazing journey toward bringing healing and peace to the chronic pain and conflict that plague relations among Jews, Arabs, and Palestinians in Israel. Having co-led several Together Beyond Words workshops with her, I can testify to the power of having traditional enemies express their most painful truths and feel witnessed by one another — particularly for Palestinians to feel heard by Jews and watch Jews work on the legacy burdens that drive their racist and oppressive behaviors. Through dance, movement, and psychodramatic techniques, Nitsan creates exceptionally safe spaces for these encounters that are building an important grassroots movement for cross-conflict connection and change. Reading this beautifully written, engaging book, is moving, enlightening, and left me with even more admiration for Nitsan’s courage and persistence.”

RICHARD SCHWARTZ

Ph.D., developer of the Internal Family Systems model (IFS).

“I love this book. It tells the story of a girl, and all the life experiences that led her to become a brave and powerful woman; A woman who was touched by injustice, pain, and bigotry. A woman who could have led a privileged life, a woman who could have not listened to the calling. But a woman who most certainly did. Read this delightful book. Let yourself be inspired. There is so much we can do with this one precious life. Nitsan is a testament to that.”

ANN BRADNEY

CPRA, founder and director of the Radical Aliveness Institute. Faculty member at Esalen educational institute.

“This inspiring book not only tells the story of one woman’s brave journey from a border kibbutz to a lifelong dedication to peace building; more than that, it gives us a heartening example of what can happen when two visionary change makers – Esalen Institute and Together Beyond Words – combine their creativity in the service of our highest human values.”

NANCY LUNNEY WHEELER

M.A., pioneering leader in education for personal and social transformation. Senior advisor at Esalen educational institute.

“The importance of this book, in my humble opinion, lies in the ability of the author/healer and her colleagues to reach across the boundaries of religious beliefs, ethnicity, skin color and nationality to the essence of our existence as human beings that yearn to live in harmony and peace with one another..”

DR MARIAM MARI

Director of the Akko Arab Women’s Pedagogical Center.

“All over the world, nations and communities and cultures are experiencing the pain and destruction that happens when one group demonizes another, when people lose the ability to see the human in each other. But all over the world, people are also transforming trauma and pain into healing and peace. It takes hard work--brave and patient work--to do this, and the Israeli Peace Activist, Nitsan Joy Gordon, has been doing this kind of work for many years. Her new book, Together Beyond Words: Women on a Quest for Peace in the Middle East, is a roadmap for all of us who want to be part of the solution.”

ELIZABETH LESSER

Cofounder of Omega Institute, New York Times bestselling author of Broken Open, Cassandra Speaks, and other books.

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in the Middle East



To my beloved children, Shir and Ben,
my wonderful grandchildren, Danielle,
Shalomi, Maayan and Noor
and to all children.

May our work and the work
of peacebuilders in every country,
make the world you inherit
more just and peaceful.

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*We cannot have a healed society, we cannot have change,
we cannot have justice, if we do not reclaim and repair the
human spirit, if we don't do the inner work that has been
underemphasized, that we have not trained ourselves to do, the
work that is upon us now.*

Angel Kyodo Williams

Foreword

By Marianne Williamson

American bestselling author, political activist,
and spiritual thought leader.¹

No one can authentically encounter the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without agony. The hatred, fear and suffering in this drama are so real and seemingly intractable, it's like a horror story that never ends. Nothing seems less helpful than those who would presume that there are easy answers.

“Beyond all ideas of right and wrong, there is a field. I'll meet you there,” wrote the poet Rumi. The problem is not that people don't believe this field exists; the problem is how hard it can be to get there. In Israel and Palestine – and elsewhere in the world – there is so much pain, and there are so many layers of often unprocessed trauma that stand in our way as we seek to reach it. How blessed are those who do the work of trying to pave the way.

God knows, some brilliant minds have tried. But perhaps that is the point: the mind alone can't do it. As Einstein reminded us that the problems of the world will not be solved with the level of thinking at which they were created, our species stands perched in a mysterious limbo: will we perpetuate the madness of humanity's collision course with itself, or will we consider the possibility that there might be another way? There is a new kind of peacebuilding rising among us, going way beyond the purview of diplomat or soldier. For peace is not the absence of war; war is the absence of peace. True, fundamental peace is not an artificial comfort; it is a return to our essential nature. It is raw. It is emotional. It is real. At times it is harrowing. It stems from facing the internal wars that are

1. <https://marianne.com>

reflected in our external violence. Peacemakers aren't softies. They're the bravest of the brave.

It's difficult to read this book by Nitsan Joy Gordon without awe at her emotionally bravery, and the bravery of the women who have joined with her – both Arab and Jew – to pave a path to peace for themselves and others. That path is not a path of avoiding their pain, but of allowing themselves to feel their pain; not a path of explaining themselves, but of listening to others; not a path of always saying yes, but of sometimes saying no. The courage to remain awake, not only to one's own pain but to the pain of the other, is the work of the modern peacemaker. The women in this book are extraordinary examples of what that looks like and where it can lead.

In *A Course in Miracles*, it is said that the “holiest spot on earth is where an ancient hatred has become a present love.” Whenever I have read that line, and I have read it often, I have thought of Israel and Palestine. The Holy Land, the place where several major religions find their portal to God, is a place on the planet where the peace of God seems sometimes hardest to attain. Whether looked at from a political or a spiritual perspective, this cannot be an accident. There – in that holy yet tortured place – lay both the problem and the Answer, humanity's greatest division and greatest opportunity for peace. It is a land of an ancient hatred longing for a present love.

Reading this book, you feel such a present love is possible, even if only expressed in fleeting moments of resolution. Nitsan was only five years old when her father first told her to seek resolution. It wasn't to be just with her little brother, as she might have thought then; the search for resolution was to be her life's calling. In order to claim that calling, however, she would have to enter the darkest regions of her own pain, acknowledge the pain of others and invite them to dwell in those regions with her. Her work, and the work of the other women whose stories are told in this book, is truly the Great Work.

And they do it so well. What a blessing on Israel and Palestine, and a gift to the entire world.

October 2022.

Introduction

One Holy Spot on Earth

*The holiest spot on earth is where an ancient
hatred has become a present love.*

A Course in Miracle

Pain that is not transformed is transmitted.

Richard Rohr

Leaning back on the smooth cream-colored bathroom door, I look down at my blue sandals, the same ones all the other five- and six-year-olds at the kibbutz have. They are not so new anymore; we received them a while ago, right before Passover and the dust and wear have turned them from shiny to drab.

Looking up I see my blond three-year-old brother, Mor, who is sitting on top of the toilet cover staring at me with tears running down his face. His feet are so far from the floor that I'm not sure how he made it up there. The door to the bathroom is not locked, but I know we cannot go out yet because when our father put us inside the bathroom in the middle of our fight he said, "You can only come out after you resolve this."

I peek again at my brother and he stares back. I am not sure what to do now. I don't know what "resolve" means and have no idea if we have done it yet or not. *Is just being quiet enough? Do I need to say something to Mor? How do Abba and Ima and other people resolve? Will we be stuck here forever?*

The bright red train we were fighting over is on the floor where Mor threw it and I make no move to pick it up.

"Can we go out now?" Mor asks in a tearful voice, blue eyes watery.

"No, we have to resolve," I tell him.

A little while later, I hold out my hand. Mor slides off the toilet and puts his little one in mine. We open the door and walk out hand in hand

towards my father, who is sitting and reading on the green couch in the tiny living room of our kibbutz apartment.

“We resolve,” I say to him.

He hugs us both and says, “Good, now you can play together.”

And this is how at the age of five I learned that conflicts are resolved by spending time together in the bathroom.

Later I was able to expand the possible scenes of conflict resolution from the bathroom to the living room, porch, kitchen and even to large workshop spaces, but the concept of spending time together with someone from the other side of the conflict remained a key component in the conflict resolution process.

And I care deeply about conflict resolution. *Why?* There is not one answer but rather many stories I share in the first part of this book as I explore what led me to devote my life’s work to “Resolve.” The second part of the book includes the stories of *How?* How do we Resolve? The different tools I learned that comprise our own approach to spending time together in ways that resolve conflicts. And the final part are the stories of *What.* What actually happens in our workshops and meetings that leads to resolution between Arab Palestinians and Jews?

The conflict I chose to “Resolve” is the most talked and written about conflict in the world. There are many reasons for the world’s obsession with a country no larger than New Jersey with a population the size of Togo. I will mention only one. Israel is a spiritual center of five world religions – Jewish, Druze, Muslim, Christian and Bahai, so naturally what happens here is important to people of these faiths from all over the world.

Our conflict, also known as the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, has lasted for anywhere between 100 to 140 years, depending on whom you ask and when you begin counting, with over 236,000 casualties, and unfortunately, there does not seem to be an end in sight.

In the early nineties, when my children were quite young and we spent time in fortified shelters hiding from Katyusha rockets fired at us from Lebanon by the Hezbollah, I began searching for something I could do that would contribute to the resolution of this conflict.

I had a BA in Psychology and a Masters in Dance/Movement Therapy and knew that one reason for this protracted conflict and our inability to find a solution is the trauma, the painful emotions driving our decisions and behavior. Trauma is so prevalent and chronic in this area that David Eshel calls Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza “a perfect laboratory for

studying Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other anxiety-related ailments.”²

I also knew that, in the absence of emotional healing, early trauma can have a lifelong impact in the form of rigid, irrational behavior, and that our emotions bias our decision-making³. So I concluded that when people don’t engage in healing their traumas, their painful emotions frequently lead them to behave rigidly and irrationally, hurting themselves and others. As Richard Rohr puts it: *Pain that is not transformed is transmitted*⁴.

When I realized how our past influences our present and future in Israel, I felt a calling to do more for coexistence and peace, using my skills as a dance/movement therapist and a group facilitator.

For years, I had stood at intersections with Women in Black, holding signs calling on the government to bring our soldiers home from Lebanon, and participated in demonstrations for peace before the Oslo Accords, but it did not seem like enough. Consequently, in 1994 I approached Dr Mariam Mari-Ryan, a Muslim woman and the director of the Akko Arab Women’s Pedagogical Center, where I was working, to speak about further possibilities.

We both understood that the destructive behavior, prejudices, and violence around and sometimes inside us are driven by fear, anger, grief, and despair related to our painful histories and to the ceaseless conflict. We believed that women – in particular, early childhood educators – could have a unique role in transforming these destructive behaviors. So, we developed a pilot project whose goal was to empower and train early childhood educators in what we called peace building. Our first program received financial support from the Abraham Fund⁵.

Then, on November 4, 1995, before we began, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was murdered by Yigal Amir, a Jew, and the whole country shook. The peace process was stalled, many hopes were shattered and we decided to move ahead.

In February 1996 we began our program with a 56-hour workshop using the multidisciplinary approach, I had developed. The workshop was

2. https://defense-update.com/20070601_ptsd.html

3. De Martino, B., Kumaran, D., Seymour, B., & Dolan, R. J. (2006, August 4). Frames, biases, and rational decision-making in the human brain. *Science*, 313(5787), 684-687.

4. <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Daily-Meditation---August-17--2013.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=VsvGk1wUnuI>

5. <https://abrahaminitiatives.org/>

co-led by two Arab Palestinian facilitators, a Jewish facilitator, and myself. Our goal was to create a place, a safe haven of sorts, where the 24 Arab Palestinian and Jewish early childhood educators who participated would be able to share their feelings and learn to transform their pain rather than transmitting it. We hoped that through this process of meeting, growing to know and care about one another, and learning peacebuilding skills, they would be moved to do more for coexistence and peace.

Gathering the women for the first group was not easy. I literally had to climb fences in order to reach them. Working together as Arab and Jewish co-facilitators was also an adjustment that involved inner healing work for each of us.

In addition, we learned that most of the issues we were dealing with were not only personal but related to oppression that has lasted for years. This includes the oppression of women and the feminine qualities in women and men and the prejudice and oppression of minorities, in so many different ways, including language. We also learned to hold complexity: that every story has at least two sides and that we need to create a space where people with opposing narratives would feel comfortable in sharing their pain.

Despite the hardships, something about our approach worked really well, and by the second year there was no need to climb fences to reach the teachers. They themselves contacted us because they heard we were doing something unique and wanted to try it out.

Seven years and several groups later, in 2003, we became a nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering women and providing them with peacebuilding skills.

We named our approach "Beyond Words" to signify that the painful emotions shared in our workshops are often beyond words, that our healing approach is also frequently nonverbal, and that to resolve the conflict something is needed that is more than speeches, conversations, shouting matches, debates, and even dialogue. Something that brings to the forefront the power of emotions to destroy and to connect and the need to transform pain so it is not transmitted. Later we added the word "Together" to emphasize the particular power of a beyond words healing process when it happens in conjunction and in the same space with the "other", with our former "enemy". Hence the name *Together Beyond Words* (TBW).

Since our first group, we have worked with hundreds of people, creating

places where Arab Palestinians and Jews, both women and, beginning in 2014, men, can express their painful emotions rather than acting them out; where empathy and understanding for “the other” are enhanced; where women can reclaim their power in the public sphere; and where women and men can become allies in working for a more compassionate and peaceful community.

What actually happens in our workshops is described in stories that constitute the third part of this book. But it can be summarized in the words of Amichai, a Jewish man in his late twenties, who participated in the TBW 2018 Peace Leadership Training with Ann Bradney and wrote afterwards:

Together we cried and screamed the pain that had been frozen in the body for too many years, we experienced fear and terror, anger and hatred, immense love, passion and yearning, and such deep human connection. And we were able to see beyond all the stories, to truly see ourselves and one another. We saw that within us there exists everything, all of it, all the voices and the parts, the feelings and the needs.

I saw within myself all the narratives and points of view at the same time. I saw the voices of extreme rightists, and extreme leftists, Arabs and Jews, women and men, courage and fear, compassion and hatred. And mostly, I saw how much love I have in my heart, how much love there is in everyone’s heart. I will not be the same again after this experience.

I’ve learned a lot about what it means to “resolve” since that day spent standing in the bathroom with my three-year-old brother. I don’t know when the bombing, the prejudice, the violence will stop; none of us do. But I do know something about conflict resolution, about the deep healing work that is necessary to create a sound basis for a lasting peace, and it includes creating places to feel and heal that are available to everyone.

I hope and pray this book will encourage you, the reader, to create your own **safe havens** for emotional healing and for the healing of those around you so we can all live in a more compassionate and peaceful world.

May it be so...

The publication of this book was made possible
thanks to the work of a whole team.

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Nitsan Joy Gordon

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Women on a Quest for Peace
in the Middle East

The Israeli-Palestinian region, a Holy Land to many, has been enmeshed in one of the world's most intractable conflicts for over a century, characterized by prejudice, failed peace talks and violence. This book is the inspirational story of one woman working with her colleagues to break that cycle. Nitsan Joy Gordon's life experiences – growing up in an Israeli border kibbutz fraught with danger and violent skirmishes, facing hatred in the American South as the only Jew in her junior high school, and finding dance as a way to work through her trauma – set her on a 30-year quest to empower women as peacebuilders and transform prejudices between Arabs and Jews, Israelis and Palestinians.

She co-founded Together Beyond Words, a peacebuilding organization that brings Muslim, Jewish, Bedouin, Druse and Christian women together in a dynamic process to heal ancient wounds, recover hidden strengths, and promote emotional understanding. Using Dance/Movement Therapy, Listening Partnerships, Healing Touch, Radical Aliveness (RA), Playback Theater and Internal Family Systems (IFS), this groundbreaking approach teaches women to harness conflict and intense emotions as a way to achieve empathy and deep connection with perceived enemies. The women then take these transformative practices into their communities, tribes, organizations, to spread the healing.

Says Gordon: "Our power as women together is no longer dormant and as we liberate ourselves from various degrees of bondage and unite around the world in a call for change, we can also become allies to men in their own liberation of the heart."

Foreword

**Marianne
Williamson**

Afterword

**Leymah
R. Gbowee**

Nobel Peace
Laureate

"Nitsan's work is visionary, wise and important. It's a call for us to do the deep healing that must precede a lasting peace. She asks us to live beyond our stories into the heart of love."

Paula D'Arcy, *author*

"Read this delightful book. Let yourself be inspired. There is so much we can do with this one precious life. Nitsan is a testament to that."

Ann Bradney, *developer of
Radical Aliveness*

"In this powerful book, Nitsan takes us on her amazing journey toward bringing healing and peace to the chronic pain and conflict that plague relations among Jews, Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians."

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of Internal Family Systems (IFS)*

"Nitsan reaches across the boundaries of religious beliefs, ethnicity, skin color and nationality to the essence of our existence as human beings who yearn to live in harmony and peace with one another."

Mariam Mar'i Ryan, *Educational
Psychologist*

