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A Mideast Bond, Stitched of Pain and Healing

By [ETHAN BRONNER](#)

JERUSALEM — He can be impulsive. She has a touch of bossiness. Next-door neighbors for nearly a year, they talk, watch television and explore the world together, wandering into each other's homes without a second thought. She likes his mother's eggplant dish. He likes her father's rice and lamb.

Friendship often starts with proximity, but Orel and Marya, both 8, have been thrust together in a way few elsewhere have. Their playground is a hospital corridor. He is an Israeli Jew severely wounded by a [Hamas](#) rocket. She is a [Palestinian](#) Muslim from [Gaza](#) paralyzed by an Israeli missile. Someone forgot to tell them that they are enemies.

"He's a naughty boy," Marya likes to say of Orel with an appreciative smile when he gets a little wild.

When Orel arrived here a year ago, he could not hear, see, talk or walk. Now he does them all haltingly. Half his brain is gone. Doctors were deeply pessimistic about his survival. Today they are amazed at his progress although unclear how much more can be made.

Marya's spinal cord was broken at the neck and she can move only her head. Smart, sunny and strong-willed, she moves her wheelchair by pushing a button with her chin. Nothing escapes her gaze. She knows that Orel is starting to prefer boys as playmates and she makes room. But their bond remains strong.

In a way, a friendship between two wounded children from opposing backgrounds is not that surprising. Neither understands the prolonged fight over land and identity that so divides people here. They are kids. They play.

But for those who have spent time in their presence at [Alyn Hospital](#) in Jerusalem, it is almost more powerful to observe their parents, who do understand. They have developed a kinship that defies national struggle.

"The wounds of our children, their pain, our pain, have connected us," noted Angela Elizarov, Orel's mother, one recent day as she sat on a bed in the room she shares with her son. Next door is Marya, her 6-year-old brother, Momen, and their father, Hamdi Aman. "Does it matter that he is from Gaza and I am from Beersheba, that he is an Arab and I am a Jew? It has no meaning to me. He sees my child and I see his child."

It was two weeks into [Israel's](#) Gaza war last January when Orel was hit. After days in a shelter his mother took him out in the car. As they drove around Beersheba, a siren blared, warning of an incoming rocket. She pushed Orel to the ground, lying protectively on him. When she heard the explosion in the distance, she rose in relief. A second rocket exploded and she saw her son's head bleeding profusely.

A surgical nurse, she flagged down a passing motorist who drove them to the hospital where she works.

"I saw his brain coming out, everything around me was burning, and I was not even scratched," she recalled. "When I got to the emergency room, I said to the doctor: 'You can't kid me. I know he has no chance of survival.' The doctor looked away. But after six operations, he is actually making some progress. God took my son from me, but he has given me another one. A year ago, he was the best in his class in sports, the best in math. Now he is learning to walk and talk."

Her husband, Avrel, who works with children, spends much of the week at home with their 18-month-old daughter but comes often. The couple, originally from Azerbaijan, had been childless for years, and Orel's birth, coaxed along by infertility treatments in Israel, seemed a miracle.

Their hospital neighbor, Mr. Aman, is a 32-year-old construction worker from Gaza who not only cares for his own two children but helps with Orel. He is regarded as a luminescent presence, an inspiration to staff, volunteers and fellow parents.

This is partly because the pain in his own story is hard to fathom.

More than three years ago, Mr. Aman and his uncle had split the cost of a car and, having paid for it two hours earlier, took it on the road. With them were Mr. Aman's wife, their three children and his mother.

Prowling above, an Israeli jet fighter on an assassination mission was seeking its target, a militant leader named Ahmad Dahduh. Two missiles were fired at Mr. Dahduh's car just as it passed Mr. Aman's, killing Mr. Aman's oldest son, wife and mother. Marya was thrown from the car.

He and his children have been at Alyn Hospital, which specializes in young people with serious physical disabilities, for nearly the entire time since. The Israeli government, which brought him here for emergency help, wanted him and his children either to return to Gaza or to move to the West Bank. But attention in the Israeli news media produced a bevy of volunteers to fight on his behalf. Marya would not survive in either Gaza or the West Bank. The government has backed off, supporting Mr. Aman on minimum wage and paying for Marya to go to a bilingual Arabic-Hebrew school nearby.

But Mr. Aman has no official status and is also raising a healthy and bright son in a hospital room. He wants residency or a ticket to a Western country where his children will be safe and Marya will get the care she needs.

Volunteers who help are often religious Jews performing national service. Some ask Mr. Aman how he can live among the people whose army destroyed his family.

“I have never felt there was a difference among people — Jews, Muslims, Christians — we are all human beings,” he says. “I worked in Israel for years and so did my father. We know that it is not about what you are but who you are. And that is what I have taught my children.”

Mr. Aman’s hospital door is rarely closed. Asher Franco, an Israeli Jew from Beit Shemesh who has been coming to the hospital for six months for his daughter’s treatments, was a recent visitor. They greeted each other warmly. A manual worker and former combat soldier, he was asked about their friendship.

“I was raised as a complete Zionist rightist,” he said. “The Arabs, we were told, were out to kill us. But I was living in some fantasy. Here in the hospital, all my friends are Arabs.” Ms. Elizarov, Orel’s mother, noted that in places like Alyn Hospital, political tensions do not exist. Then she said, “Do we need to suffer in order to learn that there is no difference between Jews and Arabs?”

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