

Red Moon in the Middle East DeAnna L'am

My consciousness as a woman wasn't truly raised until I left Israel, my country of origin. Years of involvement in women's activities in England, and subsequently in the US, (where I now live), had me swimming in Female consciousness, from the political to the spiritual. The circles of women in which I participated shared tears and laughs, histories of struggle, loss and overcoming, abuse and recovery. We even compared stories of losing our virginity. And yet, *not once* was our menstrual blood mentioned... the taboo being so deeply ingrained, we didn't even suspect we left anything uncovered.

A few years after awakening to the mystery, power and beauty of my own menstrual flow, I started facilitating Red Moon circles, welcoming girls into womanhood. Having witnessed age differences become insignificant as adolescent girls sat in circle with women of all ages, bonded by cyclicity, it occurred to me that I needed to come full circle. I decided to travel back home, to Israel/Palestine, where women are seemingly divided by chasms, and form circles in which we can sit together.



Neveh Shalom/ Wahat Al Salam

In January 1999 I traveled back to the Middle East to close a circle. My Palestinian friend and former colleague, Nardin, was hard at work. She was busy recruiting Palestinian and Jewish women to a workshop she never experienced, on a subject that was hard to talk about. All she had to go by was her trust in me, based on our work together, and for this trust I will always be deeply grateful. Nardin lives and works at **Neveh Shalom/Wahat Al-Salam**, the only Jewish-Palestinian village in Israel, located 15 miles southwest of Jerusalem. It was in this village that Nardin and I first met as co-workers of the **School For Peace**, where Palestinian and Jewish youth and adults come to experience 3-day reconciliation workshops.

When I lived in Israel and facilitated workshops for Jews and Palestinians, all of our sessions were co-ed. About half way through the 3-day workshop we invited participants to divide into nation-specific groups. The Jews in one room, Palestinians in another, had a lot in common. Mostly they shared pain and rage, which they felt unable to express in the presence of the "Other". The idea of dividing into *gender* groups never occurred to any of us. What would the women alone, or man alone, have in common? Our consciousness as group leaders,

personally and collectively, was focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Gender didn't seem to be part of it... or so we thought.



Neveh Shalom/ Wahat Al Salam, aerial view

12 years after leaving Israel I was back at Neveh Shalom/Wahat Al Salam, which is Hebrew/Arabic for **Oasis Of Peace**. I returned to offer a Red Moon workshop to Jewish and Palestinian women. It was the first gender-specific group ever offered there on this subject. A crisp morning welcomed us as women started gathering in the hall overlooking Jerusalem's ridges, covered in pine trees and dotted with wild flowers. Some of the name-tags were being written in Hebrew, others in Arabic. Arabs in Israel are obligated to study Hebrew from a very young age. They all speak, read and write it fluently. The Jews are mostly illiterate in Arabic. It all started to come back to me: the tiniest of details, like name-tags, revealing subtle inequities. Palestinian women, wanting to be understood, had to write their name-tags in both languages. The Jewish only needed use one language, their own. Embarrassed by my oversight, I shyly asked Nardin to add my name in Arabic to my tag, for solidarity.

20 women gathered in the spacious hall. About half were Palestinian and half Jewish. A few of them, like Nardin, were residents of Neveh Shalom/Wahat Al Salam, others came from all over the country. Ya'el, a Jewish resident of the village, was joined by her Mom, a visitor from the US. Most of the women in the room never met each other before, but they all knew Nardin. The complexity of a Palestinian woman's life in Israel was somewhat revealed when Nardin, surprised, found herself in the midst of an unforeseen summit: "there are women here from regions of my life that never meet", she said, "my roles as Mom, teacher, student, village resident, are all separate, some have only Palestinians in them, others only Jews. I never thought the circles of my life would mingle when I asked women to attend this workshop! This is an unexpected bonus..." she smiled.

We started by telling the stories of Menarche, our first blood. The national differences in upbringing, the differing religions, cultures, social and economic backgrounds, (which all of us, Jews and Palestinians, are acutely aware of whenever we meet), dissolved into non-existence. In their place emerged a deep sense of recognition of each other's stories: shame, embarrassment, lack of

information, surprise, sadness, pride, fear, feeling “dirty”, being teased, becoming Woman; all were shared and experienced by women across nationality lines. No experience emerged as belonging to one culture or another, this religion or that. Our work together revealed time and again our *suppressed* bond as cycling women. All of a sudden there was something deep we shared in common, which was hidden behind the faces of our differences: *We all* bleed, monthly; *We all* had a less-than-smooth transition into womanhood; *We all* have a relationship to our monthly blood and for most of us it’s a difficult relationship, ranging from physical pain to emotional discomfort. Most of us are silent about it...

“I have been living in this village for years, along with three of you women,” said Ya’el, “we are close friends, and we talk about everything. You, Merav, talked me into having children when I wouldn’t hear of it. But I never, ever, told you this story of my blood...” Nor did she hear her mother’s story, or told her Mom how she felt as a young girl at Menarche. The presence of a mother and daughter in the room made a lot of the women resolve, there and then, to have a similar conversation with their mothers. Others got in touch with the pain of having lost their mothers and mourned the missed opportunity for such a conversation.

In preparation for the workshop I asked Nardin to translate into Arabic the circle chant “*Earth my body/ Water my blood/ Air my breath/ Fire my spirit*”. My friend Carmela already translated the chant into Hebrew a while back. As I taught it to the women in all 3 languages, a complex landscape of emotions emerged, mirroring yet again the conflicting scenery of the Middle East. Ya’el’s American Mom and I were the only ones singing in English, as no one else felt an affiliation to that particular language. The Jewish women sang in Hebrew only, as Arabic was too alien for them, and even such a short chant couldn’t be memorized. The Palestinians sang in Arabic only, though they speak Hebrew well. The chant, which I envisioned would be beautifully woven in rounds of three languages, turned out to be awkward and didn’t flow. Suhair, my long-ago Palestinian co-worker, said later: “I can take speaking Hebrew all through the workshop. I can take speaking Hebrew most of my professional life. I can take doing all my errands in the city in Hebrew. But I can’t sing in Hebrew! This is the language of all the Israeli victory songs; it’s the language of the military march songs, which are so popular in this country. I *can not* sing in Hebrew.”

A blind spot surfaced. We talked and we cried and we, eventually, understood some of how it feels to be “Other”. Walking in each other’s shoes we grew a bit more compassionate.

Living in Israel and running workshops at the School For Peace, I spent years working on excavating and eliminating my internalized racism, acquired by growing up as part of the Jewish majority in Israel. I learned that sensitivity is part of a choice to stay conscious, moment-by-moment. Sensitivity must breath freely in order to stay alive. What I discovered now was, that those 12 years away from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict made this particular sensitivity rusty.

It was interesting to observe how obstacles of insensitivity, as well as our bonding as cycling women, co-existed in our day together. One didn't negate the other. Sensitivity needed to be built. Our bonds were *discovered*. They existed all along but were hardly noticed in daily life, as we so often focus on what separates us (of which there is plenty in the Middle East), rather than what we share in common and can potentially unite us. Palestinian and Jewish, young and old, we unanimously *reclaimed* our bond as cycling women. This bond took precedence over such artificial divides as nationality, religion, age, belief system and political bias. It connected us to all women who ever lived, and ever will live, on this planet: our Mother Earth.

At the end of the day Nardin was exhausted, yet glowing. It was particularly important for me to hear her feedback, as she worked so hard on organizing this workshop. Her life is busy. She is a mother of two and a teacher at the village school. She travels to Jerusalem a few times a week to complete a higher degree, and she serves on some of the village's committees, which often produce long nights of heated deliberations. "My life is full to the brim", she said, "but this day, which I have taken for myself alone, spent in the company of women from all walks of my life, connected me deeply to hidden parts of myself. It allowed me to get in touch with a deep and forgotten yearning: to Belly dance... I don't know how I'm going to fit this into my life", she exclaimed, "but I *will* ! Ever since I was a girl I wanted to belly dance. I never pursued it because in the Israeli society it was considered "cheap", "primitive" and Arab. Then I grew up and forgot... But today I remembered. Today a candle has been lit in me. And I am going to dance!"

(All names were changed to protect women's privacy. Names used are corresponding to each woman's nationality.)

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*DeAnna works toward cultivating **Red Tents** in every neighborhood, and trains women to facilitate **Red Tent Circles**. For more information go to: www.deannalam.com or contact her at lam@sonic.net.*

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