



*Planting the Seeds for Peace*

**Sami Awad**

**Bethlehem, West Bank Palestine**

In 1983, when Sami was 12 years old, his uncle Mubarak Awad moved back from the USA to Jerusalem. For his leadership and his inspiring example of peaceful, nonviolent resistance, Mubarak has been called the "Gandhi of Palestine."

Sami's mother grew up in Gaza, on a small patch of land along the Mediterranean Sea. His father grew up in Jerusalem, in a neighborhood where Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived together in relative peace. And while the peace they experienced was sometimes tenuous, it proved that peace was possible.

When Sami's grandfather was killed in the 1948 war, his grandmother and her seven children became refugees. Like more than 700,000 Palestinians who were displaced from 1947 to 1949, his family was part of a massive crisis called "Al-Nakba," the catastrophe. Sami was born in the USA but was just six months old when his family moved from Kansas to Palestine in 1971. Israelis and Palestinians struggled in a tug of war to claim this tiny piece of land for their own. Yet, despite having never seen peace for himself, Sami still believes it is possible. In fact, achieving it is his life goal.

Growing up in Palestine, Sami says, "the occupation was always constant." From an early age, his situation didn't feel right to him. The feeling of being under Israeli domination made him feel helpless, and sometimes angry, wanting to lash out. He wasn't the only one. Many Palestinians got caught up in the resistance movement, some becoming fighters with groups that wanted to overthrow Israeli rule through armed resistance.

But from his uncle, Mubarak, Sami learned powerful lessons, about protesting peacefully in the streets, and inspiring people – both Israelis and Palestinians – to join him. They planted olive trees to prevent the confiscation of Palestinian lands by encroaching Israeli settlements. They organized marches, and called for the boycott of Israeli products. "It started clicking for me, even at a young age, that we could do something about the situation— even as children we were very involved," Sami says.

But things changed again for Sami when he was 17, during the first Intifada, or the Palestinian unarmed uprising. His uncle Mubarak was arrested by the Israeli authorities and deported out of the country. Many Palestinians turned to violence. But, following in his uncle's footsteps, Sami chose to carry on his uncle's legacy and choose a nonviolent path. "I committed my life to the study of nonviolence," Sami says.

Sami's studies took him first to the University of Kansas, and later a graduate program in International Relations at American University in Washington D.C. He returned to Palestine in 1996 during the Oslo Peace Process, with President Bill Clinton. With his deepened awareness and his new passion for peace, he wanted to include Israelis and Palestinians equally in the peace process, and teach them how to think differently about how to achieve peace together.

For the last thirty years he has continuously worked on shifting the dialogue about the past, present, and future among all peoples. "The past affects us and all the decisions we make in the present," he says. "It limits the possibilities of the future when we only use our past to make decisions." He adds, "I can instead make a decision in the present based on the *future* I want to build for my family, for my people."

In 1998, Sami founded the Holy Land Trust, a nonprofit dedicated to nonviolent community action.” In addition to training and activism in nonviolence and nonlinear thinking for both Palestinians and Israelis, the Holy Land Trust organizes alternative tours for internationals.

Building on what he learned from his uncle Mubarak, Sami engages people in practicing nonviolent resistance, as well as healing trauma and developing the next generation of leaders. "Women and girls are key in this work," he says. "So too is a new generation of young people who are willing to break down borders and plant seeds for peace, instead of dwelling on the past."

“I’m seeing the next generation of young people who are involved in a new global consciousness, a new global understanding,” he says. “How they perceive their own identity is changing. The younger generation are less focused on political solutions and national state structure," he says. “They want to live, travel, engage, and connect around the things they all have in common.”

Today the future of younger generations is at greater risk than ever. Today, young people in Israel and Palestine, like young people everywhere, have their work cut out for them. This time, however, they face a common threat: climate change.

Sami names the challenges climate change will bring to the region, and which of them will be exacerbated by the Israeli occupation. Rivers, springs and water sources diverted by settlements means less water for Palestinian agricultural lands. Trees uprooted by the separation wall result in sewage flowing into farming communities in the Palestinian territories. The rise in global temperatures means that warm, dry places are becoming deserts. The Jordan Valley, the heart of Palestinian farming, is already drying up at a rapid pace. Sandstorms are increasingly sweeping across Jerusalem and other cities in the region. “Heat stress” at night makes summers nearly unbearable. The poorest will be hit hardest by the water shortages and droughts. The United Nations has warned that in the coming years the Gaza area will become unfit for human life.

Sami’s organization is working to bring activists from Israel and Palestine together to tackle these challenges. The Holy Land Trust has launched a three-year project focused on increasing environmental consciousness across the region, beginning with awareness building and moving into activism and action.

"Every little action helps – from picking up trash from the ground to installing solar panels in your neighborhood," Sami says. Over time, he hopes these little actions will turn into a groundswell of change.

They aren't alone in this work. Since the late 1990s, a number of groups in Israel and Palestine have begun to tackle climate change. Green Course, based in Israel, leads more than a dozen environmental campaigns each year. In Palestine, the Palestine Heirloom Seed Library is working to protect the agricultural diversity of the Palestinian territory by reintroducing local farming methods. Standing Together brings together activists across the border to resist the occupation and protect the environment.

Sami – now in his late forties – knows that change won’t be easy. Despite his greatest efforts, it’s hard to say whether peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians has come any closer during his lifetime. He’s watched as his generation has failed time and time again not only to bring peace to the Middle East, but also to protect the environment and reduce global warming.

“We promised young people that it would be a better world and it’s not,” Sami says. “We need to create spaces where they’re not just rebelling against us, and begin to ask what is the future we want.”

*Non-violence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind.*

*It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction*

*devised by the ingenuity of man.*

**Mahatma Gandhi**

**Call to Action:** Support Sami and the Holy Land Trust in building resilient communities through nonviolent resistance in Palestine. Follow Sami [https://twitter.com/Sami\\_Awad?s=20](https://twitter.com/Sami_Awad?s=20) <https://holylandtrust.org/>

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