



## Tribute to all Victims in Gaza and Israel

Madrid, Spain, December 14, 2023

By Armondo Lozano

**O**ur hearts had been broken witnessing the pain of people in Gaza and Israel. Our traditional UPF interreligious celebration of New Year could not be a “celebration” since there is nothing to celebrate, but rather a Tribute to ALL Victims. It was an incredible challenge to bring together Jews and Arabs in one room during wartime.

With this idealistic frame of mind, I started building the event. I knew It will be difficult, but not the incredible wall I was going to encounter. I thought the many years of relating with the Palestine Embassy, Palestinian and Arab friends, mostly writers, university professors, artists and musicians will ease the way but NO, they said it’s just impossible to be in the same room with someone from Israel or a Jew. I pleaded with them to please have a larger heart, but they couldn’t endure the tragedy, and I comprehend.

On the other hand, I found our Jewish friends to be more receptive to the idea but with clear red lines: no attacks on the state of Israel, no mention to terrorist Zionism or any other hurting comment. We have a Jewish synagogue in our cultural center for years and have many friends of different walks in life coming from this community, so in this sense was easier to gather a representative group as long as we don’t enter in a political debate.

The main speaker of the program was Father Angel Garcia Rodriguez, founder of “Messengers of Peace”, a person known to all Spaniards for his charitable work in disaster and war zones, winner of the highest prizes on a national level. Father Angel was the key peace mediator we need it.

My second supporter was Yael Cobano, the director of the Reformed Jewish Synagogue of Madrid. Our UPF family have become one with her group. Yael comes from a Sephardi family of Morocco, speaks Arab and understand both sides in this painful struggle. But December 14 could not stop crying through all the program. It was unbearable for her as she told me later.

My third ally was Wafir S. Gibril, a very devout Muslim from Sudan and a great musician quite known in the country. Wafir is our friend for years and was willing to go all the way! His unconditional heart was put to test in the program when he had to play for Eliyah Hera, a singer from Israel. To see Eliyah singing in Hebrew adding “Salaam, Shalom” in the song, with musicians from Sudan, Iran and Spain on the same stage was a deep and moving moment.

Our “Tribute to All Victims” was organized around four areas: Music, Poetry, Messages and Prayers. The music contributions, Christian hymns, Sufi, Arab and Jewish music, had the purpose to prepare the hearts of the 70 people in the audience, a very selective group of people belonging to different religions, invited one by

one to avoid security problems, in fact we had the National Police at the entrance of our center.

But as MC of the program, I knew anything can go wrong in any moment. And it happened when Dr. Mohamed Osman, a university professor of Medicine and reputed poet, came to stage to read. He read a text by a medical colleague and friend of Gaza who had died with the bombings. It was heartbreaking to see him, a very dignified gentleman, crying without stop unable to finish his reading. It changed the spirit of the audience. We became serious, very serious, and many people were crying. We realize then that we could not be in a comfortable zone in front of what is happening. Spain, due to its history, has a very special connection with Muslim and Jewish culture and people are living this conflict with passion and deep concern.

The readings afterwards of one Christian poet and a military man and poet, was good to calmed down everybody. But then Dr. Osman asked me to read a poem that he had translated from Hiba Abu Nada, a young woman poet, killed in the bombings. That was too much for me! My heart was broken by the death of a poet I admired and followed. I could not stop my tears reading the poem. What an emotional rollercoaster! After that moment, one the musicians on the stage said "let's play music, and light up the moment...". That was the Holy Spirit taking through him. I was relieved.

But then came the turn of the "Peace messages" and we were back to pain. Mohamed Samadi, a Moroccan professional working with refugees, gave a talk totally contrary to what we had agreed beforehand. His words denounced the State of Israel and the atrocities to civil population in Gaza. I wanted to vanish from the room looking

at my Jewish friends. After him came Rabbi Mario Stofenmacher and, of course, instead of following the convened speech, went into denouncing Hamas and demanding the liberation of hostages. Again, I wanted to disappear in front of the Arabs, but on the other hand I was very proud of the audience, nobody responded to the provocations of either side. Thanks to God, after that, came Father Angel and his beautiful loving words, simply put, "the problems in this world are the results of not loving one another enough, we have to love more..." Amen to that!

And it came the closing prayers. What a liberation! We made it alive! Wafir 's recitation of the Holy Koran was powerful and deep. Then, since it was the last day of Hanukkah, the Jewish celebration of lights, three representatives of the community lighted the candles and offer prayers, all beautiful! And finally, we had a meditation with background Persian music so that the audience could have a moment of reflection. We finish the program I good terms; Arabs and Jews greeted each other and apologize for being aggressive. But I felt that kind of tension made the evening real. We could experience a tiny bit of what our brothers and sisters are experiencing in the Holy Land.

The following day several participants called or sent messages asking me if I could sleep well that night. It never happened before such a question. Of course not, the tension was too big but I found that many of the participants had a shared feeling: Gratitude on one hand for the fact that such an event took place, and awareness of the real problem we are confronting, demanding from us, spiritual oriented people, a loving, God centered, response, rather than just a political one.

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