

## Opinion What Might Happen if Women in the Holy Land Waged Peace? We're About to Find Out

*We all decide what truths we hold to be self-evident. We all decide where - and with whom - we stand. I'm with them.*



Arab and Jewish women participate in the 'March of Hope,' Israel, October 10, 2016. *Photo Credit* Rami Shllush

2,000 women begin two-week march for peace to end in mass rally in Jerusalem

Jewish-Arab women's peace group delivers political message while avoiding politics

Good things are happening in Israel.

You read that right. Alongside the horrific, the blockbrained, the mean-spirited, the mired, alongside the calamitous and the terrifying, the unjustly, inconceivably cruel, people are setting out, day after day, to do good.

I have trouble believing it myself. It's as impossible to accept as, say, an Israeli bereaved by the conflict, getting together and drawing hundreds

of volunteers among Israeli Jews, to drive Palestinians in need of crucial medical treatment, from the Gaza border directly to hospitals in Israel.

It would take a comprehensive psychic reboot to accept this, to see the tiny, incremental, significant move of the needle toward the better, time after thousands of times. It would take a whole new take on the Holy Land to believe that this could affect change, or even trust that such a thing could be happening.

But it is.

So, if that's true, and it is, what might happen if, say, thousands of women in the Holy Land banded together to wage peace?

What might result if the women included Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Muslims and Christians, residents of kibbutzim and residents of settlements, secular and observant, supported by other women and men as well, in countries far across the world?

We're about to find out.

The night after Rosh Hashanah, hundreds of women set out from Rosh Hanikra on Israel's border with Lebanon, on the first leg of a 200 kilometer cross-country trek. The March of Hope is set to culminate next Wednesday with a mass rally outside the prime minister's residence in Jerusalem.

Organizers hope that following two weeks of local events, treks, and cycle rides throughout the country, tens of thousands will take part in the October 19 demonstration in Jerusalem – an afternoon march from the Supreme Court, past the Knesset and the president's official residence, culminating at what is hoped to be a rally of major proportions at the prime minister's house.

The march is a project of Women Wage Peace, a grass roots organization founded in the disillusionment and despair of the 2014 Gaza war between Israel and Hamas. The movement is unique in a number of ways, not least because of the inclusiveness of its message and its non-partisan activism.

Confronting the most divisive of issues cleaving the Holy Land, the goal of the march and the movement is to spur leaders to pursue a peaceful, negotiated end to the Israeli-Palestinian tragedy.

"We demand that our leaders work with respect and courage towards a solution to the ongoing violent conflict, with the full participation of women in this process," the group has said. "Only an honorable political agreement will secure the future of our children and grandchildren.

They don't have a specific solution to demand. Their near-term goal is to see Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic negotiations resume. And they vow not to stop their activism until an "honorable political agreement, which will bring us, our children and grandchildren a safe future, is reached. "

Good things are happening in Israel. Of late, they are happening more frequently, frequently enough that good things are beginning to overlap.

In one of a number of examples, an unprecedented gathering of Jewish and Muslim religious leaders Thursday issued a remarkable statement. The initiative, hosted by President Reuven Rivlin and organized by the Washington Institute, brought together such figures as Israel's Sephardi chief rabbi, the senior Muslim religious affairs adviser to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and leaders of a major West Bank yeshiva.

"God created life and commanded life. Therefore, we denounce the killing of innocents or any kind of aggression against the other," the participants declared in a statement.

"We believe the deliberate killing of or attempt to kill innocents is terrorism, whether it is committed by Muslims, Jews or others. In this spirit, we encourage all our people to work for a just peace, mutual respect for human life and for the status quo on the holy sites, and the eradication of religious hatred."

You can decide that these are just words. But in this place, there is no such thing as "just words." Words themselves are enough to start wars, stoke mass killings, ruin our lives. At the same time, the right words, from the right people, can initiate tectonic changes for the better. Changes for good.

Words like these, for example, from Women Wage Peace:

"As women, mothers, wives, sisters, and as citizens, we demand that our leaders work with courage toward a solution to the bloody ongoing

conflict: An agreement that will be respectful, non-violent and accepted by both sides."

"It has happened in many places in the world that have experienced ongoing conflicts," they conclude. "We know it can happen here as well."

All of us here make a choice. We all decide what truths we hold to be self-evident. We all decide where – and with whom – we stand.

There are thousands of women here determined to see all of this through to a peaceful end, no matter what and how long that may take.

I'm with them.

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