

Aikido: The Art of Peace and Peacemaking

— Jamie Zimron

POSITIVE NEWS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

There is a deep desire in people today for CHANGE. It is obvious that our world is a troubled place. Life is so beautiful yet hatred and violence rage on, billions of people are suffering, and climate change threatens the entire planet. Palestinians and Israelis have been locked in one of the longest and most intractable struggles in modern history. Still, despite ongoing war in the Middle East and the media emphasis on terrorism, literally all kinds of people are energetically creating peace through cross-cultural dialogue, nonviolent conflict resolution, and cooperative business and educational initiatives.

The Mideast Aikido Peace Project (MAP), also known as Salaam Shalom Aikido (SSA), is playing a vital role in the peace process. MAP has a twofold purpose: 1) spreading the nonviolent practice of Aikido in Israel and Palestine, 2) establishing contact and cooperative ties amongst Arabs and Jews through martial arts training dedicated to fostering peace. Regular joint trainings and even “twin” dojos (schools) are already a reality in Israel and Palestine! Muslims, Christians, and Jews are mixing it up on the mat, with the harmonizing influence of Buddhist philosophy and Eastern body-mind practices.

By its nature, Aikido builds bridges. Its method is to harmonize and connect with an attacker, not to counterattack or to vanquish. Its aim is to neutralize aggression, with no harm coming to anyone. Its larger goal is to bring inner peace to its practitioners, and peace within the entire human family. Martial arts training for peace directly cultivates values and actions that can bring about the positive changes of true respect, equality, balance, health, harmony, inclusion, security, prosperity, and peace for all.

In the words of Shehede, the first Palestinian Aikido sensei in East Jerusalem: “We all want peace. A place where people could live. This place

was heaven. Take down the fence, end the barriers. There are not so many differences when all people are under the same God.”

The Founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba O’Sensei, taught that **True victory is self-victory. The only ‘enemy’ is the mind of discord within.** Aikido seeks not to develop successful fighters, but to end fighting itself. This is a very hopeful message and pathway for Israelis and Palestinians living in the midst of seemingly endless conflict. It becomes possible to retrain and heal the mind, to stop seeing or fearing enemies “out there,” and to be the ones actually making peace.

O’Sensei offered Aikido as “medicine for a sick world.” He gave this profound guidance to all who would practice: *There is disorder in the world because people have forgotten all things emanate from one Source. Return to that Source....The Art of Peace begins with you. Foster peace in your own life and then apply the Art of Peace to all you encounter.*

Says Dekel, an Israeli sensei from West Jerusalem: *Aikido lets us share harmonizing our movements. This is so needed! That way we can come closer and combine the actual people that represent the different sides. I wish to plant peace by doing peace.*

Through Aikido training, people locked in strife are able to recognize a common source and to focus on this innate oneness. This allows a genuine shift to the daily practice of “the loving protection of all life.” Barriers of fear, hatred, and simple lack of contact quickly dissolve when Arabs and Jews meet on the mat, move their bodies together in powerful circles and spirals, and physically give the philosophy of peace a chance!

This e-mail from an Iraqi sensei in wartorn Baghdad says it all. It was sent in response to news that



MAP &BFP SENSEIS MILES KESSLER, JAMIE ZIMRON, DANNY HAKIM
Aiki Extensions had secured funds to purchase new mats for the Iraqi dojo: *By great cheerfulness and big happiness, we received your good news. We danced and we cheering, and started to dream, how will we make a new dojo. I can’t express my feeling about this. Really I can’t.*

PROJECT BACKGROUND AND ACTIVITY UPDATES

Picture these scenes from early 2005: Two Jewish women, one an American-Israeli sensei and the other a Russian-born medical student, arriving along with two Israeli men to practice Aikido with Christian Arabs in a village near the Israel-Lebanon border....These strangers meeting for the first time on the mat, and by midnight eating schwarma, pita, flafel, and baclawa together and loudly schmoozing in Arabic, Hebrew, and English like old friends.... Muslim men focused and smiling on the mat, women and girls training in dogi and head scarves....A dozen Israeli Aikidoists, in the cold of winter, nervously driving their cars and following their Palestinian hosts to a rented hall just a kilometer from a major military checkpoint....Everyone wary but excited to try training together in the Art of Peace....Now imagine all these people who have been dreaming of peace, knowing they are not the only ones.

One morning about four years ago, my phone rang. It was Don Levine, the founder of Aiki Extensions (AE),

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a nonprofit organization of Aikidoists extending the Art of Peace into the world through their professional work in psychology, medicine, law, business, healing, sports, etc. Don knew that I am a dual citizen of Israel and was calling to ask me about Aikido in the Middle East. I said that Aikido was now widely practiced in Israel, and that I had heard there were practitioners in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. I knew that Queen Noor of Jordan had fallen in love with Aikido and in the early 1990s brought a Japanese Sensei to teach in the royal palace in Amman!

I told Don that I was living in Israel in 1994 when the peace treaty with Jordan was signed, and dreamed then of creating some sort of "Salaam Shalom" Aikido peace conference or even dojo. Salaam Shalom: nearly the same words for peace in both Arabic and in Hebrew, from the same root letters meaning "wholeness, perfection." Those must have been the magic words, because the next thing I knew Don was on the phone, the web, and the airplane to form the Middle East Aikido Peace Project. He located contacts in various Arab countries, and visited a small group of Palestinians practicing Aikido in East Jerusalem. These were leaders of Karate and Judo in Palestine, and they were hungry for more Aikido.

The rest is truly history in the making. It is a story that is amazing to tell, encouraging to hear, and wide open for participation. Don worked with Richard Strozzi-Heckler and Philip Emminger to set up the first-ever Training Across Borders (TAB) Aikido Peace Conference, held in Cyprus in April 2005. The TAB vision was to bring people from warring nations together on the mat, on neutral ground in the UN buffer zone, to create understanding and friendship through their mutual passion for Aikido. We were gratified to raise enough funds to help send people to Cyprus, and to find participants willing to step beyond their fear, pain, and defensive mindsets.

For four days in Cyprus, 100 people from Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Bosnia, Serbia, Turkey, and Greece (plus a few Westerners) practiced Aikido, meditated, danced,

massaged, ate, took pictures, went to workshops, laughed, talked, cried, hugged, did more Aikido, and basically had a mind-boggling life-altering wonderful time together! Cyprus was really a watershed, creating effects that continue to ripple and multiply. While we had feared tensions might be too great, yet dared to have high hopes, no one anticipated the great "lovefest" that occurred. Feel these comments from participants:

~ It's an unbelievable feeling to see the things in people's eyes here. Caner, Turkey

~ A lifetime experience. From this moment the world is my family. Spiros, Greece

~ Amazing. Heaven on Earth for four days.

We managed to pull off what governments only dream about. Scott, Turkey

~ It was great to meet Aikidoists from all over the world, especially countries I am not yet allowed to visit. Efrat, Israel

~ These days were a good reminder to an easily forgotten fact. It's people out there.

Thank you for the opportunity to raise my eyes from the narrow sight of daily stressful life, and realize there is a bigger and much more beautiful picture to see. Eyal, Israel

~ I put myself in the hands of O'Sensei second and God first, decided to jump...and landed in a bed of roses too good to be true. There was a Harmony and energy flow unlike I ever experienced and it split my heart in two. Alaa, Jordan

~ This seminar achieved its goals, and went far beyond. We proved that the training mat is a perfect tool that helps people forget their hate, and even love each other. I hope the seeds of peace planted in Cyprus will grow very quickly, so that we will be able to see their positive impacts on our reality. Palestine

~ Glow, peace, glow. Ayman, Jordan

Today a growing number of Israelis are exploring joint training with their Arab neighbors. The Palestinian Aikido Federation has been established, with aid from Israelis, Americans, and Europeans. A vibrant Palestinian dojo exists in East Jerusalem, with crossover between students there and West Jerusalem Israeli dojos. A strong group has emerged in Ramallah in the West Bank, and plans are being laid to expand Aikido into Bethlehem, Nablus, and other Palestinian areas.

A wonderful Aikido community of adults and children is thriving in the northern town of Kfar Yassif. The sensei there has produced Aikido handbooks and films in Arabic, and plans to open branch dojos in northern Israel which will be affiliated with Salaam Shalom Aikido. He is networking with several Israeli

senseis in the north who are opening SSA dojos in the Galilee and Golan. SSA feelers are out in several areas in central and southern Israel. And we are in the process of establishing a MAP/SSA headquarters at the Integral Aikido Institute in Tel Aviv, under the dynamic direction of Sensei Miles Kessler.

Affiliate relationships are continuing to strengthen our efforts. After Cyprus, we gained the official support of the Shimon Peres Peace Center. Recently SSA teamed up with Budo For Peace (BFP)(www.budoforpeace.org) to enhance peace education and exchanges for youth in our dojos. When I met the founder of BFP, Sensei Danny Hakim, it was like meeting my soul brother! Danny is of Egyptian Jewish origin, grew up in Australia, and was a national Olympic Karate champion. He spent a decade training in Japan, then immigrated to Israel to raise a family and promote a future of friendship and peaceful coexistence for the children of the region. In addition to his focus on BFP peace education, Danny works with victims of terror on both sides as a "volunteer martial arts therapist." He describes dramatic results in not only renewed physical capabilities but also respect, self-confidence, and a desire to reach out and put an end to the violence.

Like SSA, BFP's mission is to establish "twin" or partner Palestinian and Israeli dojos and through training together "to uproot the distrust and hatred between the two sides and sow the seeds among younger generations for a future of authentic peace." The week before the 2004 Athens Olympics, Sensei Hakim brought 20 Palestinian and 20 Israeli kids to train together at Delphi and publicize martial arts for peace. This summer, SSA and BFP are joining with Aikido Sensei Robert Kent to bring a pilot group of kids from the Middle East to an American summer camp (www.susquehannock.com/peacecamp.htm). We all aim to bolster martial arts within camp sports activities and to provide powerful, positive, peaceful experiences for youth meeting across national and religious borders.

The Training Across Borders concept has definitely taken hold. Looking to 2008, a second regional TAB conference is under consideration, possibly in Istanbul or Am-

man. "Mini-TAB" seminars continue to sprout in Israel, Palestine, and Jordan. Arab and Jewish Aikidoists will train together in July at the Zurich Aikido Camp ("Z-TAB"), hosted for the third time by Sensei Kurt Bartholet. AE established a thriving Aikido community in war-torn Ethiopia, and the Awassa Peace Dojo there is a beautiful part of the MAP/SSA/TAB family. Past separations, stereotypes, and enmity are giving way to friendly relations through the harmonious medium of Aikido.

REFLECTIONS ON TRAINING AND PEACE EDUCATION

Much has been said about Budo, The Warrior Way, and the modern day "Peaceful Warrior." As time goes on, it seems to me that the line between dojo-practice and life-practice is becoming increasingly permeable. The mat itself is a giant mirror, rendering both realistic and idealistic reflections of who we are and who we can become. The dojo is a laboratory and testing ground whose lessons are impossible to leave behind once we've

changed clothes and returned to the "real" world outside.

The whole feeling of the Middle East Aikido Peace Project always reminds

me of the theme of a 1989 women's martial arts conference: Healing Through Training. I believe that Aikido is well-suited to create the conditions needed for Mideast peace. O'Sensei taught that training exists to "polish the Self" and to "reconcile the world." The vision of this Japanese Shinto priest resonates with the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kabbalah, which revolves around the living notion of Tikkun Olam/Repair of the World. O'Sensei's message also echoes the teachings of Christ, with the emphasis on Ai/the supreme power of love

and the phenomenal possibilities for healing when people forsake fear and fighting. The very word "Islam" comes from the root s-l-m, salaam, "to make whole, peace."

Deep within we know that the greatest power is not brute force. Forceful-type power really does not feel good. It is not ultimately satisfying or effective. It opens the door to bullying, oppression, and destruction. Peaceful power respects all life. It springs from care and interconnectedness. Practicing Aikido is entering into relationship that seeks harmony and mutual growth. With each new partner we viscerally experience our common humanity and enjoy the flow of universal energy. This opens the way to real healing and peacemaking.

Who hasn't gotten hurt and lost in the distortions all around and inside us? As we train our bodies and minds, we move through the fragmentation that has led to so much suffering and harm. Breathing and moving in the very essence of life, we restore ourselves to wholeness and can more readily resolve conflict. Training keeps becoming a deeper path of Tikkun Olam, reconciling and repairing the world. Restoring ourselves and "the others" (our new friends) to the perfection and unity that already IS—and having a good time doing it! In O'Sensei's words: *The Path of Peace is exceedingly vast, reflecting the grand design of the hidden and manifest worlds....Rely on peace to activate your manifold powers!*

The possibilities for peace indwell within each of us, and surely must be present in the Holy Land. Palestinians and Israelis are actual neighbors, and biblical cousins. This is geographic and historical reality. While others look towards military or political solutions to the conflict, Aikido is simple and direct. It offers physical interaction that confirms spiritual truth and the efficacy of power that is peaceful. While others treat peace as a last resort, or a sign of weakness or surrender, Aikido provides sound philosophy and concrete training in the power of peace.

O'Sensei saw that fighting and war could "destroy us utterly" and so urged: *"What we need now are techniques of harmony, not of contention."* During the era of fascism in Japan, he actually modified traditional

martial arts techniques to eliminate competition and conquering! He fashioned Aikido as a great Way for people to literally become one with "The Great Spirit of Peace." O'Sensei wanted every person to develop the kind of heart, mind, and actions that would eliminate all strife and killing, and that could turn conflict into creativity and mutual benefit.

It is this Aikido philosophy and physical training that has the power to turn enemies into friends and peacemakers. In this light, I'd like to share one more incredibly eye-opening and heart-warming e-mail from the Ki Center in Baghdad, amidst all of the incomprehensible violence in Iraq. A dojo member was recently killed in a suicide bombing, several other members have lost family and friends, and most have now fled to Syria and Jordan where they are continuing to train. Says Bashar: *"Once a Japanese press man I met at our dojo, he asked me before the last war Why did you choose Aikido? My answer was: Aikido make me smile in front of my enemy. We still training in anywhere and in all exceptional circumstance. AIKIDO is our way and our life."*

WHAT YOU CAN DO

AIKIDO is our way and our life. Where so many have been frozen apart in war and a dangerous culture of hatred, war and violence, Aikido is bringing the bright light of peaceful possibilities. Moral and financial support is vital, and so appreciated by those "on the ground" in the Middle East. Here are five ways Aikidoists, martial artists, and everyone can cross borders and get involved:

- 1) Make a tax-deductible donation. www.aiki-extensions.org, (773) 702-7917.
- 2) Become a Sister Sponsor to a Salaam Shalom Aikido school in the Middle East. Contact AE.
- 3) Host a MAP training seminar/event. Senseis can cosponsor a workshop or speak in your area.
- 4) Become an Aiki Corps volunteer. Spend 3-12 months teaching Aikido in a war-torn or poor area.
- 5) Send Israeli and Palestinian children to summer camp. Contact Robert Kent at rk@aikidokids.com, www.susquehannock.com/peacecamp.htm.

Feel free to pass on this article, and to share your ideas and contacts with us by e-mail: info@aiki-extensions.org or jamiesensei@aol.com. Salaam—Shalom—May Peace Prevail!

SENSEI JAMIE ZIMRON is a board member of AE and cofounder of MAP. She holds a 5th Degree Black Belt and is a somatic psychotherapist (MFT), mind-body fitness trainer, and LPGA golf professional. Through Aikido and her KiAi Golf and KiAi Way trainings, Jamie works to embody "the mechanics and magic" of Peaceful Empowerment.



AIKIDO TRAINING IN K FAR YASSIF