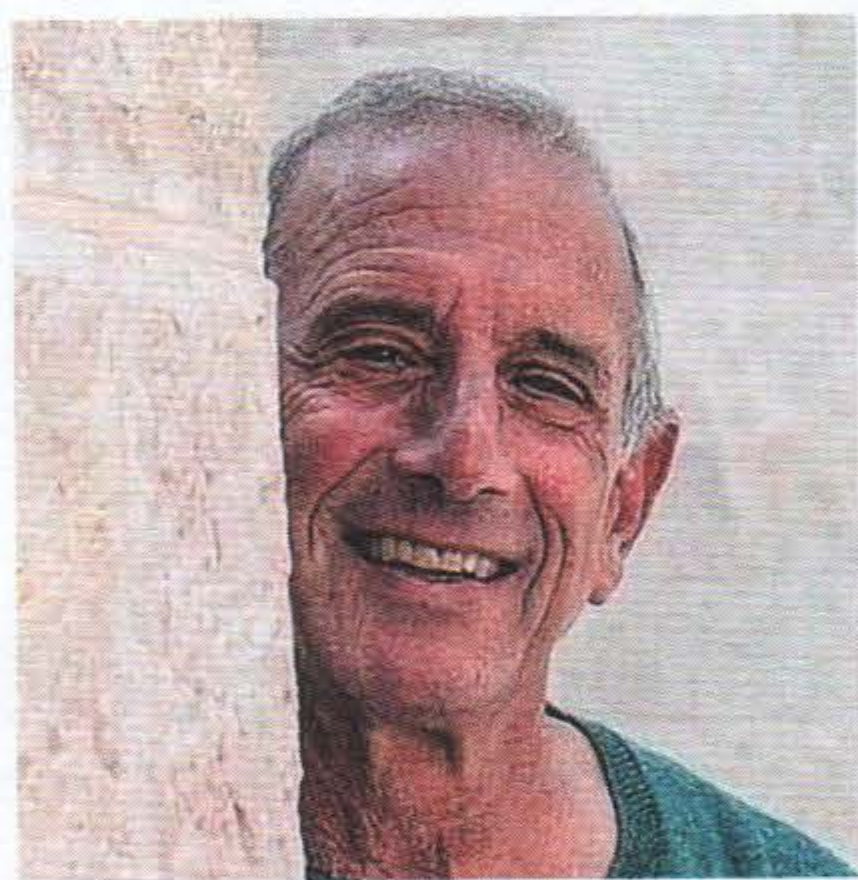


BRIDGING THE GAP: A SOLEBURY ALUM STRIVES FOR PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

BY MARY ROGELSTAD



It was a bright and sunny day in December 2023, when **Yoav Peck '64** (known as Bo to his classmates) chatted about his life in Jerusalem, but he called that beautiful afternoon an illusion. On one hand, his family was making plans to gather for Hanukkah—to share memorable moments that come at the best of times. But bombing sounds and daily funeral plans were a constant reminder that for millions of people in the region, it was actually the worst.

“It’s a very strange reality. I’m less than an hour and a half drive from Gaza,” Yoav said. “So while we’ll have friends over this evening and light candles and sing Hanukkah songs, just down the road there’s a war going on... and everyone is on edge.”

For Yoav that reality has had a particularly deep impact. He’s dedicated decades of his life to peace initiatives, working to bridge the gap between Israelis and Palestinians. Yet now Yoav says no one seems to know how to resolve the current conflict and end the growing death toll and desperation.

On a personal front, his 50-year-old son is back in uniform protecting a kibbutz and his daughters live in a region that’s under frequent bombardment. So Yoav naturally worries about his family and his fellow Israelis, but he also is distressed about the innocent people of Gaza who are dying.

Grasping the complexity of such tragedy is something Yoav has mastered over the decades. The groundwork for this was first laid when he attended Solebury School in the early 1960s. He ended up at the school after a heart-wrenching event sent him off track, and his parents knew he needed help to find his way back.

Searching for Strength at Solebury School

Yoav grew up in the New York City area. During his childhood, boarding school was not on the radar screen until the incidents of one day changed Yoav’s course. In middle school, he headed out with two friends to go exploring. And then an accident happened.

“We were playing in a swamp near our house, and my friend fell and ruptured his spleen,” Yoav said. “The third friend went off to find the police. But I was there alone with my dying friend, who was just hanging on. A half-hour after they got him to the hospital, he was dead. And I was just kind of a mess.”

Amid his grief, Yoav said he became a troublemaker and stopped studying. When he was in 9th grade, his father brought up the idea of going to boarding school.

“The idea just completely blindsided me. I hadn’t in any way thought about that. We first went off to a conservative, coat-and-tie prep school in New England, and I couldn’t get out of there fast enough,” Yoav said.



Yoav with his newest grandson



Yoav facilitating a workshop for activists

His perspective changed when he visited Solebury School and met former assistant headmaster Bill Berkeley '49. Yoav liked him immediately. He told his father Solebury was the school. It wasn't long until he packed his bags and arrived at Solebury in a bit of shock. He said he was still a troublemaker, but then he encountered a teacher who made a big difference.

"I was lucky enough to have an English teacher named Rod Cookman, who was just an incredible guy," Yoav said. "I remember we read *The Catcher in the Rye* and he asked us to write a composition inspired by the story. I went home and filled two pages with curse words, turned it in, and waited for the response. When I got it back, all I found at the bottom of the page was the question, 'Feel better?'"

It was then that Yoav began to realize the faculty understood who he was. He slowly began to appreciate the guardrails that came with their supervision.

"I liked being sort of shepherded by people who cared for me," Yoav said.

It wasn't long before Yoav was working with athletic director Don Musselman, to form a wrestling team. He delved into deeper topics by traveling with Rod Cookman to an impoverished area of Philadelphia for service work.

He also enjoyed the days when classes were suspended so they could work on groundskeeping activities. Eventually, he became senior class president. By the time he reached graduation, he was given an award for social conscience that he still has on his bookshelf today.

"At Solebury, my desire to excel in the realm of social activism was really ignited," Yoav said.

Using the Lessons Learned

After Solebury, Yoav got active in the movement against the war in Vietnam. At the University of Wisconsin and later at the University of California, Berkeley, he participated in and led mass protests against the war. In Berkeley, he lived in an activist commune, taking part in street actions and organizing movement events. He joined a political rock group called "Contraband."

But Yoav's perspective on life in Berkeley changed after he was called for jury duty. The trial involved a Black Panther member who Yoav was convinced wouldn't get a fair trial. He wanted to be on the jury, so he donned a wig to hide his longer hair and wore a suit.

He wasn't selected for the jury, but he spent six weeks taking the bus outside Berkeley and got to see a different America.

"I had an awakening and realized that I had been living in this bubble in Berkeley. Meanwhile, the world was outside my window and I was missing it," Yoav said.

So first he headed to Europe to lead a bike trip for teenagers, and then he went to Israel.

"I gave myself two weeks to go to Israel and figure out the Middle East, and that was 50 years ago. I'm still working on it," Yoav said.

He lived for more than a decade at a kibbutz where he learned about communal living and finding cooperative ways to promote change. Eventually, he became interested in how the systems people live in affect them, so he got a master's degree in organizational psychology. That set the stage for his work in peace organizations.

He worked with teenagers involved in youth peace movements and embraced the hopes that came with the Oslo Accords in the 1990s.

"The Israeli tanks patrolling Palestine were surrounded by joyous Palestinians, inserting olive branches into the barrels of cannons. There was an incredible euphoria," Yoav said.

After the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, things began to change, but many people still held onto hope. The Israeli Foreign Ministry sent Yoav to Gaza to train Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) members on management basics. Later he became the director of the Sulha Peace Project and served as Director of Community Relations at the Bereaved Families Forum that supports Palestinians and Israelis who've lost loved ones during conflicts.

"We had this sense that we were building the future together," Yoav said.

The current war is throwing that in doubt, but even at the worst of times, Yoav helped organize a gathering of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Old City to pray and hope for peace.

And each day the lessons he learned at Solebury keep carrying him through no matter what he sees outside his window.

"The people at Solebury really saw the individual and gave you the sense that you're being called to be bigger than you are," Yoav said. "There was this understanding that people, when given the opportunity, will rise to the occasion. If you give people the opportunity to speak up and feel safe, people are willing to change." ■