

FEATURING: Jordan, Dita Von Teese, Glastonbury's style rebels, and the perils of posing for Modigliani

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HEARTS AND MINDS

Inside this Jewish child is a transplanted kidney — from an Arab boy shot dead by Israeli soldiers. Christine Toomey investigates his parents' selfless decision to donate his organs to the children of 'the enemy', and the emotions it has stirred between implacable foes



MENUCHE LEVINSOHN,
4, RECEIVED ONE OF
AHMED'S KIDNEYS
Menuche and her mother
(centre) at their home
in Jerusalem in May

A MIXED BLESSING

When a Palestinian boy was killed by Israeli soldiers last year, his parents donated his organs — saving the lives of three Jews. Hailed by some as a triumph of humanity amid the horrors of the conflict, it has also caused controversy. Christine Toomey reports. Portraits: Heidi Levine



Ahmed's mother, Abla, and her daughter Takwa with a photograph of Ahmed. Below: Abla, her husband, Ismail, and other relatives are kept waiting at an Israeli checkpoint while trying to attend a party held in honour of their son

More than anything else, on the morning of November 3, 2005, Ahmed Khatib wanted to buy a tie. "I want to look like a real bridegroom," he told his mother and father as he paraded in front of them, proudly smoothing his hands over his new beige shirt and matching trousers – a bridegroom being the 12-year-old boy's idea of the epitome of elegance.

His parents had bought him the clothes as a present to celebrate Eid-al-Fitr, the Muslim holiday marking the end of Ramadan. Ahmed was so excited about the day ahead that he had woken up much earlier than his siblings and, at dawn, had gone to the mosque to pray and visit the grave of his grandparents, as is traditional. Afterwards he returned home to help his mother make morning tea for the family. "He was the one who helped me most around the house," Abla, Ahmed's softly spoken mother, explains while rocking her youngest daughter in her arms. "He had a gentle character and knew his sisters were too little to start doing household chores."

As the family sat sipping their tea, Ahmed kept talking about how he wanted a tie. "I told him all the shops would be closed. But he insisted that Nasser's store would be open," says Ahmed's father, Ismail, a tall man with stooped shoulders



He saw Ahmed collapse. His friend had been shot – once in the head, once in the stomach

and dark stains of anguish circling his eyes. "He was a good boy and I gave him a few coins to let him go and see." So Ahmed set off at a run. As he wound his way through the narrow alleyways of the Jenin refugee camp in the Palestinian West Bank, he picked up his friend Hithem.

When the two boys reached the corner shop on the camp's outskirts, they found it shut – as Ahmed's father had predicted. But there was a crowd of children in the street letting off fireworks to celebrate the feast, so the two friends ran to join them and started to play. ➤ ➤ ➤

Hithem stands anxiously shifting his weight from foot to foot as he points to the spot opposite the shop where the two boys played that day – a semi-enclosed area of wasteland that must once have been a row of buildings. Hithem bites his lip as he remembers what his friend said to him that morning. “He said, ‘I feel like I’m going to die today.’ When I asked him why, he said, ‘I don’t know, man. But I feel it.’ I was afraid for him.”

The game the boys played that morning was what kids in Britain call cowboys and Indians. In Jenin – the refugee camp partially flattened by the 2002 Israeli army assault that left 52 Palestinians dead – it is called army and Arabs. Ahmed was the Arab, Hithem the army. Hithem was dressed for the part: his clothes were camouflage and he carried a toy gun. The boys who play Arabs carry stones and pretend Molotov cocktails, he explains earnestly. At just before 10am, however, the boys’ game became horrifyingly real.

Earlier that morning, a small unit of elite Israeli soldiers had entered Jenin in search of a suspected terrorist. When word went around that the soldiers were there, Palestinian gunmen took up positions on rooftops, and a larger crowd of children congregated near Hithem and Ahmed. Afraid the situation would escalate, the Israeli army called in reinforcements. Several Jeeps full of soldiers and at least one armoured personnel carrier rolled into the street where the children were gathered, according to eyewitnesses.

As gunmen fired shots at the soldiers, hitting the side of one Jeep, the children started throwing stones towards the vehicles 130 metres away.

Hithem doesn’t remember why Ahmed dashed out of the protected area where they had been playing. Perhaps it was to get a clearer view of what was going on; perhaps it was to toss stones at the soldiers – though Hithem denies this. But what happened next is something he says he will never forget and “it hurts” to talk about.

Still crouched behind a wall playing army and Arabs, Hithem says he saw Ahmed suddenly collapse. Though he did not realise it immediately, his friend had been shot by Israeli soldiers – once in the head, once in the stomach. Terrified, Hithem says he tossed his toy gun in the direction that Ahmed lay and fled. While an older boy scooped Ahmed up and staggered off trying to reach a hospital, an Israeli soldier approached the children, picked up the toy gun and left. In an attempt to explain the killing of an innocent child, pictures of the toy gun they argued he was carrying would later be distributed to the press, laid out alongside a semi-automatic M-16 rifle to illustrate how like the real thing it had looked.

Ahmed clung to life for two days. When it was clear the hospital in the refugee camp did not have the resources to treat such serious wounds, his father called Abla’s brother Muhammad for help. He lives on the other side of the so-called “green line” drawn by the 1949 armistice separating Israel from the occupied territories. So Muhammad is an Israeli citizen and, as such, could request his nephew be airlifted to an Israeli hospital with better facilities. Ahmed was flown



MOHAMMED KABUA, 5, RECEIVED AHMED’S KIDNEY



SAMAH GADBAAN, 12, RECEIVED AHMED’S HEART

Above: the Bedouin boy Mohammed Kabua last month. Left: Samah Gadbaan, wearing a surgical mask to protect her from germs, holds up a poster of Ahmed, whose heart saved her life

day of their son’s life-support machine being switched off, Ahmed’s heart, lungs, liver and kidneys were used for transplant operations needed by six desperately ill Israelis – two Arabs and four Jews – five of them children.

Newspapers as far away as Ottawa and New Delhi carried stories heralding the Khatibs’ “Gift of Peace” and their “outstanding gesture of humanity”. “The name of Ahmed Khatib won’t go into the history books alongside that of Yitzhak Rabin or Yasser Arafat, but it deserves at least a mention,” the Los Angeles Times wrote. The shooting of Ahmed got barely a mention in the Israeli media the day it happened, so frequent is the death of a Palestinian child. But when news of his parents’ decision to donate his organs broke, it not only made the front page of most Israeli papers, but the country’s future prime minister Ehud Olmert called Ismail and Abla to thank them for a “gesture that would produce an atmosphere of deeper connection and goodwill between Israelis and Palestinians”. After this initial flurry of heart-warming stories, however, the Khatib family was forgotten as the media turned its attention back to the daily maelstrom of violence that engulfs the Middle East.

Yet what happened, not only afterwards but – more incredibly in light of their subsequent decision – what had happened to Abla and Ismail before their son was killed, provides a chilling insight into the dynamics of a conflict that between 2000 and the end of May 2006 has claimed the lives of 1,005 Israelis and 3,512 Palestinians, many of them – 119 Israelis and 695 Palestinians – children.

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Our first glimpse of Ismail, Abla, five of their children, and other elderly relatives is as ➡➡➡➡➡

The father publicly stated that he wished the organ ‘had come from a Jew, not an Arab’

first to a hospital in Afula and then to one in Haifa. His parents were refused permission to accompany their dying son. As Palestinians are subject to travel restrictions, they had to request a permit to exit the West Bank. By the time this was granted, Ahmed had less than 24 hours to live.

What happened next made headlines around the world. When it was clear their son would not survive, Ismail and Abla took the decision to donate Ahmed’s organs for transplant. Within a

Right: Anat Beton and her husband, Amnon, with pictures of their daughter Osher, who died after an unsuccessful transplant. Below: Ina Rubenstein receives antibiotics during follow-up treatment

the family stands huddled together beyond the electrified wire fence, watchtowers and steel barricades of an Israeli checkpoint separating the West Bank area around Jenin from Israel. Despite having been told the previous day that they have permission to pass, the family is kept waiting beyond this barrier for more than an hour.

As the stalemate drags on, I approach one of the soldiers and ask if he is aware of the background of the family being kept waiting. He does not reply. Does he know, I ask, what happened to their son: that he was shot by Israeli soldiers while playing, and that his parents' decision to donate the boy's organs saved five lives, three of them Jewish? Silence. Does he know that the Khatib family's decision was hailed as both "moving" and "noble" by senior Israeli politicians? Still no response. Growing increasingly frustrated, I ask the soldier if he had a terminally ill brother, sister, mother or father whose life depended on a transplant, would he not be desperately hoping for someone to make the decision of the family standing before him? Silence. Finally I raise my voice. Does he not feel ashamed at how he and others at the checkpoint are now treating this family? Still he says nothing, but in the shadow of his helmet I see one eye twitching rapidly, the only sign of inner turmoil.

Immediately I feel ashamed for having lost my temper. The soldier is just a conscript, barely out of his teens. I have only been here a few hours, yet already I am torn by conflicting emotions that must tear at the conscience of those not already entrenched in extremist positions.

When the family is finally allowed to pass through, we squash into two cars and travel to the village of El-Bqa'a in northern Galilee. Here the family have been invited to a party prepared by the parents of 12-year-old Samah Gadbaan, to give thanks for their daughter receiving Ahmed's heart. The Gadbaan family – Druze Arabs often treated with suspicion and hostility by Israelis and Palestinians alike – are joined by the parents of Mohammed Kabua, the five-year-old Bedouin boy whose life was saved by the transplantation of one of Ahmed's kidneys. Kayed and Fairuz Kabua have travelled for many hours with their son from the Negev desert in the south of the country to thank Ismail and Abba. Samah's parents, Riyad and Yusra, also invited the families of the four Jewish recipients of Ahmed's lungs, second kidney and liver – split between a seven-month-old baby and the 57-year-old woman. None have chosen to attend.

The father of a four-year-old girl, whose life has been saved by the transplantation of one of Ahmed's kidneys, publicly stated afterwards that he wished the organ "had come from a Jew and not an Arab". His comments deeply wounded the Khatib family, and were greeted with outrage by other Palestinians and many Israelis.



OSHER BETON (IN PICTURES), 7 MONTHS, RECEIVED PART OF AHMED'S LIVER

'On the one hand we are appreciative, but they are continuing their terrorist attacks'



INA RUBINSTEIN, 57, RECEIVED PART OF AHMED'S LIVER

Following the outcry, the ultra-orthodox family fell silent. I will meet them later. But before this, I hear Ismail and Abba's extraordinary story.

For the hours they are hunched by my side in the back of a car on the way to Galilee, the grieving couple are preoccupied only with recollections of their son. They talk about how he loved to draw and play the guitar. At the

house of the Gadbaan family, Ismail and Abba's obvious pain amid the joy of those who welcome them is heart-rending. When Samah and Mohammed's parents bring their now-healthy children to greet the couple, others in the room fall silent at the poignancy of the scene. Samah's brother suddenly launches into an impromptu song of gratitude that his sister's life has been saved. A parade is then organised to march through the town in honour of the Khatibs, followed by a formal ceremony and many speeches of thanks in the town hall. It is a long day.

Back in their home in Jenin the next day, the couple are exhausted. Ismail is also on edge. He is due to leave early the next morning for Italy, but by midnight has still not received permission from the Israelis to leave the camp. He has been invited to attend a peace conference in Milan, one of several such invitations from abroad, and to meet with a group interested in helping him set up an organisation he wants to found. It will be aimed at raising awareness of the need for organ donors, and would also help sick Palestinians find medical treatment beyond the confines of the occupied territories. With no prospect of a transplant, his elder brother died of kidney disease years ago – a crucial factor in Ismail's decision to donate his own son's organs. Ismail is also hoping to finalise arrangements for his eldest son, Muhammad, to travel to Florence, where he has been invited by philanthropists to finish his school studies.

"I want to get him out of this place. I would like all my children to study abroad," says Ismail. "I want Muhammad to fulfil his brother's dreams through education, not by taking vengeance for what happened to Ahmed. I don't want my son to become a militant." It is a legitimate fear. Raised amid the gun culture of years of warfare, it is the militants of extremist factions who regularly send suicide bombers into Israel, ➤➤➤

Palestinian boys play with toy guns at Balata refugee camp, near the West Bank city of Nablus

and whom children in the camp widely regard as heroes. Within days of Ahmed's death, pictures of him were pasted up alongside posters of the many suicide bombers – martyrs, as those here call them – who have come from Jenin.

Then Ismail begins to speak about his own childhood, spent entirely within the densely populated refugee camp, established by the UN in 1953 for those who lost their homes after the founding of the state of Israel. He talks of being sent to prison at 15 for throwing stones at Israeli soldiers, and of spending a total of five years in jail after that for offences including throwing Molotov cocktails. He talks of being abused in prison, of being forced to stand for days with his hands against a wall and a sack over his head into which someone had urinated. But it is when he and Abla start to speak of what happened to their family during the 2002 Israeli army incursion into Jenin that the most disturbing story emerges.

Because the couple's two-storey house stands near the top of a steep incline from which much of the refugee camp can be seen, it was taken over by Israeli troops and used as a lookout post. Together with their children and other relatives and neighbours – 29 in all – the couple were herded into a small windowless room and kept there under armed guard throughout most of the military operation. "We had to ask permission to go to the toilet and to make food for our children in our own house. It was humiliating," Abla recalls. But while the women and children were kept like that for a week, Ismail and a brother were hauled from the room and used as human shields – pushed into house after house in front of soldiers, testing to see if the buildings were booby-trapped. In the confusion following one explosion, the brothers, unhurt, managed to break free. But later Ismail was recaptured and used as a shield again. This time he was stripped naked to ensure he did not have a bomb strapped to his body, and his shoulder was used as a gun prop.

Rather than talk about how this made him feel, Ismail describes the fear of the Israeli soldiers: "One was so afraid he started crying and his commanding officer shouted, 'Shape up! You're not in Bethlehem!'" Amid the confusion of gunfire, Ismail once again escaped, and this time managed to flee the camp. Two days later, soldiers released his family and they also fled Jenin.

"When the fighting finally stopped, I was one of the first to set foot back in the camp," says Ismail. "The smell was incredible. There were body parts spread all over the rubble. Part of our house was destroyed. My children saw all this. They were extremely affected. They kept asking me questions I was incapable of answering."

Ahmed was nine at the time. The following year, Ismail says, his son was hauled by an Israeli soldier into one of their tanks, given a broom and ordered to clean it. "Ahmed tried to make a joke of it afterwards," says Ismail. "He said the tank was disgusting inside where the soldiers had



'There were body parts spread all over the rubble and mounds of dirt. My children saw this'

dirtied themselves. He said the soldiers had tried to give him biscuits and crisps. But he told them, 'I don't need your stuff. My father can buy me what I need.'" After listening to the details of such humiliation and tragedy, I cannot help but ask the couple how they could find it within their hearts to donate their son's organs, knowing that because they were in an Israeli hospital, they would almost certainly go to people of the same nationality as the soldiers who had shot Ahmed. It is a question many others in Jenin also asked: the couple's decision to donate their son's organs did not find unanimous support. Anticipating this, and so to safeguard his family, Ismail sought the approval of the grand mufti of Jerusalem, the most senior Islamic cleric in Palestine, before telling the hospital of his decision.

In answer to my question, Abla speaks of the final hours of Ahmed's life. As she and Ismail sat beside his hospital bed, she recalls being surrounded by parents all praying for their sons and daughters. "As we sat reading from the Koran, the other parents read from the Torah. Then one of these mothers came over to us and began to pray for Ahmed, and we went and prayed for her son," she says, pulling Ahmed's little sister Takwa tight against her breast. "We are all mothers and fathers. We all love our children. The message I wanted to send with what we did was, 'Stop killing children!'"

Ismail nods agreement and then repeats a practised phrase: "Hope comes from suffering

and we, as a people, have suffered a lot." When I press him further, he says: "Look," with a deep sigh, as if explaining an obvious truth, "a sense of common humanity is much bigger than any feelings of bitterness and revenge." Try telling that to some of those whose lives were transformed by the action Ismail and Abla took.

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The Jerusalem district of Ramat Shlomo lies less than 100 miles south of Jenin. But the newly built and immaculately maintained suburb seems much further removed from the virtual slum conditions of the Jenin refugee camp. It is here that Tova Levinsohn sits cradling her daughter Menuche. Menuche is four now, and with her golden curls, round cheeks and saucer-like eyes, she looks like a Botticelli angel. But Menuche did not always look so healthy. A year and a half ago she suffered sudden kidney failure, after which she spent three days a week undergoing dialysis.

Menuche was put on the waiting list for a kidney transplant. On November 6, the day after Ahmed died, the doctors called with the news of an available organ. "I burst out crying. It was such an emotional moment. They were tears of happiness," recalls Tova. Within hours, Menuche was having surgery at the Schneider children's hospital in Petah Tiqwa near Tel Aviv.

At one point Tova describes the Khatib family as "messengers of God". "We believe God sent them to give us the kidney," she says. Her husband, Yaakov, claims he does not recall making the comment about wishing the kidney that saved his daughter's life had come from a Jew, not an Arab. "Some people say I said wrong things. But I don't really remember," he said. "Menuche was still in surgery when I was asked by the media what I thought. I didn't know how to react. It was all so shocking. I was so tired I hardly knew what I was saying."

Be this as it may, it is the casual comments both he and his wife make subsequently that signal a sad disregard for the circumstances in which their daughter received her new

kidney. It is six months since Ahmed's death as I sit talking with the Levinsohn family, and Tova turns to me looking for me to jog her memory. "I'm in the process of having a social worker help me write a letter to the family to thank them," she says. "What's their name again?" And then she adds: "It's not usual for Arabs to give to Jews, you know." Asked how he now feels about what he said, Yaakov says he "didn't truly appreciate what they [Ismail and Abla] did at the time. It was a big thing". As he speaks, Tova mutters: "They didn't have any choice, really." Then Yaakov continues: "After all you get from Arabs, you know, they are the enemy, trying to do bad things, and then there they are donating organs."

Such views, Yaakov explains, have been greatly influenced by the time he spent in the Israeli army, during which his duties included identifying the bodies of Israeli soldiers killed in the conflict. "It is a very hard situation here." "That's right," Tova chips in. "On the one hand we are very appreciative, but on the other hand they are continuing with their terrorist attacks."

Tova is right in that once Ismail and Abla made the decision to donate their son's organs, medical ethics meant they could not stipulate to whom those organs would go, though nor, the couple say, would they have wanted to. This has meant in the past that donated organs of Israelis killed in suicide bomb attacks have also gone to save the lives of Palestinians. But it is the

Levinsohns' seeming inability to look beyond the fact that the donor came from "the other side" that is most striking. They are not alone in this. The family of the teenage girl who received Ahmed's lungs, I am informed, is so anxious about the reaction of those in their orthodox community to finding out that she received her transplanted lungs from an Arab child, that they refuse to be identified. And when I meet the 57-year-old Jewish woman to whom part of Ahmed's liver was transplanted, she makes her view clear in three different ways: "It was not important who the organ came from. I did not want to know... I just wanted to get the liver... It was my own situation I was very sad about."

Ina Rubinstein, her husband and two children moved to Israel from Uzbekistan 16 years ago to escape persecution by nationalist forces there. "It was a big relief to come here, but then we found things were not so easy here either," says Ina, who was just hours from death when the transplant of part of Ahmed's liver was performed. The operation did not go well. Ten days later she received a second successful transplant. "Of course it was a pity what happened to the boy, and I am grateful to his parents," Ina finally concedes. "But the people I really want to thank are the doctors who saved my life."

Such grudging attitudes are counterbalanced only by that of the parents of the seven-month-old girl who received the other part of Ahmed's

liver. Anat and Amnon Beton called their baby daughter Osher, meaning "happiness", and pictures of her cover the walls of the couple's home in Akko, north of Haifa. But Osher lived for only two days after her transplant operation. "It's a pity. I would have been so proud if my daughter had lived with Ahmed's liver," says Anat. The reason the couple did not attend the Gadbaans' party, they explain, was because they are still observing a period of mourning.

"If I could have gone I would have hugged Ahmed's mother," says Anat. "I would have taken her and told her thank you, told her that her loss gave life to five people." Amnon says: "We have friends who are Arab and Christian. We want peace. It did not matter to us that the liver came from a Palestinian boy. We are all humans."

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In the months following Ahmed's death, the Israeli human-rights organisation B'Tselem wrote to the chief military prosecutor of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) demanding a criminal investigation be opened into the shooting. Soldiers had not used crowd-control measures such as tear gas, but instead had used live ammunition as the first resort, B'Tselem argued, describing it as another example of the IDF's "trigger-happy" policy. According to witnesses, Hithem's account that his friend had not been carrying a toy gun is true – though one said the boys had been throwing stones at the soldiers.



Palestinian teenagers carry Ahmed's body during his funeral procession on November 6 last year

For the past three years, B'Tselem and the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) have been petitioning the IDF's judge advocate general's office to open criminal investigations into the killing of every Palestinian not participating in fighting. In response, the state attorney's office last month told the High Court of Justice that military police have been increasing the number of criminal investigations against Israeli soldiers suspected of killing "non-combatants". In the four years to July 2004, it said, the army had conducted 80 investigations, while during the following year, 55 new cases had been opened, and in the nine months after that, 40. The reason for this increase in investigations, it said, was that a lessening in Palestinian violence meant

less reason for civilians to be hurt. Human-rights workers argue a different case. They say there has been an escalation in Israeli military action since last autumn, when Israel resumed targeted killings, and an even further increase since Hamas came to power this year. Such violence is widely viewed as a form of collective punishment for a people who voted in a party that refuses to recognise the state of Israel's right to exist.

But even this increase in the number of criminal investigations means that of the 3,512 Palestinians killed by the Israeli security forces from September 2000 to May 2006 – more than half of whom are believed not to have been participating in fighting when they died – only 175 investigations have been opened. Of this total, 19 cases, involving the deaths of 26 people, went to court, and seven of these resulted in convictions; six on charges such as illegal use of a weapon. The number of convictions on the charge of manslaughter: one – a situation that B'Tselem argues amounts to a "de facto climate of impunity" for killing civilians.

As to the killing of Ahmed, the IDF say that while they "regret" the shooting, they can find "no justification" to open an investigation. Puzzled that their written response to my inquiry – B'Tselem is still waiting for a reply to their demand – refers to Ahmed as "the man", I call to confirm we are talking about the shooting of a 12-year-old boy. "We want to emphasise that he

looked older than he was," a spokeswoman says.

In Jenin I walked the 130 metres from the place where Ahmed was shot to the position from which soldiers in a Jeep are said to have targeted him. My eyesight is not good, yet I could clearly see that Ahmed's friends, with whom I had been talking at the spot where he fell, were children.

Trying to make sense of what Ahmed's death and such reactions to it say about what is going on in the Arab-Israeli conflict, I visit the grand mufti of Jerusalem. But instead of a spiritual response, I find myself on the receiving end of more political diatribe about the current mess in the Middle East being the fault originally of the British, who with the Balfour declaration of 1917 supported the formation of a Jewish national home in British-mandated Palestine.

Finally, I remember the words of another grieving father I had met in Jerusalem several years before. Rami Elhanan lost his beloved 15-year-old daughter, Smadar, in a suicide bombing attack nine years ago, and has spent much of his time since touring Israeli schools talking about the conflict and the need for it to end. "Sometimes I feel like a boy with his finger in the dam, talking about peace when the flood of violence and hatred has already swept away the wall," he said. "But I believe strongly that the minute the price of not having peace exceeds the price of peace, then peace will come. And the loss of a child is the highest price any parent can pay." ■



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