

## **"We, Israeli-Arabs in Israel, will live as Israelis"**

### **An Interview with Sheikh Abdullah Nimr Darwish**

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In 1971, Sheikh Abdullah Nimr Darwish founded the Islamic Movement in the State of Israel. The decision to take part in the 1996 elections for the Knesset brought about a split in the movement's ranks. Today, [the moderate wing of the] Islamic Movement is headed by Ibrahim Sarsur, while the fifty-five year old Darwish continues as the movement's spiritual leader and activist. "The difference between us and the extremist camp is in the place where we are at," says Darwish: "My ex-followers, on the other hand, the extremists, are floating on chairs above the earth; their feet are not on the ground and that is dangerous. That is the difference between them and us: I am here and my feet are on the ground. As long as my feet are on the ground I can influence others. I can walk to Jerusalem, eventually I can reach the Knesset, and if I make my presence felt, I can get to the Histadrut and to local municipal primaries. I just don't believe that people who float in the air can get to all these positions because the Knesset and Histadrut and local municipalities are not in the air—not until the Messiah comes, at least. That's why I want to remain connected to all facets of life here."

The interview with Sheikh Darwish was carried out by editorial staff members of the BGU Review in the municipal building in Kfar Kassam, which is one of the political strongholds of the Islamic Movement. The interview took place during September 2003, after about three years of violence and terror, after the collapse of the peace process, after the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that brought about the downfall of the Taliban regime and of Saddam Hussein. These were stormy years for the intricate relationship between the Jewish and Israeli Arab citizens of the State of Israel. Both sides waited in tense anticipation for the results of the judicial investigative committee, under Judge Orr, which investigated the events of October 2001 in which 13 Arab citizens were killed by police guns. It was in this tense atmosphere that the BGU Review staff met with Sheikh Darwish.

The meeting with Sheikh Darwish had been delayed a number of times. Then, on the way to Kfar Kassam, we encountered military barriers that were erected as a result of terrorist infiltration alerts and we joined thousands of vehicles that were delayed for a long time. Finally, however, we arrived. Despite the impalpable tension that hovers over both Jewish and Arab citizens, we were able to carry out a relaxed and friendly interview with Sheikh Darwish.

**Question:** More than two years have passed since September 11. How do you think those terrorist attacks have affected the world?

**Answer:** From 1971 till today I have not changed my words of warning. I constantly point to two things that lead to violence and terror: One is oppression by the government and the second is military occupation by a foreign body or force. Occupation and oppression always lead to resistance. I favor

the kind of resistance that was employed by Mahatma Gandhi. Then there is the other kind of resistance espoused by Hasan Nasrallah or Sheikh Yassin or Bin Laden. Before we accuse Bin Laden and his organization, we must blame the oppression, on the one hand, and the occupation on the other. I don't agree with Bin Laden under any circumstances, that the Americans "captured" Saudi Arabia. The sovereign nation of Saudi Arabia asked the Americans to come and protect them from the dictator in Iraq. A person must be blind not to see this. The Americans came to assist Saudi Arabia in accordance with their request. It's true that the Americans also have a clear interest in this region: even if there was no Saddam, the Americans would have to invent one in order to realize their goals and implement their strategic interests. But there is still a big difference between saying that they have interests in the region, and between calling them conquerors.

Therefore, Bin Laden's uprising against the Americans is really an uprising against the Saudi government. We can argue and debate this point regarding Bin Laden's resistance to the Saudi government, and perhaps even convince the Americans that there is substance to Bin Laden's allegations against the Saudi ruling family. In Saudi Arabia the ruling family decides for the nation, and the nation as a whole does not take part in making decisions that concern them. It is a regime in which many things should be reformed. If Bin Laden would have come and claimed that the Saudi regime should be reformed, we might have argued with him and even justified him on some points, and disagreed on other points. But you cannot get rid of the "American occupation" –in quotes—via airplanes that blow up the World Trade Center in the United States. If there is occupation, then the battlefield for your jihad must be Saudi Arabia and not the land of the United States.

If you choose the United States as your battlefield, then you force me, Mr. Bin Laden, to re-assess my position completely. You have made it clear that this is not an issue of occupation or subjugation at all. Instead it is another matter entirely, and one that endangers me even before it endangers the Americans and the Israelis. You interpret Islamic principles in a way that endangers me because tomorrow, Mr. Bin Laden, you will be capable of assigning an interpretation to a passage [in the Koran] that I, Sheikh Darwish, must be executed. If you can rely on some kind of interpretation to justify blowing up the Twin Towers, then you can do the same to execute me as well. And this is a very dangerous route to take.

Another dangerous issue is Bin Laden's monopoly of truth. He presents himself as the only righteous one, the one who has a monopoly on the truth. I could understand him if he would say: I believe that **I** am right, but I realize that **you** may be right instead. This was the way I was brought up. I claim that I am right, but I don't negate other claims that perhaps I am mistaken. The ultimate, definitive truth is found only in God, not in Sheikh Darwish, not Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, not Bin Laden and not the Pope in the Vatican. Interpretations that claim to have a monopoly on truth are very dangerous. Only God and His prophets can have a monopoly on truth and you, Bin Laden, are not God nor are you a prophet and therefore, you can err. There is the possibility that you are wrong. You can claim that Darwish is wrong, but there is a chance that he is right. This monopoly on truth is a very dangerous thing; it negates all the Sheiks, all the Muftis, the national universities, everyone. He, the Sheikh who rebels against the government, claims that all the other Sheiks are subordinate to the government.

Is there no middle road? I claim that I represent the golden mean, that third party: I am an independent Sheikh, not a rubber stamp for the government but I am also not willing to incite a rebellion. There are many ways to implement change, but if you want to change something and you have no patience and can't take a deep breath, then don't take upon yourself the role of a leader. In my opinion, Gandhi's example [of civil disobedience] is excellent. I also believe in the existence of pragmatic movements that participate in political life of various regimes in Western and Islamic worlds. Even when I know that the government will not agree with certain results, I want to try again and again, even when it seems that the government disqualified my democratic victory the first time. What is the alternative, to turn to violence? No, I believe that one must try again and again and if you are disqualified, try a second time, try a third time. Your purpose is not only to change the government, you must also sway most of the people to your viewpoint, and this takes patience and perseverance. Anyone who prefers violence wants the shock treatment: to finish it off with one fell swoop, and this never works.

Let's just assume, for the sake of argument, that I was willing to temporarily accept the claim of the militants, that in democracy we achieve nothing and we can only get what we want through violent revolution. I ask only one question: Since 1948, how many violent revolutions have shaken the Arab world? —Abd Al-Nasser in Egypt, Iraq, Syria—have any of them brought about a democratic regime?!

I claim that a regime that assumes power by virtue of tanks can be defeated by a single bullet, but a regime that assumes power by virtue of the ballot box, on the wings of an entire nation, will be closely safeguarded and protected by that same nation. You have to connect yourself to the people and not allow yourself to be dragged into violence. We say in Arabic: Someone who wants to save his own people from the flame of an oppressive regime, must offer a spring, a garden with water and flowers, as an alternative. But if you claim to save me from the fires of X but throw me back into the fires of Y? You save me from the violence of one regime, only to throw me back into the violence of your movement? No sane nation will follow a violent regime or a violent movement. No sane nation will accept a gang of militants, no matter how just their claim, if they set off explosions in the main streets of Cairo; or in churches, synagogues or mosques in Morocco; or the Twin Towers of the United States. Thugs cannot mobilize sane people to their cause. Only one who opposes the regime and the occupation in a civilized manner can recruit the masses. This is why I claim, for example, that the first intifadah achieved much more than the second intifadah, because of the participation of children and women. The first intifadah was an uprising of the entire [Palestinian] people and created waves both in Israel as well as in Europe, while the second intifadah has not created any waves at all. I claim that Palestinian independence will arrive via Tel Aviv, but not in a bomb blast. It is necessary to join up with the Israeli peace camp and demonstrate again and again, until a second Rabin is born as well as a second Begin. Menahem Begin, the Likudnik of the Right and Yitzchak Rabin, the Laborite of the Left—the Rabin who fought in all the wars, the Rabin who proclaimed [during the first intifadah], “We must break their bones,” -- both of these men came to the conclusion that the conflict cannot be solved by force. Sadat came to this conclusion, as well as the Jordanian King Hussein. Yassir Arafat also came to this conclusion but the second intifadah unfortunately deprived him of legitimacy. I really know this man from up close and I know that he is deeply angered by all the violence he sees. I stayed with him for long periods of time and slept in his compound, I know him well; I swear by God that he is against

violence. If we lose this man, no second Arafat will rise to sign an agreement with Israel. If he dies a natural death, there is a chance that another Arafat will arise. If the Israelis expel him or kill him—no second Arafat will arise for a hundred years. Neither Abu Mazen nor Abu Alla will dare to do what Arafat did.

Violence brings about two things: hatred and temporary agreements. Maybe violence would force the United States to withdraw from here or there but only temporarily. A grass-roots popular intifadah, however, can bring about true strategic agreements. Violence can sometimes pressure a Prime Minister to sign a temporary agreement, but such an agreement will not get to the root of the problem. It will only blow up in our faces at the first occasion. An explosion without an agreement is not as dangerous as an explosion after an agreement, because then the people despair of agreements and give up on everything. That is what happened after Oslo.

**Question:** Another issue, aside from violence, rose to the public agenda after September 11: the fear of a cultural war that encompasses everything from music, clothing, and of course, religion. Articles have appeared claiming that the entire world is in the grips of a “clash of civilizations.” What is your stance regarding this?

**Answer:** I have read these articles about the “clash of civilizations” and the new theory regarding the “end of history.” In my opinion, people wrote these articles for money. I don’t write for money, I write from my intellect and not my emotions. I think that the authors of these articles don’t believe what that they are saying. History has never seen a clash of civilizations. There have been many civilizations in the past and when a new civilization arose, it did not destroy the previous one but was assisted by it, learned from it, and integrated the new and the old. This kind of model can be seen in Islam as well: the Muslims allied themselves with the Romans and Persians and didn’t destroy these civilizations but used them, integrated them. I simply can’t understand how one can claim to be a democratic man of freedom and at the same time, assert the existence of a war of civilizations. One claim contradicts the other. The man of freedom and democracy argues his position in the civilized debating forum; he does not enter with a tank to destroy the other civilizations and introduce only one civilization by force. The man of freedom believes in cultural pluralism and the freedom to be different, yet still equal.

To “end history” one must destroy all civilizations or to terminate history on your own doorstep, so to speak. In essence, this is returning full circle to Bin Laden who speaks of a “monopoly on truth,” which simply does not go together with freedom and democracy. Bin Laden said that the war is between two camps, and that is exactly what the authors of these articles also say.

You and I are victims of both these sides. If we remain in this crybaby, whining stance, we will be trampled. We must begin to move and take action because we do possess a truth, not an absolute truth but a relative truth, and we must minimize the damage of exclusivity that is proposed by Bin Laden as well as by those who argue the case of the cultural war.

We do not believe in destroying our fellowman. He or she has the right to live alongside us with his own views, and if the majority of humanity accepts someone else’s views, I will sit on the sidelines. But I know that most of the world does not accept the views [of the militants]. There are two loud troublemakers in the world in which we live, two parties who claim they have the absolute truth, and

alongside them is the silent majority. We must start to shout and if that's not appropriate, we must try to bring the two sides closer together and uncover their common points. However, instead of placing on the table that which we have in common, we argue about those issues that separate us and then everyone goes home angry at the other. We must change this, we must attempt to emphasize our similarities and points in common. We must create a type of mutual political platform--for the philosophers, diplomats, politicians and cultural icons-- that will grant deep respect to religion on the one hand, and respect to human life, human rights and liberties, on the other hand. A platform like this would contain both the holiness of religion as well as the right of all humans to live, support themselves, raise children, walk freely and breathe the air without fear. It is our right to be sane, yet both sides compel us to insanity. I ask myself: Till when?

**Question:** The most disturbing phenomenon for the West is the upsurge of suicide bombers. People ask themselves: Why has this phenomenon begun precisely here in the Middle East, the birthplace of Bin Laden?

**Answer:** Suicide killing is a phenomenon that we have already seen in human history. For example, the Japanese [Kamikaze] pilots during World War Two. We have to ask why they did this. In effect, any soldier that is sent to the front, knows that there is a big chance that he will not return and that he is being sent to [a possible] death. We send our sons to die in wars and when we send them to an unjust war, we experience great inner anger. I can send my son with a clear conscience to a righteous war: of course it hurts, but my conscience is clear. The same thing with the other side, the suicide bombers. The suicide bomber knows that he has a zero chance of escaping alive from his battle, a hundred percent chance that he will die.

I studied this phenomenon and also wrote about it. Most of the sheikhs believe that suicide killing is forbidden, with one exception: if the suicide gives a ray of light, of hope, that it will let others live. Other sheikhs claim that it is permissible to commit suicide as part of the general struggle against the oppressor because if the potential suicide bomber remains alive under the occupation, he is dead anyway. They view life under occupation and humiliation as a form of slow death, as opposed to a bomb that is a quick death. I asked many youths from the universities: Are you ready [to be a suicide bomber]? They answered that they are ready. And then I asked: If someone would come from the Israeli side, some representative of the government, and would be willing to sit with you and promise you independence, would you still choose death and suicide bombing or independence and life? I swear by the Holy Koran that everyone I spoke to, told me that they would choose life and independence.

I had been worried that even if there would be independence, they would continue using the suicide bombings as a tool and a means to an end. I was relieved to hear that that is not the case. If Nablus would be independent from Tel Aviv, the youth from Nablus would not come to blow himself up in Tel Aviv, just like the soldier from Tel Aviv would not enter Nablus' Kasbah and endanger himself and his people. Therefore, the suicide bombings do not frighten me. I know that the youths do not have an ideology of death. The concept that these youths want to leave this world in order to enter another world with a lot of girls—I have not encountered this approach personally.

I find that we are undergoing a process of slow death that is painful and humiliating; quick death is viewed as a better alternative. After I spoke to the students, I was reassured. Neither Bin Laden nor a hundred like him can convince my son or your son to kill himself if he feels that he has an opportunity to live. The Japanese committed suicide, the Americans were willing to kill themselves at the Boston Tea Party [*sic*]. If a person is not given the chance to live, he will choose to die and not to die alone, that is the danger. So we must give them the opportunity to live. Both the Israeli and the Palestinian will choose life.

**Question:** What has September 11 done to the Arab world? Has it stimulated new viewpoints or aroused debate within the Islamic world?

**Answer:** I feel that under the confusion and disorder we see today, there are the beginnings of an awakening in the Arab world. This awakening is directed towards honoring the Islamic religion, together with a debate against the incorrect, violent interpretations of religion and religious rulings. I foresee that in another five years, maximum, we will be hearing about the equivalent of “Peace Now” in Pakistan, of a peace camp in Syria, of many human-rights associations in all the [Middle East] capitals.

I foretell that we will also hear more and more about intellectuals who will begin to take a more active role in their countries. For many years, these people have been anaesthetized and told: Your role is just to teach students and pick up your salary slip; you have nothing to look for on TV or in the newspapers. But I believe that the intelligentsia has started to approach the newspapers and television stations to say what’s on their minds. They have started to dream: not the dream of Joseph the Righteous, whose dream took ten or twelve years to be fulfilled, but the dream of the modern man who knows that circumstances can be changed much more quickly.

**Question:** You have spoken only about men of religion. Are there voices of secular [Arabs] who express positions such as yours? To use historical Muslim terms: is there a new wave of Motazilites [Muslim theologians who relied on reason in their inquiries about divine attributes] or something similar to the Motazili school of thought in the offing?

**Answer:** There are no concepts of “religious” and “secular” in Muslim society. In the Muslim society, everyone is considered to be religious: some observe the *Sharia* [Islamic law] and some don’t, but none renounce the faith and principles of the religion. I never thought that the Motazili had disappeared; they are still an inseparable part of Islamic culture. However, they attributed too much importance to the intellect, more than it warrants. In my opinion, every time there is anaesthetization of the intellect, we need a kind of “Motazili shock” to awaken the common-sense and intellect. An inner conflict exists but not according to the Motazili system which holds that people should retreat from society and devote their life to intellect. I personally am not willing to accept this Platonic view, that one should devote oneself only to thinking while the nation burns. I don’t believe that that the Motazili path leads to human civilization, but again, there is reason to stimulate the mind since we have sunk so many years in emotion. We all need pure emotion, but not to forget the mind. The mind and the intellect have begun to wake up. You can’t afford to lose your head even when you are dreaming.

It's true that none of us are willing to deprive ourselves of using fire. On the other hand, it is important to know how much fire we need for cooking and for warmth, and not to allow the fire to turn into a conflagration. When emotion takes over, everything turns to fire but emotion that is organized is analogous to the kind of constructive fire that we need for our day-to-day lives. We require emotion, just like we need fire, but not a conflagration. Intellect must be the boss; God recognized it as the boss and sent His prophets and gave them His holy book. The intellect that understands the holy book is in charge, and the parts of the body are the soldiers. Any time we reverse the order and let the soldiers rule the boss, or put the cart before the horse, this leads to ruin. In the Islamic world today, they are starting to organize properly and put the horse before the cart. I believe that within five years we will see this phenomenon grow even stronger, we will see different television [programming] and different press coverage. Today, Al-Jazeera and Abu Dabi still have their hands tied behind their backs; they are not really free to say what they want. However, I believe that this is in the process of change and we will eventually see uncensored television. We will see intellectuals pouring into the streets and students organizing behind political platforms, not just a few ineffective shouters in the streets. I hope that I will live to see the realization of this dream.

God willing, in a few years, you and I will sit together in Cairo, Damascus or Islamabad and discuss the things we have in common with the intelligentsia there. I am willing to go together with you, Sheikh Darwish with Jewish Professor so-and-so, in one Israeli delegation.

I established the Islamic Movement within the State of Israel. The State of Israel did not attempt to suppress or gag me from speaking. I and my friends represent, as one denominator, the Israeli side in this dispute. This is what I dream of, this is what I want to accomplish. If God takes me afterwards, I will die a happy man. If I die before my dreams are realized, something will always be missing to me, even in Paradise.

In order to realize these dreams, we must first establish here in Israel, a house of *Fatwa* [Muslim religious rulings], an institution that will furnish religious rulings that obligate all Muslims who live in Israel. You must understand that every Muslim must first accept a local *Fatwa*. It is only when there is no local ruling that he may turn to the *Fatwa* of an external sheikh--and it is an external sheikh who could permit suicide attacks, for example, while a local sheikh would never permit such a thing. The local *Fatwa* institution can excommunicate anyone who does not accept the local *Fatwa*; according to our religious laws, a Muslim must accept the local *Fatwa*. It is essential that we maintain this kind of institution to produce *Fatwas* for Israel. I intend to suggest this to the Israeli Arab Leadership Monitoring Committee, since the State of Israel is, unfortunately, far from understanding the need for such an institution.

In [the State of Israel's] President's House I told President Moshe Katzav: Sir, I speak Hebrew with you and I learned the language because I want to live peacefully with you. But you have not learned my language, and that is a problem. If you do not learn our language and our culture, you have a problem. You must learn to understand the kind of authority that a *Fatwa* has, and the importance of such an institution that produces obligatory religious rulings that oblige all the imams and arbiters. Such a *Fatwa* would do a great deal to calm the Muslim public. It is essential.

**Question:** You mentioned your dream of yourself and a Jewish professor sitting together, both representing Israel. What characteristics do you feel belong to the appellation “Israeli ” as opposed to “Jew” or “Muslim”?

**Answer:** All sane persons in the State of Israel today search for Israeli characteristics or what I call Israeli-ness. Laws and citizenship protect us, create us all equal before the law and unite us. That’s why I rebel against the idea of a Jewish state or an Arab state. I see positive signs that we are walking towards this Israeli-ness, and I feel confident that in this way, we weaken the camp that wants to view the State as only Jewish and the other camp that wants it only Arabic. In my opinion, all the Israelis—both Jews and Arabs—have exhausted the schisms that divide us. We have tried everything: wars, terrorist acts, hatred, revenge, and temporary agreements. Instead we must focus on the things that unite us, not the things that separate us. Both Israeli Jews and Arabs must, together, sign the permanent [status] agreement with the Palestinian side; I am confident that the Israeli side will be signed not only by Jews. There will come the day that out of five-six people who will sign the permanent agreement, there will also be Arabs who will sign the agreement as witnesses. It may be the Jewish majority that leads the way to the agreement but there will be Arab witnesses who will express the Israeli-ness of the entire country. There will not be a permanent [status] agreement until the “Israeli-ness principle” is realized.

After the events of October 2001 [in which 13 Israeli Arab citizens were killed by police officers], both Jews and Arabs started to search for common ground and this common ground is not Jew nor Arab, but Israeli. You will not convince me to be a Jew and I will not convince you to be Arab. But both of us can be convinced to be Israelis. Israeli-ness forced itself on us and will win over both sides. If Ami Ayalon, a previous head of the Shin Bet, can become a man of peace, and Alik Ron, previous Northern Region Police Commander who was deemed “unsuitable for his post” by the Orr commission, can say that he wants to see Palestinian independence, then I am not day-dreaming but seeing a new reality. Anyone who thinks that the Jewish nation has shifted far to the Right, must return to reality to see what is really happening. When Sharon was elected, I said that the Israeli nation wants peace and independence for the Palestinians but they want it carried out by the Right. If the Right does not succeed in bringing about peace then it will be banished from the government.

I don’t see a black future. On the one hand, I see blood and killing but on the other hand I see hope and light. I feel that the public mood is, “We are sick and tired of all this.” I suggest to listen not only to what the tongue says, but also to observe body language. The tongue shouts “Attack!” but the bodily wearily says, “We are sick and tired of all this.” That is why I am an optimistic writer. First we will reach a temporary solution to separate between the two nations and afterwards you and I, the Israelis, will sign a permanent settlement.

**Question:** The modern world deals extensively with the issue of the status of women. How do you view the position of women in Muslim societies?

**Answer:** The modern world has let itself be dragged down in an uncivilized manner after some empty [anti-Muslim] slogans. You yourselves see that here in our municipal council in Kfar Kassam, we employ many female workers. The women here do excellent work, but they do not expose their bodies.



I want to ask: What do you want from the woman, the professional head or the body? What is modernization, the woman's body or her head? I agree to the professional side, the head, but never to the body. Period. That is my view of the woman.

We can pass all the laws we want to prevent rape and sexual abuse, but how can these laws accomplish their purpose when a young woman goes out in public wearing almost no clothes? How can I prevent my twenty-year-old son from abusing her? We invite abuse and rape with such exposure, and then we punish. This kind of justice is not clear to me. It's as if you come across a hungry man who needs food, you leave him money on the road and then punish him if he even takes one shekel—that's crazy. The woman has privileges and rights: if she decides to flaunt her body I cannot stop her. But I still believe that what we want from the woman is her intellect, skills, and not her exposed body.

There is laughter and banter among the male and female workers [here in the municipal council] and it is OK to argue and laugh together, but only "hands off," without touching each other. I don't [allow women to expose their bodies here] or men and women to touch each other. This is my understanding of the integration of the woman in society: I try to protect her and society from her body. If she doesn't want, I can't prevent her. We have women who work in hospitals, in lawyers' offices, in the media—the opportunities are all open. But, only without exposing the woman's body and without touching.

**Question:** Yet the Muslim woman still occupies a different position than the man. One of the examples is that men can take more than one wife while the reverse is not true. Is the Muslim intellectual leadership interested in changing inequities between men and women? Is it possible to institute change? What dynamics surround this issue?

**Answer:** The Muslims in Israel know and accept that the only religious arbiter is I, Sheikh Darwish. I claim that the status of the Muslim woman has been "frozen" at least three hundred years, not because of religious dictates but rather because of some Arab and Muslim customs. The Muslims set aside religion and choose instead to follow customs of the Bedouins, the clan, etc. When I first founded the Islamic Movement in the State of Israel in 1971, I also founded the first institution of the movement: "The Muslim's Women's Club" in Kfar Kassam. This club aroused great opposition. I understood the opposition and, therefore, started to mingle with the *diwans* [meeting forums], and argued and explained to them. I discovered that public explanations did not convince them and I understood that I had to go to all the *diwans* personally with the Muslim *Fatwas*. We read together what the Islamic sages said and it created a revolution. Abu Hanifa [the greatest authority on Muhammadan canon law; died in 767 CE] gives more freedom to the woman than the United States gives, but does not allow the exposure of her body and insists that there is no touching among the sexes [in public].

Once they wanted to impose a certain wedding match on a young girl in my family. She called for me and told me that she does not want to marry the fellow; I calmed her down and sat with the elders who told me that he, the prospective bridegroom, is a good person. I said OK, but she doesn't want him. The elders got angry and said, "Since when do our daughters have the right to say no?" I told them that indeed she [has the right to say no], just like the Prophet Muhammad said no, just like all the other prophets said no, so she, too, has the same right.

We have a problem; our heads and minds are dormant, while our emotions flare. We must plan our steps. If Plan A does not work we must find another system. In my opinion, the position of women will become stronger. In Kfar Kassam, the place where the Islamic Movement was founded, 47% of the council workers are women, and 41% of the university graduates are women. Of the female university graduates, 70% studied at the universities of Bar Ilan, Tel Aviv, Haifa or Jerusalem. When I hear the women in the Islamic Movement debating in Hebrew, I am ashamed of my own Hebrew. When they discuss, for example, the philosophy of Descartes, I also participate in the discussion and feel greatly encouraged and uplifted. It encourages me and I am not afraid. Whoever understands the philosophy of Descartes in depth, can also understand Amos Oz, I am sure of this. If you visit any school in Kfar Kassam which has a female college graduate and you enter her small library, you will see books in Arabic, English and Hebrew. But when I enter the home of a Jew I do not see books in Arabic and that is a problem.

I am satisfied with the status [of Israeli Muslim women], at least within the 1967 Green Line. In the Gaza Strip there were disagreements and arguments with family relatives, but the girls there also began to convey similar messages [as their counterparts within the Green Line]. Dr. Muhammad Salim al-Awa, the Egyptian philosopher, once told me an important statement: The steps towards progress in the Arab world will never succeed until the woman will be integrated alongside the man, within a millimeter next to him. If she trails after him even by a centimeter we are in trouble, and if she walks ahead of him we are also in trouble. Not in front and not in back, but precisely next to him. If this does not come about, then the Arab world will not progress the way we want. This is the only way we can achieve integration. Another person once told me: We need at least two years of affirmative action in favor of the woman. We progress at the rate of forty kilometers per hour and she progresses at the rate of only ten. We must stop and wait at the station for her to catch up and see how fast she is capable of going, and then we must slow down to her pace. This will make us lag behind, but better to lag behind than reach the target before the woman. If we reach the target before the woman, we will fall and be crushed. Yes, there has been an encouraging awakening in the status of women in the Muslim world.

**Question:** You mentioned Amos Oz. What is your attitude towards literature, art and painting? What role and what place do you assign to literature and art in the world?

**Answer:** Neither you nor I can get up in the morning and go to work without looking in the mirror. We have to look at our teeth, our hair, and if necessary, to correct what we see. Literature is our mirror on the wall: within literature you see yourself, your emotions, your way of thinking. You see yourself even in the works of an author who has different views than your own. Whoever wants to be truly cosmopolitan and not remain a provincial Israeli must also read world literature in Arabic, English and French. When you read French literature, you feel that you are French; when you read British literature, you feel British. You feel that they are referring to you, that you are there. When something bothers the Italians it also hurts you because you are part of them, you found yourself in the literature. This is my understanding of true literature. Music and painting are, in my opinion, the same thing. One you see while the other you hear: just as you observe a painting, you listen to music. The art of artistic creation is a natural gift that God gave us when he created us. It draws us closer to God because it reminds us that God is the first, primary creator.

In literature you find yourself, and in music and painting you return to your natural, pristine feelings. You return to a clean slate and remove all the heavy chains that pull you down; you start to really listen and see. You are the only one who comes to conclusions regarding the things you see and hear: no one else can reach conclusions for you. When a group of people listen to Beethoven's Ninth symphony, for example, each person has his or her own feelings, own fantasies, and sees in it something completely different. I see in this blind composer something else altogether: I see that although he is deaf, he is inspired by God, and his music allows him to hear, see and communicate. Artistic creation does not involve only the eyes and ears, it is an existential, universal part of us, given to us by God. Through music and art I return to God, our creator.

**Question:** What is the place of the Islamic Movement or of parallel movements on the Jewish side of Israel, in our times?

**Answer:** When I was the head of the Islamic movement I used to sign, "Head of the Islamic Movement in Israel." Ibrahim Sarsur, the head of the movement today, also signs the same way. I founded both factions of the movement, and even the more extreme faction today does not deny that I am the original founder. I say to you, pity the poor fool who would attempt to argue with me on this principle, that this is the Islamic Movement in Israel. Someone who does not feel that he is Israeli should look for another country, and that is his legitimate right. Here, in sovereign Israel, only Israelis will live. Whoever does not feel that he or she belongs, is invited to find another place that is more suitable for him. We will continue to live here as Israelis, this is what unites us and this is what we struggle for and will, some day with God's help, attain.