
SKIP NOVAK

Breaking the Ice

The Israeli-Palestinian Friendship Mountain

There have been many initiatives to promote understanding between the Israelis and the Palestinians, orchestras and soccer matches among them, but the idea of climbing a virgin summit in the Antarctic must be among the most bizarre. 'Breaking the Ice' was conceived as a flagship for a recently created foundation in Germany called Extreme Peace Missions. The idea was to make a spectacular media success of 'an extreme peace mission' in order to raise capital to fund adventure sports projects between young Israelis and Palestinians. The intended message was that Palestinians and Israelis could work for a common goal on an individual basis, politics aside, although the political differences would not be ignored by design. A high-risk project indeed, especially after it secured the endorsements of Kofi Annan, Shimon Peres, Yassar Arafat, the Dalai Lama, Mikhail Gorbachev, the German Parliament, the European Parliament et al.

The architect of the concept was Heskell 'Hezi' Nathaniel, an Israeli businessman living in Berlin. His friend and mountain hero Doron Erel, Israel's answer to Chris Bonington, Robin Knox Johnston and Ranulph Fiennes all rolled into one, was chosen as team leader. Climbing Everest and the 'seven summits' may not raise eyebrows anymore in extreme sports circles, let alone among the general public, but Doron's film making, lecturing and writing about his adventures in remote areas provides a much needed distraction from the daily dose of death and violence in Israel and the occupied territories. His exploits as a young commando in an elite unit are less well publicized.

The initial idea was to take a joint team to a peak somewhere in the Himalaya or elsewhere in the high mountains of Asia. However, Hezi and Doron realized that wherever they went the host country would put a political spin on the project. The solution lay in choosing a neutral territory and nowhere better fits that description than Antarctica. That's where I came in. Among our shared adventures as friends, Doron and I had sailed and climbed together in 1994 in the Antarctic, using my expedition sailing vessel, *Pelagic*, a veteran of 15-years of logistical support operations, based in Puerto Williams on the Beagle Channel.

In December 2000 we spent some time with Doron in Israel while my wife, a news coordinator with the European Broadcasting Union, was working on the millennium story from Bethlehem. I remarked what a quiet period it was in the conflict. Doron was visibly nervous and constantly

looking over his shoulder while giving us a tour of old Jerusalem. 'It won't last. I'm very pessimistic,' he said. But like many people on both sides of the conflict, despite their pessimism, when an opportunity arises they do what they can. Doron, whose responsibility it was to select the team of four Israelis and four Palestinians, almost bit off more than he could chew.

After eight months of planning, including a press conference in Berlin in July 2002 to whet the media appetite, we set sail from Puerto Williams in Chile near Cape Horn on 1 January. My new vessel *Pelagic Australis* carried the eight team members plus boat crew, cameraman, editor and satellite technician. My old boat was seconded in to ferry the 'extras' in this entourage of mountain cameraman/Chamonix mountain guide, journalist, doctor and a camp manager. Between the two boats there were 21 people. Unlike so many 'expeditions' that have felt hijacked by the media and their purpose lost in the telling, in our case it was understood by all from the beginning that the telling was in fact the only purpose.

In order to enhance this, the team was not a youth squad but people with a history – history of the tragic kind, which is not hard to find in the Middle East. In the Palestinian contingent we had Sulemain Al-Khatib (32). In the 1987 Intifada, at the age of 14 he knifed someone in the street and lost his youth in an Israeli jail where he spent the next 10 years as a political prisoner. He is now head of Al Fatah in his village of Hismeh in the West Bank. Nasser Gous (38) is number two in Al Fatah in Jerusalem. He spent three years in jail for throwing a Molotov cocktail in the same Intifada. Ziad Darwish, at 52, was our elder Palestinian spokesman, a journalist and fixer for foreign news teams. Among other things he was close to Arafat and it was he who managed to secure Arafat's approval of the project (without which the Palestinian team probably would not have showed up at all) and Arafat's signature on the joint venture flag that was to be flown at the summit. None of these three looked like adventure types, but Olfat Haider was the exception. Lean and mean at 33 years old, Olfat is a distractingly attractive Israeli Arab who teaches sport in Haifa and is admittedly non political. She was the only Israeli Arab to represent Israel in a national volleyball team.

'You would not believe how hard it was to find the people on the Palestinian side,' Doron explained to me as the swell in the Drake Passage kicked in and before he along with most of the others got deathly seasick. 'First of all, it sometimes takes week to get permission to meet some of the people who are candidates. Then it may take weeks for them to get a pass to enter Israel to have another meeting.' Maybe it should have been obvious, but it quickly became evident that Palestinian mountain climbers, sailors or adventurers are almost non-existent. A doctor was originally on the team but after pressure from 'associates', which included death threats to himself and his family, he finally threw in the towel when someone in his family hid his passport two days before a training week for the group in Chamonix in early November.



93. *Pelagic Australis* was chosen as a base in Antarctica from which a joint Israeli-Palestinian team would attempt a virgin summit as a symbol of co-operation. She carried the eight team members plus boat crew, cameraman, editor and satellite technician. (Skip Novak)



94. The old expedition sailing vessel *Pelagic*, a veteran of 15-years' support operations, ferried the 'extras': mountain cameraman/Chamonix mountain guide, journalist, doctor and camp manager. (Skip Novak)



95. The Israeli-Palestinian team on board *Pelagic Australis*. (Skip Novak)

The Israeli team was not at all problematic. In addition to Doron and Hezi were Avihou Shoshoni (44) and Yarden Fanta (27). Avihou, an articulate civil litigation lawyer from Tel Aviv, had been in the same commando unit as Doron, bonding their friendship. He has acted for the state of Israel in many disputes during the last two Intifadas and it is therefore no surprise he is right wing. Yarden migrated from Ethiopia at the age of 13 with Operation Moses in 1989 and lost five family members on the year-long walk and through the rigours of the refugee camp in the Sudan. She is now working through her PhD, studying the minds of illiterate people with a view to developing technological solutions.

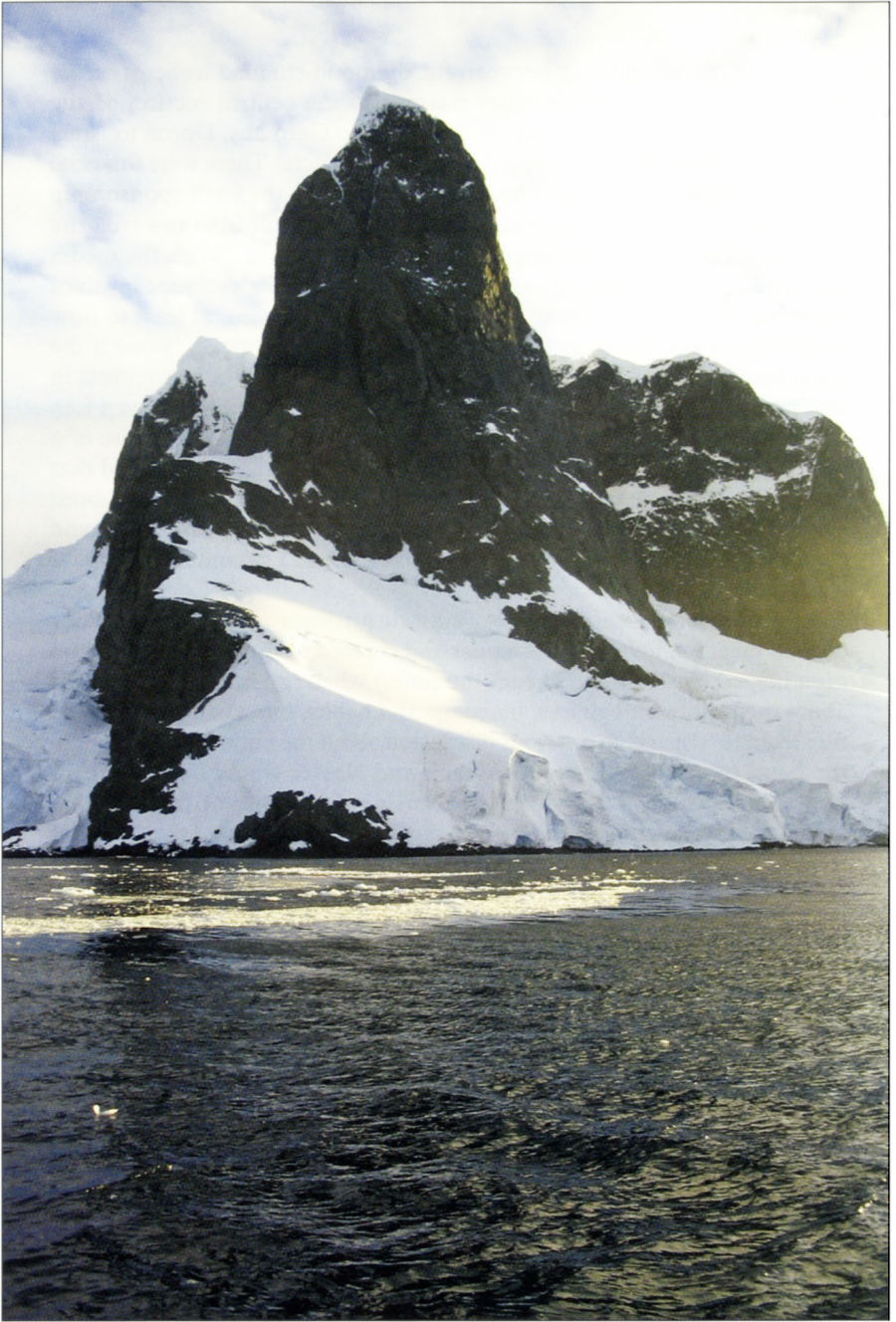
The Drake crossing was relatively mild, but bumpy enough to put a fear into the team of the return journey three weeks later. Our first landfall in Antarctica, at Deception Island, gave the team the chance of a run ashore. This was an enlightening experience, as the walk across a small mountain to the Chinstrap penguin colony on the opposite coast finished in a full-blown Antarctic snowstorm. It was clear that some in the group had struggled on a trek no more than a refreshing day out for a tourist hiker in the Alps. Back on board they all took stock of the situation. The original plan touted in the media was for the team, after having battled the Drake Passage and the pack ice of the Antarctic Peninsula, to spend three-to-four days trekking to the chosen mountain, climb it and return – an ambitious outing given the nature of the place. There would be no rescue here except self-rescue.

As we threaded our way between the diamond-studded icebergs of the Gerlache Straits, the main inner passage in the central section of the Peninsula, Hezi was constantly on the phone to Germany, Doron to Israel and Ziad to Ramalla, massaging their media contacts. There were financial black clouds on the pristine Antarctic horizon, as the cash sponsorship that was to have paid not only for this project, but also towards the foundation for the young people, had not materialized. With the media plan well in hand, including daily news feeds via satellite, everyone involved expected the money if not to fall out of the sky like rain, at least to flow easily from a tap. It was not to be. 'Too risky', 'too political', 'What if the team breaks down?' were typical responses. Reprisals from extremists in the 'peace process rejection front' were not beyond possibility. Even Lan Chile, when approached about sponsoring air tickets, refused because of a perceived likelihood of passengers cancelling when they discovered that Israelis and Palestinians were on the same plane. 'Everyone talks about solving the conflict, but we got almost no support except equipment and clothing. It was a shocking revelation. So Hezi and I wound up paying for it all,' admitted Doron.

En route the team had been working surprisingly well together. They cooked together, helped sail the boat and cleaned house together. Avihou even helped Nasser fix the head (the toilet) when it jammed. They joked about their different cultures, language and habits, but when asked by the film team to 'engage' in a serious discussion about the political background, the fangs inevitably came out. Avihou and Nasser would lock horns for hours on the subject of Jerusalem accusing each other of fundamental ignorance on the religious history of the Temple Mount and the Dome of the Rock. Although this demonstrated that a dialogue could take place without killing each other, and maybe the Antarctic had a pacifying effect, it was clear that lines were drawn in the sand. And that in turn demonstrated the whole problem in the Middle East where any compromise is a clear signal of weakness and eventual defeat.

Last year's sea ice was still fast to the shore in some places in Crystal Sound, near the Antarctic Circle. It was my intention to get us in to land at Prospect Point, a good place to disembark with an easy glacier to ascend and several unnamed peaks at its head. After a day of tricky navigation skirting the sea ice and pushing our way through the brash ice, we off-loaded 16 people and 400kg of equipment and the pilgrimage to the mountain began. Threading our way through the crevasses and seracs, pulling sleds and carrying heavy packs was slow work. But the team, now with the climbing rope between them for 'encouragement', somehow gelled and moved together like an amateur army.

Camp 1 was on the middle of the glacier and Camp 2 below the base of our mountain. Doron was now more relaxed as he and the team had overcome so many obstacles to get this far. So many things could have gone wrong: the politics, the lack of money, the sea voyage and its possible



96. The Israeli-Palestinian Friendship Mountain, 882m, climbed in January 2003 as a symbol of co-operation. (*Skip Novak*)



97. The support team. (*Skip Novak*)

vagaries, and the ability of the team itself to cope with such an ambitious undertaking. But now we had reached a stage where only the weather could throw a serious spanner in the works.

Until now, Allah and God had blessed us with perfect conditions for the preparation and the trek up the glacier. Optimism for mountaineering soars on a windless sunny day and in the Antarctic it is no exception. The air is crystal clear and all things are pure. But 14 January, the day of the climb, dawned snowy and the sky was closed. Getting breakfast and getting a move on was a solemn affair. The harder route on the face above the camp was voted down by the Chamonix guide Denis Ducroz and we opted for a safer traverse of the summit ridge above a col further up the glacier. It was a procession in a white out – all tied together and the symbolism could have not been stronger.

Four hours later, after a few technical manoeuvres, the team of eight, with the media on their heels, topped out at 882 metres above sea level. Hezi made a speech to camera and named the mountain 'The Israeli-Palestinian Friendship Mountain' which had been jointly agreed. Hugs and kisses were offered and received all around and then Ziad, Nasser and Sulemain went down on their knees and prayed to Allah. The expedition's peace flag was broken out, but Arafat's signature at the bottom was enough for Avihou to refuse to stand together with the team for the group photos. This was an unpleasant surprise and a bit of a dark moment on the summit, but it underpinned the reality back home.

The goals of the project had been achieved in relative calm, so much so that the television news pickup was weak. They were expecting a disaster or two and none came. Good news is no news especially in the Antarctic, but life and the bad news goes on as usual in Israel, in the occupied territories and on your TV screen.

Summary In January 2003 a team of four Israelis and four Palestinians climbed a virgin summit in Antarctica as a symbol of co-operation. They named the peak 'The Israeli-Palestinian Friendship Mountain'. For more information on the expedition go to www.breaking-the-ice.de