

Women in black

The way Jane Ariel sees it, "I couldn't be a Jew and *not* get involved with Women in Black."

That might strike many people as a deeply ironic statement, given the fact that Women in Black was founded in Jerusalem in 1988 to protest the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.

"I hate the Palestinian suicide bombers, but I am not surprised at them," said Ariel, a Berkeley family therapist who holds both U.S. and Israeli citizenship. "I look at Israel and say, 'You are my country. I love you, but you are doing something that is unconscionable.'"

Ariel is one of three dual citizens among the 13-woman, predominantly Jewish organizing core of Bay Area Women in Black. As chapters have spread throughout the Middle East, Europe and the United States — there are now more than 170 — the organization's message has grown, too. It now includes a commitment to "active, nonviolent protest against all forms of personal and state violence and terrorism, including militarism, anti-Semitism, racism and religious oppression."

Like many of their sister chapters, Bay Area Women in Black took a page from the book of South African and Latin American women who walked the streets or assembled in plazas to grieve their apartheid dead or the "disappeared." They wear the color of mourning and march, wordlessly, to a funereal drumbeat.

In a world filled with angry shouts for vengeance, Women in Black stand silent and solemn. In a social climate devoid of dialogue, they are determined to listen. When no one seems willing to wear the mantle of "victimizer" as well as the mantle of "victim," they insist: "We all bear guilt."

Common ground — and pain — is their sacred territory. As one of the signs they carried in a recent march through downtown San Francisco stated: "Mothers are grieving in New York and Afghanistan. Mothers are grieving in Israel and Palestine."

Said Ronnie Gilbert, one of the Bay Area core group: "I am not a joiner. I am really not an organization person. But when I heard about Women in Black I thought, 'Vigil, quiet, silent, women? Yes! That is something I want to be attached to.'"

A singer and now-music teacher, Gilbert performed with the best-selling folk group, The Weavers, in the early 1950s. But, as she explained in a recent essay that is circulating on the Web, an FBI investigation turned the hit group into pariahs. A month after the terrorist attacks on the World



Stephanie Salter

Trade Center and Pentagon, Gilbert learned that she was back on the FBI suspects list, this time for being part of Women in Black.

"The FBI is threatening my group with a grand jury investigation," she wrote. "Of what? That we publicly call the Israeli military's occupation of the mandated Palestine lands illegal? So does the World Court and the United Nations."

Last week, after a Bay Area Women in Black meeting,

In a world filled with angry shouts for vengeance, Women in Black stand silent and solemn. In a social climate devoid of dialogue, they are determined to listen. When no one seems willing to wear the mantle of "victimizer" as well as the mantle of "victim," they insist: "We all bear guilt."

Gilbert said her cohorts had talked long and hard about the recent and horrendous escalation of violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip:

"Susan Freundlich said it best: 'How many lives need to be lost before we admit this kind of thing doesn't work?' The oppression of a people, forced violence, bullying and reprisals do not bring security. They bring the op-

posite."

Freundlich is vice president of community development for the Women's Foundation in San Francisco. She was drawn, in part, to Women in Black because she wants other Jews and Palestinians to know that "not all Americans, not all Jews, support what Israeli leaders want to do."

Since September 11, her group's message of nonviolent conflict resolution has become even more important, she said:

"While the the United States is lecturing the world about democracy and justice, we are openly supporting a government that is committing gross human rights violations that are the opposite of democracy and justice."

For Penny Rosenwasser, Women in Black is the natural extension of the Hebrew idea of *tikkun olam*, which means "the repair or healing of the world."

Currently writing a graduate dissertation on "internalized anti-Semitism," Rosenwasser first traveled to Israel and the Middle East during the first intifada in 1989.

"I wanted to go see for myself," she said.

In the ensuing 12 years, she has stayed for months among Palestinians and Israelis in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Her most recent visit was in July.

"I was in a refugee camp near the Egyptian border and saw a football field-sized area of destruction. Eighteen Palestinian homes had been destroyed by the Israeli army," she said. "I knew they'd used U.S. weapons. All I could say, over and over again, was, 'I'm so sorry.' For the Palestinians and the Israelis, there is a war of annihilation going on."

Like all the Women in Black, Susan Freundlich emphasizes that Palestinians are hardly blameless in that war.

"We understand that mistakes have been made on all sides," she said. "But we want to hold out for the humanity of both sides. One group doesn't need to be demonized by the other, one doesn't have to be sacrificed."

At 5 p.m. on Dec. 16, Bay Area Women in Black will hold a community candle lighting ceremony for Hanukkah at Chochmat Halev, 2215 Prince St., Berkeley. For information, contact Bay Area Women in Black at earthlink.net.

E-mail Stephanie Salter at ssalter@sfcronicle.com