



עובדים סוציאליים לשלום ולרווחה
عمال اجتماعيين من اجل السلام والرفاه
Social Workers for Peace and Social Welfare

Confronting Painful Pasts in Building Better Futures

**A Summary of the ICfC/Ossim Shalom Intensive Weekend Retreat of the
Hajar Inter-communal Leadership Training Group in Beersheva**

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Introduction:

A new bilingual elementary school in Beersheva was recently established by an NGO known as *Hajar*, a group made up of concerned Arab and Jewish residents in the area. This unique bi-national school, one of only five ethnically mixed schools in Israel, is open to Arab and Jewish families in the Beersheva region, Israel's fourth largest city known as the "capital of the south." The children come from Bedouin families, Israeli-Palestinian families, and Jewish families of the region. Parents from each of these groups have taken an unusually active role in developing this school, many demonstrating outstanding leadership abilities. Their strengths and their fragilities challenge us to think of the

potential for grassroots leadership at a time when top-down initiatives on all sides of the Middle East conflict are at a standstill.

One of the most important discoveries of the International Center for Conciliation/Ossim Shalom approach has been that oftentimes, when delicate issues concerning the Arab-Jewish conflict are not dealt with in depth, there is a good chance that bi-national organizations will falter badly, even those that are deeply committed to communication and cooperation. When under stress and when political disasters strike, these organizations have difficulties building on their years of positive experience in working together to sustain their commitments to a tolerant and pluralistic society. At this time especially, with Israel divided and the regional environment not conducive to peace, it is an immutable given: those stresses certainly do develop, those disasters certainly do strike. When the December 2008-January 2009 Gaza attack was raging on and rockets were constantly falling on Beersheva, tension rose amongst the bi-national staff, leaders, and parents associated with the Hajar group, and they had no way of dealing with it. They all felt that they did not have enough support and knowledge to deal with the many aspects of the conflict. Even though the members of Hajar are all committed to peace and acceptance, many residual and unresolved conflicts, pains, suspicions, and tensions lie beneath the surface, thwarting imagination and inhibiting action.

Initiating the Historical Conciliation Process:

In mid-October of 2010, ICfC/OS began working with the Hajar group to provide them with the critical tools necessary to ward off the potential for falling apart during difficult political times. A group of 15 participants from Hajar, including the school's parents and board members, was assembled and they commenced the Historical Conciliation workshop. The introductory session in which individual members introduced themselves and set goals for what they might accomplish in the workshop ended with high hopes and created a positive atmosphere. Two weeks later a second session was held, which focused on the subject of individual and group identities, identity conflicts, and provided some basic tools for the groups' work.

The Intensive Weekend Retreat:

This was one of the highlights of the Historical Conciliation program for the Hajar group, involving the participants spending two days together in an intimate atmosphere in order to touch upon extremely emotional topics. The group, together with its Ossim Shalom facilitators, Tzofir and Nasir, worked intensively throughout the weekend. Tzofir and Nasir understood that their main goal was to maintain a secure and protected environment where people could be open and sincere.

Day One:

The session started with a quick review of the ideas and issues that were brought up in the two previous meetings. Then the facilitators presented the main themes of the day: **pains, fears, concerns, needs, and hopes.**

Without giving any prior notice, the parents in this school were divided into two: the Jewish group and the Arab group. This itself was a rather shocking experience for people who are so devoted to the strength of their togetherness. The two groups were asked to sit separately out of hearing range and discuss among themselves their pains, fears, concerns, hopes and needs in regards to the "other." Sitting in separate rooms, they wrote down their deepest emotions, including some, according to participants, that were never before expressed nor exposed. Then the two groups reconvened and presented their work in front of the whole assembly.

The Jews spoke about their fear of Arab extremism and the fear of becoming a Jewish minority in an ever expanding Arab world. The Jews also expressed their fear of potential Arab violence should conflict in the region erupt, as it so often does. The members of the Jewish group also expressed their concerns of the growing fundamentalism of Islam and some of the expressions of that movement in terrorism. A Jewish woman named Sharona, for example, emphasized that her strongest and most frequently experienced fears come from the reality that the Jews are actually a minority in the Middle-East.



The members of the Arab group spoke about their feelings of discrimination and about the humiliation that they are exposed to in airports and public places. They also mentioned their concerns about state institutions whose policy it is to bring Jews to live in the Negev. "That makes the Arabs fear that they'll be forced out of the Negev, transferred to an unknown place," shared one of the Arab participants. Members of the Arab group also expressed their need for basic trust. "We need equal opportunities and true recognition of Arabic as a formal language," they argued.

Members of the Arab group also spoke about their hopes. One participant said: "We are hoping to live in a multi-cultural society. We are hoping that a new national flag and a new anthem will be created...a flag and an anthem that will also represent Arab culture and nationality."

Members of the Jewish group expressed their hopes saying they do believe that true peace can be achieved. Many Jews are looking forward to a two-state solution that they believe will surely mitigate the stressed atmosphere between Arabs and Jews living in Israel. An Arab man named Moneer was asked to summarize the workshop in his own words. He said, "It was important for the whole group

to touch upon these delicate issues even though sometimes I felt uncomfortable listening to the fears and concerns which both sides expressed. Unlike other Jewish-Arab group workshops that I've been to that ended with mutual accusations and a bitter taste, Historical Conciliation seems to lead the participants toward understanding and empathy. The important thing is that we try to fully understand the 'other side's' fears and concerns and relate to them."

The conversations continued in an informal way during dinner, followed by a successful and entertaining social evening activity, arranged by the group members. One of the participants volunteered to prepare the social gathering which turned out to be a night of laughter and good friendly atmosphere. They played witty games sitting in circles like their own children might play, to everyone's excitement. One of the participants drove to the nearby Bedouin city of Rahat and brought Narghiles (hookahs) and Baklawa (sweet pastry). They sang songs, smoked the Narghile and had a lovely time together. After a long and demanding day and full of sessions on "heavy matters" they loosened up and soaked in this mini-catharsis that was so badly needed. In the jovial banter that ensued, there was little trace of the shocking experience, the enactment of the worst nightmare that the members of the workshop had experienced just a few hours earlier: "Jews to this side, Arabs to that..."

Day Two

The second day of the workshop started with high energy. The main focus of the day was the topic of empathy. The participants were first asked by Tsofit and Nasir to share personal stories related



to the idea of empathy.

A Jewish male participant named Shimon told the group of an experience that he had had in the 1973 Yom Kippur War: "I was a Platoon Commander in the southern front and we took many Egyptian soldiers as prisoners of war. At one point we had to load many prisoners on a vehicle that could seat

only 50 people. So I reported to my commander that there was no space on the truck for all the prisoners. He said 'don't count them just load them by the kilo.' For me it was awful. I felt sympathetic toward these Egyptian prisoners, even though they were the enemy. I didn't want to see them squashed into a truck. I refused my commander's order and had to stand trial for it."

Manal, an Arab participant, told the story of how one night she went to her Jewish neighbor's house after it was broken into by burglars. Manal came to her neighbor to help and encourage her, but Manal's empathy was truly tested when she overheard conversations by other people who were in the house. They said: "The burglars must have been Bedouin... those Bedouins are all thieves... they should

be burned on the spot." Manal said that hearing these racist remarks made her want to leave the house but her empathy for her neighbor's distress made her stay and support her despite Manal's personal conflict and feelings of anger towards Jews in general at that moment.

After sharing these and many other experiences of empathy, the participants were asked to form small groups in order to "exercise empathy" towards each other's stories of "pained memories" by reflecting on their family's and their own experiences going back several generations. Badria, an Arab participant, told of stories she heard as a child from her grandfather, who was forced out of his village near Ramallah by Israeli forces during the 1967 war. "I remember many stories he told me about my family's struggle against Israel and that made me more and more anti-Israel."



Gadi, a Jewish participant, told the group about the Jewish education he received as a child living in the United States: "I was brought up on the idea that Israel is the land of the Bible, is the land of my ancestors and that Israel is the land that all Jews should return to. I only heard good things about the 'land of milk and honey.' It was only when I arrived here as an adult that I saw quite a different Israel, including an Israel with Arabs living in and making claims to it... I had no idea that there were Arabs in Israel."

Yasser, a Bedouin participant, shared experiences he had as a child: "I was brought up in an unrecognized Bedouin village and the Israeli authorities came one day and tore down our house. I felt small and helpless. I knew as a child that the Jewish kids had everything and we had nothing. When I grew up I finally understood that I had to compromise in order to survive and that I have to integrate into Israel's majority-controlled society. As an Arab – you don't have any other option."

During the activity, the topic of the Jewish Holocaust was brought up. One Arab participant commented: "The Jews felt comfortable and free among the Arabs in the Arab states. It is in Europe that Jews were exposed to racism and oppression." Tikva, a Jewish female expanded on the subject: "I think it is a kind of blindness, the way Jews have gone through the traumatizing experience of the Holocaust but now are sometimes acting in a discriminating and racist way towards the Arab minority. After what we suffered, why do we see Arabs through these prisms?"

Ibtisam, an Arab female, mentioned that she understands that the Holocaust is a very traumatic episode in Jewish history. Maybe the Israeli-Jewish education is based so much on the sufferings of the Holocaust that it creates a society that lives in constant fear. Maybe this fear is one of the reasons that

the Jews have such a hard time negotiating with the Palestinians. She said, "I think Palestinians are more open to the idea of a peaceful solution between the nations."

Summary and Self Evaluation:

The two-day session, which included this conjuring up of transmitted and experienced painful memories, was emotionally intense and quite exhausting. To sum up the work achieved during the weekend, participants were asked to comment on and evaluate what they experienced and what they achieved.

Avi, a Jewish participant, said that the weekend workshop was very meaningful for him. "The sheer fact that this workshop was held has a meaning because we got the chance to be exposed to new ideas and issues, we opened up to each other, and that makes a difference. I believe that only in a day



or two I will start to understand the impact this workshop had on me."

Liat, a Jewish participant, said that as a girl she was always in a continuous dialogue on the subject of the conflict – but only within herself. "In this workshop I came to some kind of peace with my own deep and troubling thoughts and feelings because I heard other people speaking

openly and that made me feel protected to expose my deepest emotions."

Salim, an Arab male participant said: "I also saw conflicts between Arabs and Arabs, between Jews and Jews... I think this should be the time for forgiveness... it is surely the first step towards conciliation."

Ronit, a Jewish participant, said that she saw how the group changed during the workshop. "People got closer... more intimate... more sincere." David, a Jewish male added: "We shouldn't try to change society. We should try to change ourselves. We'll set the example and others will follow..."

Hamdi, an Arab male, concluded: "I came with a certain narrative in mind, a certain point-of-view that I've been holding onto for years... but now my views have broadened, I can see things from different angles. I want to thank the facilitators and this group for being so accepting and open."

Conclusion

We observe in these bi-national leadership groups their potential for establishing the tolerance and pluralism on firm and ever expanding foundations in Israel, in an emerging Palestinian state and

across the Middle East. Working with the Hajar group and other such groups, we have learned much about what the participants in these groups themselves often code by the term “politics.”

We have been studying the fragility of these already existing bi-national groups and devoting ourselves to applying our methods of Historical Conciliation. That these methods prove to be as catalytic and transformative in these functioning groups as in newly constructed groups is somewhat contrary to what we might have expected and provides important proof of concept for using painful memory in developing empathy and stronger group solidarity.

In the past we had focused on neighboring Jewish and Arab communities where there is little neighborliness and where we try to bring together grassroots leaders, encouraging them to understand and have profound personal experiences of communication and cooperation and to overcome their resistance to what is wholly lacking between these neighbors. We try to create the group and its group dynamic, *de novum*, and reviewing the past as we do seems to be ever important to the formation of a new and more comprehensive sense of community. That Historical Conciliation is so effective in these more established bi-national groups where shared interests have been so much more clarified and shared experiences so much more comprehensive underscores the attention to which we pay to this method for peace making and community building. Ultimately, it is upon the success of both types of groups that a peaceful and prosperous future depends. What has been happening in the Hajar group provides so encouraging an example.

The Hajar group is now discussing the next steps to involve the extended group of parents in the Historical Conciliation process. Generating excitement about this approach and seeing the process multiply is exactly what ICfC and Ossim Shalom had envisioned. The group’s success in engaging the other parents will also impact how their children will interact with each other in the school. From experience, we feel confident that more togetherness, more dialogues, and more openness will lead to better understanding of the “other” and more peaceful solutions to the conflict starting at a local level.