

The following article was written in 2001 and relates to my play “Checkpoint” that tried to see the Arab/Israeli conflict from the point of view of young IDF soldiers who are faced with orders their humanity dictates them to refuse.

“Windows for Peace” is an organisation based in Tel Aviv which brings together the children of both sides. This is Education at its most profound and sensitive. We can all learn from it.

Website: www.windowsforpeaceuk.org

Windows For Peace

In Israel, walls are being built. The physical walls which separate Israelis from Palestinians and Palestinians from their fields and hospitals and schools are already familiar icons in our media, but few know of the mental walls that are being created by education. Here are the words of an Israeli mother and peace activist:

“The children in my country are victims of an education which is a mind infection. The second generation of Israeli children do not know there is an occupation, have never seen a map of the real state and learn that the Palestinians are “Arabs in the State of Israel.” They learn that the Palestinians are an overwhelming threat and a demographic nightmare. A mental wall is built in the schools that is a wall of hatred and fear, and it makes children accept the real wall.”

Palestinian children also learn to hate their neighbours. For them, chaos has become normal. There are so few schools and teachers that lessons occur in shifts - half a day each - and there are 50 in a class. Sometimes a school is taken over by the Israeli Defence Force to use as a base for “security” reasons. In the refugee camp of Deheishe, south east of Bethlehem, I saw builders clearing the rubble of a junior school which a helicopter gun ship had destroyed when targeting a house next to it only a week before.

“So you are a teacher!” a Palestinian father gasped. “Here, you must make the children fear

you. They have to be crushed. My grandfather says that in his village fifty years ago the teacher was a saint, a prophet. He had all the learning. Everyone respected him and his voice was always quiet. Now the kids are harder because of the suffering, and everywhere is overcrowded. They despise the teacher who must shout and crush them to keep order. Remember the first Intifada? It was started by kids.”

But in a small house in a suburb of Tel Aviv, Windows for Peace is chipping away at the mental wall of ignorance and hostility. This association of Jews and Palestinians was founded by a group of parents and educators who wanted to produce a joint bilingual magazine for the children of both nations. Should be easy. But it isn't. Each side has to overcome years of prejudice, fear and in some cases trauma before they can find the courage to listen to each other let alone communicate. Windows sets up Friendship Centres and then puts the children through a carefully worked out process of mutual learning. Rutie Atsmon, founder of Windows, explained that each side has different problems:

“The Palestinian children experience a harsh reality which they want to describe, to get off their chests. If they have seen their father humiliated or beaten up by soldiers at a checkpoint, they need to hit out, to unload their anger. The Jewish children generally have a much easier and more privileged daily life, but have learnt to fear Arabs. Also, they will deny that a soldier who could be their father or brother would, for example, beat someone up at a checkpoint. We have to help them listen. They are trained in denial. The disillusionment is shocking for them. They will make excuses, “He had to do that to defend himself”, etc. Our message is that there are no monsters on either side, only a situation which makes people do bad things. It is part of a process that creates mutual hatred. And we offer an alternative process, towards empathy and communication. We can talk, we can work together, we can make a change.”

At a monastery just outside Jerusalem, a 12 year old Palestinian girl arrives for the first stage of this process. She is asked to send a letter to Israeli children telling them her dreams. She writes that she wants to become an atomic engineer when she grows up so that she can build an atom bomb that will kill all the Jews. At a separate meeting, this letter is read out to the Israeli children. The process dictates that they must be given

space to react with the understandable outrage (*“Why should she hate us? She is a terrorist!”*) before they are invited to write a letter back to her. She later receives this letter full of angry questions and accusations, but she is calm and almost pleased to receive it because its existence means that her feelings have been heard, acknowledged and responded to. Someone is listening. She writes back that she does not hate the people who sent the reply; she does not want to kill them. Windows staff facilitate this stage-by-stage interaction so that both sides express violent and vulnerable feelings in a safe environment before they move on to trust and interaction.

Then they embark on the Young Journalist Programme.

Here is **Lesson 1**:

“Look through the window. Write down five lines about what you see.”

When the results are read out everyone notices that although they have been looking at the same view, all have different perceptions of it. So Lesson 1 demonstrates that reality is complex and subjective.

Lesson two:

“See the tree? Why is the branch moving? Because of wind? Because a cat has just jumped from it? HOW DO YOU KNOW?”

Lesson two reveals the limits of our view because of the window frame. In order to understand what makes the branch move, we have to know what happened before we saw it and what is happening outside the frame of our vision. A journalist must see different angles. And the only way to do that is to be open enough to listen.

Then the kids are taught interviewing and research skills and how to write for a particular audience. Gradually they learn to challenge the mindsets imposed on them by media and propaganda. It is a long, difficult road, but the staff at Windows have proof of success in

joint exhibitions of paintings and in the publication of a Hebrew-Arabic youth magazine. Each issue of this is distributed in an average of 8,000 copies and read by some 30-40,000 readers, both children and adults.

15 year old Adham from Nablus says:

“I hope all children dare to listen and that I myself will be able to listen to different opinions.”

“The Courage to Listen” is a powerful Windows slogan to give us hope for a real peace in the Holy Land as walls of ignorance and fear are breached.

A U.K. Branch of Windows - Windows for Peace (UK) has been set up.

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