

Camps, choirs and conversation: Peace education for Palestinian and Israeli children and youth
By Janet W. Parachin
Yoga Spirit Academy, Tulsa, Oklahoma

Abstract

This paper explores efforts of individuals and groups to educate Israeli and Palestinian children and youth in the ways of peace and the impact these efforts have on the people of the region. It contains an evaluation of the educational goals, methods and outcomes of peace education in this region, how young people are changed by systematic, respectful encounter with the “other,” how religious and cultural realities impact these efforts toward peace education, and the prospects for a lasting peace in Israel/Palestine through reaching out to the youngest members.

When discussing the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, many people are surprised to discover that this region has been home to Muslims, Jews and Christians for many centuries, and most of that time they have coexisted peacefully. All three religious groups call Jerusalem a holy city, and each inhabits a different quarter of the city. Many Palestinians have claims to land that go back thousands of years. And Jews view Israel as their Holy Land, promised to them by God. But twentieth-century wars and political decisions have created instability in the region, resulting in much suffering, intense anger, and increasing bloodshed. Images of armed Israeli soldiers and Palestinian terrorists flashed across our television screens can hide the dynamic efforts of those who want to see a resolution to the conflict without resorting to violence.

Because of the long-standing conflict in the Middle East, the children of that region are born into violence. Children hear about and witness violence daily and most know people who have been killed by soldiers or bombings. For the children of Israel and Palestine, this is the reality of everyday life. Not surprisingly, there are many teachers, parents, and religious leaders who are not only helping children cope with the difficulties of this way of life, but who are striving to develop more positive perspectives among children and youth. The reasoning is simple: young people can grow up thinking of the other as their enemy or as their friend; learning to be friends has greater potential to lead these neighbors to peace.

Behind the Wall is an e-zine developed by teachers at the Ramallah Friends School, associated with the historic peace church the Society of Friends, or Quakers. Ramallah is a city of nearly 4 million people located in the West Bank, a Palestinian territory. Over 50% of residents live below the poverty line. The school’s students are Muslim and Christian Palestinians, and the contributors to the site are tenth graders who write about their lives in Ramallah and respond to questions posed by other students in different parts of the world. The website offers a unique window into the lives and perspectives of young people living under Israeli occupation. For instance, students in Michigan ask, “Are you optimistic about the future?” Most responders have a bleak view of the future. Fahmi writes, “The future is something that we can’t determine, but I feel pessimistic about it. Our situation is getting worse, and no one is helping us.” Juman writes, “Feeling optimistic about the future in Palestine is hard. Educational and job opportunities are very limited. In the short term, we have little hope, but we will never give up hope for a better future. History teaches us that people under occupation cannot remain occupied forever. So we plan and work for a peaceful and prosperous future.”¹ By encouraging young people to reflect on their lives and the future, these teachers create space for imagination and hope. By sharing their dreams and concerns with other young people all over the world,

these Palestinian young people make it possible for the international community to join them in their quest for peace.

Deborah Ellis is a Jewish educator who spent several weeks talking with Israeli and Palestinian children in 2002. She asked them what made them happy or sad, angry or fearful, and how they felt that the war was affecting them. She put their responses into a book called *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak*. The children's responses demonstrate how religious, cultural, familial and societal influences shape their perspective, even at an early age. Eleven-year-old Mona, a Palestinian, says, "The fighting is between the innocent Palestinians, who have nothing, and the Israelis, who have everything. . . . I don't know any Israeli children, and I don't want to. . . . They are not the same as me."² But another Palestinian girl, 14-year-old Yanal expresses guarded optimism: "Israeli kids get hatred put inside them by their parents and their government. . . . Because they don't know us, they want to kills us. The Israeli people need to fight back at the lies they get told about us."³ Perhaps in articulating their fears these children will find ways to cope with them, and in expressing their hopes they might find a community in which to realize them. More significantly, the book sits on the shelves of many public libraries offering more opportunities for young people all over the world to learn about the hopes and fears of children growing up in the midst of this conflict.

In her book *Inheriting the Holy Land*, Jennifer Miller discusses the educational systems in Palestine and Israel. With the creation of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, Palestinians are now able to decide what will be taught to their children. In their text books they try to give children a larger view of Palestinian society, but the overall message is one of Palestinian identity. Miller says that this has both positive and negative consequences. Positively, it is a clear act of nonviolent resistance against the Israelis who are seen as an invading force. Young people stand up and say, "I am here! I exist!" Negatively, it can churn up anti-Israeli sentiment that leads to unrest and often violence. For Israelis there is less need to teach national identity. Instead, they tend to balance teaching the history of Israel with a universalist view of the world. Older textbooks did not mention "Palestine" or "Palestinians," nor did they acknowledge that anyone else lived in the land before they moved in. The new textbooks are more forthcoming about the conflict over the land and that a Palestinian national movement exists.⁴

Within the Palestinian and Israeli educational systems there are educators who recognize their unique opportunity to guide young people in the ways of peace. Pathways in Reconciliation trains teachers to work with students at the tenth grade level on issues of religious and cultural values, power relations and conflict resolution. The schools in Israel and the West Bank which participate agree to allot two hours per week for one semester to the curriculum. Teachers in the program meet for five-day intensives that are held in neutral locations like Turkey or Cyprus to create an environment more conducive to honest dialogue. They practice the same skills in negotiation, conversation and respectful listening they will teach their students.⁵ An educational effort like this one has multiple beneficiaries: first, there are the teens who participate in the curriculum. Seeds of peace and understanding are surely planted in their hearts and minds. The benefits of the course are probably diminished by its limited length and because it is offered well beyond when these young people have formed their opinions of the others, however. Second, and probably more significantly, the educators benefit from practicing and teaching. Even when they are not explicitly teaching the curriculum, these new ways of perceiving and interacting with others cannot help but affect their encounters at work, in their families, and in the larger community.

Jennifer Miller writes about her work with Seeds of Peace, an organization founded by John Wallach following the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993. He was the chief diplomatic correspondent for Hearst newspapers. He had a vision for teaching Israelis and Arabs to coexist by inviting young people to summer camp in Maine. Several thousand young people from over a dozen countries have participated over the years. She describes the friendship that developed between Omri, a rightist Jew from a suburb of Tel Aviv and Mohammed, a Palestinian from Jerusalem's Old City. They met at camp when both were 15 years old. Well-steeped in their respective religious and cultural traditions, both had learned to hate the other. They both spoke with much anger about the terrible actions and beliefs of the other group. But playing basketball together, eating together, and talking together about their home, they developed a deep appreciation and friendship one-on-one. Omri says to Mohammed: "Only because of you—one person—I have changed. You have changed the way I think about Palestinians." Mohammed replies: "The first time I saw you, you were wearing the David Star, and I thought you didn't like Palestinians at all. And after we had activities together our friendship became bigger and bigger, and I find that you have the same brain that I have and that we can be friends."⁶ Unfortunately, the boys were unable to maintain the relationship when they returned to their respective homes, but still the seeds had been planted: both became vocal advocates for peace in their schools and communities.

Miller's book is full of similar stories of teenagers who met at Seeds of Peace retreats. Without exception, the experience of being in a different environment away from family and friends, separated from the demands of culture and religion, and without the threat of violence, had a profound impact on the teens. Almost all arrived with preconceived notions about "the other" based on what they had been told by parents, teachers and religious leaders, or on personal encounters they had had. As a rule, these were not positive impressions. And yet, as Wallach envisioned when he started Seeds of Peace, the pleasant environment, educational activities, and distance from the persistent tensions caused a change of mind and heart for all the young people. Miller followed up on many of the students after their return to Palestine/Israel and discovered mixed results: some reverted to their original way of thinking about the other when they returned home, others maintained contact with their newfound friends, and still others found themselves living in the tension between wanting to build bridges of peace in a social situation that colludes to keep Palestinians and Israelis at odds with one another. The hope is that as these young people grow into adulthood they will take the lessons they learned on retreat into society, work settings and the government. Whether or not their retreat experiences are powerful enough to overcome their violent social situation remains to be seen.

On a much smaller scale, Jewish educator Sylke Tempel attempted to forge a personal bond of friendship and understanding between two teenage girls who met in 2000 and began corresponding by letter in 2002 when both were 18. Tempel writes, "For me, they cured a disease that is very widespread among observers of and participants in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: that is, to pass judgment too easily about 'good' and 'bad,' to make the distinction too quickly between 'victim' and 'perpetrator,' instead of first listening, remaining open to surprises, and accepting different perspectives—even though some might provoke objection."⁷ Although both live in Jerusalem, Amal, an Arab Palestinian, and Odelia, a Jewish Israeli, would not likely have met under ordinary circumstances because the Jewish and Arab sections of Jerusalem are highly segregated. In one of her letters, Odelia practices an imaginative exercise of putting herself in Amal's place, wondering what it would be like to live under occupation, under a foreign flag, among people who speak a different language. She writes, "How would I feel if

somebody took over Israel and told me: ‘OK, from now on this is a Christian country, we have to change the flag, our national symbol is the cross and the official language is—let’s say—English.’ I guess that’s what the Palestinians might feel.”⁸ Even at a young age, their instincts for peace and understanding were already at work; it just took the inspiration of one adult to bring them together. Stories such as this one should give hope to peace educators, that offering people of different cultures the opportunity to come together—even in the midst of a war zone—is never a useless activity. The seeds of peace and hope are already planted in the hearts of young people, and skilled teachers, parents, and guides can help nurture them through creativity and care.

Though overshadowed now by his Silk Road Project, renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma has also been active in forging relationships of peace and understanding in the Middle East. In 1994 he was invited to teach a master class in Tel Aviv, Israel. While traveling through the region, he met King Hussein and Queen Noor of Jordan who invited him to teach a master class in Amman as well. Meeting with young people from these two different cultures on two consecutive days sparked the idea for using music to create constructive relationships in a destructive world. His idea resulted in the founding of the Middle Eastern Youth Orchestra in which both Palestinians and Israelis play. He says, “In addition to making wonderful music, the members of the youth orchestra are forces for peace and communication in this often contentious part of the world. Every time I open a newspaper, I am reminded that we live in a world where we can no longer afford not to know our neighbors.”⁹

Outside of school settings, those who have enacted public action for peace and justice have made a conscious effort to include children, youth and young adults. Standing up and speaking out for peace and justice in everyday life is a powerful way to teach peace to every generation. In the last 40 years, the Israeli government has removed Palestinians from their lands, destroyed their homes and farms, and Israeli settlers have moved into the areas once inhabited by Palestinians. Palestinians have been told to become Israeli citizens or leave. Those who chose the path of peace rather than violence have been quite creative in enacting a variety of nonviolent direct actions including refusing to pay taxes to the Israelis, keeping shops open when told by the Israelis to close them, closing up shop when Israelis told them to stay open, staying home from school and work, placing protest ads in the newspaper, boycotting Israeli stores and services, and defying curfew. These actions affect young people in many ways: they miss classes and work, their personal safety is at risk, and they fear losing loved ones.

Because the main conflict in Israel/Palestine concerns who owns and occupies the land, actions supporting Palestinians’ rights to the land are popular. Some homes and olive trees destroyed by soldiers riding bulldozers have been re-built and re-planted. People try to prevent the destruction by sitting on rooftops and camping among the olive trees. In Budrus, a town in the West Bank, mass rallies start at daybreak and last until night fall. People of all ages—from infants to the elderly—participate in the events. The protesters link arms to form a human fence to keep the Israelis from coming into their olive groves. Budrus resident Ayed Morar says, “The Israelis know well how to use Apache helicopters, planes and tanks. We are no match for them that way. But they don’t know how to contend with this.”¹⁰

Among Israeli young adults and teenagers, all of whom are required by law to serve two years in the military, there is a growing effort to resist the occupation and refuse military service. Many hundreds of reservists have already signed a 2002 letter declaring “We shall not fight beyond the 1967 borders in order to dominate, expel, starve and humiliate an entire people.” And many high school students have signaled their desire to be conscientious objectors. The Israeli government does not honor this request, however, and those who refuse military service are tried

and imprisoned. The human rights organization Amnesty International is working to free these prisoners of conscience.¹¹ By including children and youth in these efforts, new social activists are born. In risking their freedom, security and lives, these young people learn that the price of seeking peace is high—as much if not more so than the price of waging war.

In reflecting on these various examples to teach and practice peace in the Middle East, the difficulties faced by these educators, community leaders, and young people are clearly enormous. The recent history of animosity and the present reality of ongoing violence collude in a powerful way to discourage peace education at every turn. Truly, the hope and tenacity of these people is breath-taking. Aside from the external difficulties that threaten peace education, there are also internal difficulties that hamper its progress. From an educational perspective, the greatest obstacle is the lack of coordination among the various efforts and the somewhat unclear connection between goals and outcomes for peace education. Anecdotally we see that these activities are making a difference in the lives of individuals and communities in the region. People who once hated each other walk away from these encounters with a new perspective and many even go on to become peace activists. However, their voices and actions are overshadowed by ongoing violence. Can peace advocates be content with the small victories when the grand hope of peace in the Middle East is elusive at best, perhaps impossible to attain? And how many people who were once committed to seeking peace burn out or give up in discouragement when even the small victories are no longer enough?

Short term programs offer a starting point, but to sustain the work and keep morale high, long-term programs that incorporate children at all age levels must be initiated. In the course of my research, I was unable to locate such programs, but I suspect they do exist. Beyond the programs, however, there is a need for support systems within communities, schools, families and religious organizations to maintain meaningful contact between Israelis and Palestinians once it is initiated and to mitigate negative impressions that occur due to violence. The goal of this peace education should be to have fewer children who say “I don’t know any Israeli [or Palestinian] children, and I don’t want to. . . . They are not the same as me,” and more who proclaim “Only because of you—one person—I have changed. You have changed the way I think about Palestinians [or Israelis].” The curiosity, openness and generosity of children may be the key to peace and understanding in this troubled place in our world.

¹ See the Ramallah Friends School website at <http://lifebehindthewall.org>.

² Deborah Ellis, ed., *Three wishes: Palestinian and Israeli children speak* (Toronto: Groundwood Books, 2004), 47.

³ Ellis, 59.

⁴ Jennifer Miller, *Inheriting the Holy Land: An American’s search for hope in the Middle East* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005), 55, 65.

⁵ Janet M. Powers, *Blossoms on the olive tree: Israeli and Palestinian women working for peace* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 72-73.

⁶ Miller, 15.

⁷ Amal Rifa’i, and Odelia Ainbinder with Sylke Tempel, *We just want to live here: A Palestinian teenager, an Israeli teenager—an unlikely friendship* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2003), x.

⁸ Rifa’i and Ainbinder, 3.

⁹ Jake Miller, “Travelers on the Silk Road: 2006,” in *Yoga+ Joyful Living*, September-October 2006, 52.

¹⁰ “Nonviolent resistance and the olive harvest,” *American Friends Service Committee* [website]; available from <http://www.afsc.org/israel-palestine/learn/nonviolence-and-the-olive-harvest.htm>; Internet; accessed 8 February 2007.

¹¹ “Soldiers imprisoned for refusing to take part in human rights violations,” 15 May 2002, *Jewish Peace Fellowship* [website]; available from <http://www.jewishpeacefellowship.org>; Internet; accessed 5 February 2007.