

OVER THE HORIZON: THE ROLE OF AN EDUCATOR IN THE FACE OF TERROR

by
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*“And they’ll beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall
not lift up sword against nation, neither shall
they learn war any more.”*

Middle East violence has become a daily thing, in the last two years. Terrorist bombs and attacks cut the lives of children on their way to school and parents on their way to work. A mother and her three children were recently shot to death in their home by a terrorist. In the face of suicidal human bombs, life becomes cheap and emotions are both dulled and heightened. Bereavement becomes a daily companion.

Rage, fear, indifference and cynicism laced with black humor manifest themselves as an expected outcome of these circumstances. Uncertainty is an understatement as the very essence of existence is threatened daily. Worst of all, with no light at the end of this pitch-dark tunnel, a desperate hopeless feeling creeps in.

The seed of deep, lasting hatred of the “OTHER”, a faceless over-generalized terrorist, might be deeply embedded in the hearts. It has never

been Israeli policy to foster hatred. On the contrary for years we have hoped for peace and educated in this venue.

In the wake of terrible wave of terrorism in the last two years, the relentless peace efforts seem at times naive, useless and even inappropriate. In this situation the role of the educator becomes crucial. Like a foreseer the educator should see over and beyond the glum bleak horizon. The task of the educator is to prepare students for tomorrow for there will be days in the aftermath of violence and hatred. This imposing task is difficult. As a reacting, feeling, human being the educator shares the feelings of agony and rage in the face of the unnecessary dimming light.

As a person with a mission, the educator has to rise above the immediacy of the moment, to soar and to look at another point of view, a proactive one, a far reaching and a farseeing one. In this capacity the educator must resort to peace education even though the time might not seem ripe for it.

In Israel, life and death are tightly intertwined. Memorial Day, the day we remember those who died in the wars and acts of terror, falls just one day before Yom Haatzmaut, Israel Independence Day. The constant shifting from grief, sorrow, happiness and hope, characterizes much of the Israeli identity. In 2001, the sorrow and the grief had an additional dimension, that of the *Intifada*, and the many gruesome terrorist acts that have become almost daily events in Israel.

At such a time, what is an Israeli school's mission? What activities should be conducted to commemorate the lives given to one's country? The following describes the activity of one school in Israel on Memorial Day, April 25th, 2001. As I wrote this activity description for Yom Hazikaron (Memorial Day) conducted at the Alon Elementary School in Mate Yehuda, in April 2001, car bombs were exploding in Jerusalem. Against the background of bloodshed and acts of violence, the activity at the Alon school, an activity which I believe is quite common in other Israeli schools, takes on great importance as it sets a tone of hope in this part of the world torn by hate, fear, despair and disbelief. Two fourth grade homeroom teachers, Adi and Etti, chose this activity as most appropriate for the Alon Elementary School.

The Activity

About 50 4th grade learners were asked to think about possible ways of converting tools of war into instruments and devices to be used during times of peace.

The children used drawing paper and crayons. It was a very simple activity, but much thinking and lots of hope went into it. Adi introduced the children to the activity with the following words:

We are right now in the midst of a very difficult situation from a security point of view. Both we and the Palestinians are suffering. At this time of enormous tension, when the right and the left are driven further apart in our country, Etti and I wanted especially today, Yom HaZikaron (Memorial Day) for our soldiers who died for our country, to talk with you about peace. Peace has always been a dream of the Jewish people. Even in Biblical times, in the days of Isaiah. Isaiah was a very important prophet. He prophesized in Jerusalem and said that a day will come when peace will reign. And when there will be peace there won't be any need for weapons, for tools of fighting. All the war machinery and tools will be converted into plowshares. Do you know what plowshares are?

(The children answered Adi's question).

In the book of Isaiah Ch. II verse 4 Isaiah says: " And they'll beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, niether shall they learn war any more."

[Adi and Eti explained the meaning of the verse to the children. Once the verse was explained and understood, Adi went on with her introductory words]

I would like to tell you a story I heard recently. This is a true story. Are you familiar with S. (name of a factory)? S. used to make weapons. Used to because now S. manufactures pots and pans. The directors of the factory decided to use their knowledge in making weapons for the benefit of the kitchen and started making kitchen utensils using the same technology.

So what are we going to do here, today? Soon you'll divide into groups and you'll think about what could be done with war tools in times of peace? What could we transform them into?

The children immediately divided into groups. They had big drawing blocks in front of them and crayons. Cooperative learning is a key method of instruction and learning at the Alon School, as is dialoguing in small groups. A lot of dialoguing and thinking went on. Their creativity knew no limits. A war aircraft became a "Dove of Peace" flying from one country to another ushering a new era. Tanks, armored vehicles and planes became a huge amusement park, where a merry-go-round was made of former fighter bombers and the armored vehicles cheerfully painted, were part of the amusement cars driven by visitors for fun. Some students suggested welding the iron to remake out of this strong material jewelry: earrings, chains, pins etc. Others envisioned rifles containing much desired candies of different tastes and colors. The bitter taste of war transformed into the sweet taste of candy and chocolate bars.

Summary and Discussion

At these very difficult times there is some danger of being carried into a militaristic or pessimistic mood by the terrible events. The role of the educator leading children to the future as well as imparting knowledge of the past, becomes most important. Educators everywhere, but especially in countries at war, are the agents of values and hope no less than they are masters and teachers of subject matter. Which method should they use at such times? What values should they impart? Adi and Etti, two 4th grade teachers suggest to us that creative thinking is a key element at such times.

Creative thinking helps us break away from fixed patterns, offers new options and assists us to transform situations and objects. Transformation is most needed here: transforming the "culture" of hate and fear into a new culture of hope and peace.

The idea of transforming war and its tools into instruments of peace is deeply embedded in Jewish tradition. So is the quest for peace. The Bible is strewn with this quest for peace and its exaltation. I'll mention just a few instances:

*"The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace."
Numbers 6/26*

*"Then Gideon built an altar there unto the Lord, and called it
Jehova-shalom." Judges 6/24*

*"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that
bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace." Isaiah 52/7*

"Seek peace, and pursue it." Psalms 34/14

*"The mountains shall bring peace to the people, and the little hills,
by righteousness." Psalm 72/3*

"He makes peace in His High places." Job 25/2

The activity described here builds upon the nation's longings for peace, and for a day when tools of war won't be needed anymore. The idea of transforming weaponry into useful tools and objects was well accepted by the children in the two 4th grades. They readily went on working on their assignment. The childlike creativity, which isn't marred by fixed patterns, gushed out. Instruments of war can and should be transformed into tools benefiting people instead of wounding and killing them. Lets only hope that their wishes as well as ours will come true.

The human wish to transform the bad into good, is very old as described in Isaiah: "And they'll beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks : nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." How does one get to transform things? One tool that might help us in our attempts to do that is the tool of creative thinking. Creative thinking is first and foremost an attitude that challenges conventional axioms. Creative thinking knows no limitations, is optimistic and builds on the future and not on the past. These characteristics make creative thinking the right tool to use when trying to suggest new ways to cope with a very difficult situation. In the grim, harsh reality forced upon us in the Middle East, this activity, though simple and unpretentious, is of the utmost importance. Its significance lies in its giving the children tools for dealing with the seemingly hopeless reality. Lets pray that these youngsters will have the good fortune of implementing the fruits of their Memorial Day activity.

An End Note

I want to believe there are some Palestinian colleagues who are working with their students in like manner. It is these educators among Israelis and Palestinians who will make peace a reality.

Nurturing the mind and soul from a very early age with non-violent creative activities will never fail to open up new avenues, will help us all to pave a highway for peace and understanding.

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