

## **Breaking Barriers Report 2003**

### **by Keren and Rashid**

After the two groups came back from Germany we evaluated the seminars and decided that we have to work together because:

1. That the people themselves want very much to keep it, from both sides,
2. We should do everything we can to help them.

From what happened in Germany, many of the participants came back with big motivation to act, and with a feeling of responsibility to pass on what they got to more people- and that there's some hope for the future. That maybe we can do something together.

When we came back it was somehow a shock to return to this reality from the relatively isolated seminar, but in fact everyone was very aware of this during the seminars themselves, and also said in many occasions, that returning is going to be tough after this meeting- because of the emotional involveness that was created, the exposure to the "other side", because it's hard to continue in our land which is so tensed and bloody, and because the "technical" difficulties to meet.

Participants felt frustrated from the fact they came back with strong feelings to the other group, with truth they learned, to a society that thinks and feels very different.

Many felt hopeless because of this gap. However, maybe because of this, the majority from both seminars decided that they want and need to continue the partnership, to change this situation. The contact remained in emails, phones and meetings when possible.

This continues without outside interfering to "push" them but from the need to remind the "other side" that they care, and to keep faith now when they are back.

We decided to continue developing this group, also because all the circumstances today work against this kind of connection and if we want it kept, we need not only to want it but also to fight for it and to get organized. Every contact like this carries today a political meaning. For sure in the eyes of our politicians and societies, which don't approve it usually and mostly make it harder in many ways. In addition, because many decided that personal contact is not enough, we need to act together.

First thing we did is to keep the contact also inside the "nationality groups", with phones, emails and meetings, in which we tried to start first thoughts of what we can do, together and separately.

On Israeli side, which is more free to spread information in public, started a project of going to schools, and discussing with the students, trying to raise awareness and empathy which are not shown in media or education system.

We are also doing the same thing with people in the streets, home meetings about the seminars etc.

On Palestinian side, it started with telling friends and close people about the experience they have been through, and in many cases joining them the circle of people who wish to come.

This allowed visits of some Israeli participants in some Palestinians' places.

This, without counting independent initiatives, like Yonatan who started a youth group meeting Arabic youth in his homecity, two participants, Murad and Danna, who went together abroad in a delegation, people who started learning Hebrew and Arabic etc.

WE decided to start regular meetings in Jerusalem, because we have to build this opportunity of meeting also in the place we live in.

These meetings were moving- first, people met after long time, and it was beautiful to see the warm feelings to each other, and how they missed each other. It was hard and special at the same time.

The most surprising thing was what happened at the first meeting of August seminars. In Germany, it was tensed and hard, and the gaps were big. It was amazing to see what started in Germany, developed here to a strong and special connection between the people. The level of openness was huge.

In the meetings, people shared their lives since Germany, fears and obstacles. We did a “panel”, in which all Palestinians got the chance to answer these questions:

- 1- What do you want Israelis to know about you as Palestinians?
- 2- What are you proud about being a Palestinian?
- 3- What would you never want to see / hear again about Palestinians?
- 4- what do you expect from Israelis as your allies?

The role of Israelis was to listen, as hard as it might be. This caused a result of unexpected openness and trust.

The day after, the Palestinians got the chance to ask the Israelis the questions, which created an interesting discussion and understanding.

In the meetings were raised many ideas for cooperation and from them came 3 working teams, with people and coordinators from both sides. These teams already started working. So far, to the meetings we had came new people, Israelis and Palestinians, and we think it's important for the participants to see that more and more people want to join. Every meeting is strengthening the relations between the people, and we continue the meetings and hope the group will grow and grow.