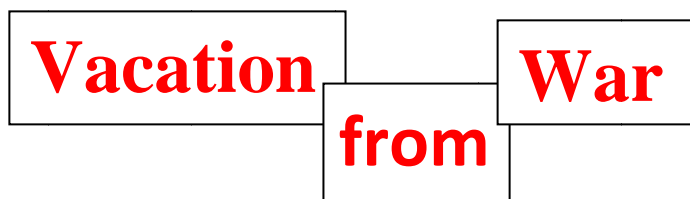
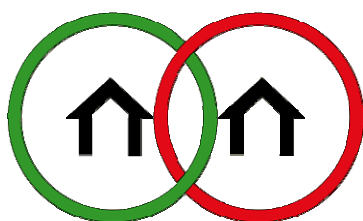


Committee for Basic Rights and Democracy



Steps toward the Concrete Utopia of a Peaceful World Summer 2009

Facilitators' Seminar Reports



AVIG - Alternative Voice in the Galilee was established following the October 2000 events in order to challenge the unequal relationship between the Arab and Jewish populations in the Galilee region. Upon its establishment Alternative Voice in the Galilee sought to mend past relationships and rebuild mutual trust between the two communities....Alternative Voice in the Galilee aims to alter the present reality in Israel, which supports the institutional preference of Jewish citizens over Arabs....Our organization works towards correcting historical injustices endured by the Arab minority, whose land has been confiscated, and villages and townships are limited by government policies that prevent their expansion. Alternative Voice in the Galilee is the only Arab-Jewish partnership in the region to concentrate on issues of population and living conditions.

Tawasul is a non-profit, non-governmental organization which was founded in 2002 by a group of grass-root Palestinian peace and development activists. The aim of Tawasul is to create and develop non-violent communication between all levels of society, based on our conception of society and through a process starting at the individual level and then reaching all layers of the complex network in which every individual lives and thrives. Our conception of society is a democratic and pluralistic society in which everybody is attempting to meet their own needs. It is a society which builds on people's strengths, deals with confusions, confronts hatred, promotes tolerance and fosters cooperation and communication. In this vision, people are encouraged to use non-violent communication to create better understanding, acknowledge people's strengths and limitations and to participate in the different disciplines of economics, education, justice and health.



Seminar Avig and Tawasul 2009 - Kath. Jugendakademie Walberberg Facilitator's reports

Compiled and commented by Wilfriede Dieter

**Avig - Tawasul Seminar –
Mohammed J. – Coordinator in the Palestinian Team**

Acquaintance and dialogue in for ending the violence and occupation

Palestinian Youth is living a state of loss of hope, lack of security and stability because of the occupation practices that limit their movement and interfere with their liberty. Also young Israelis feel the tension and insecurity as a result of them being occupiers and they should stay vigilant and

cautious in fear of Palestinians who might attack them at any moment. Such is the prevailing situations between the two peoples in general and among young people in particular.

This area is experiencing different shapes of extremism and intolerance which causes tension, disappointment, lack of hope and loss of trust and faith in the other. This tension has been demonstrated after the Israeli occupation forced besieging, starved the Palestinians and launched the war on Gaza. The trust guaranteed by the Israeli street for the right wing government, the government of extremism and settlements, has just made things worse and has caused additional deterioration in the ongoing tension.



On the other hand, Palestinian street is witnessing confusion because of the ongoing Palestinian-Palestinian fight, the absence of national unity and the impeded reconciliation dialogue. In order to keep up a justification for revenge and freedom fighters on the part of the Palestinians, and for the raids, assassinations and occupation on the part of the Israelis, each side must dehumanize the other side. Every single opportunity must be created to deepen the hatred, such as self-portraiture as a victim, labelling the other as a torturer, or wishing for death and annihilation of the other. A more moderate form seems to be the open denial of the other and not give it any legitimacy in the presence and rights. For that we see rejecting the idea of meeting the other so as not to give him legitimacy or recognition of the right to exist and to convince the public that there is no Palestinian partner for negotiations.

But what we do in the “Vacation from war” camp is the exact opposite to what was said above. 30 young people from the Westbank and some from Jerusalem come on their own to the camp to meet the others, 30 young Israeli from different regions beyond the green line. Although the street and official politicians disapprove such meetings these young people came from the two nationalities. The participants come and bring with them their personal stories and experiences of fear, hatred, suspicion and doubts, and sometimes the desire for revenge.

The Israelis listen to the Palestinian stories of daily suffering and living in very difficult and harsh conditions of the occupation, and the Palestinians listen to the Israeli stories of painful memories which haunt the Jewish people and also the feeling of fear and targeting Jewish and Israeli in general. When the participants got to know each other well on a personal and national level, and got to hear and understand the other party's point of view in depth, they found that the causes of hatred and aggression are injustice, abuse, and insecurity. They start thinking about the mechanisms and ways to end this hate, to get rid of the causes of suspicion and fear, and move on searching ways for both peoples to live free of occupation and without fears and persecution.

Despite the difficulties they have been facing during their discussions they continued to debate and communicate in dialogue. They succeeded in addressing the main points of disagreement, something that the leaders of the two sides could not achieve so far. They did not avoid discussing fear, blood, killing, terrorism, themes of human existence, refugees and return rights, borders and settlements. They developed scenarios to end the occupation and establish two independent states that share a life of cooperation and good neighborliness.

This camp was an experiment and a very rare opportunity that gave participants the ability to meet and face themselves, their own opinions and prejudices, gave them the possibility to meet each other, and stand in others' shoes. Patience, good listening, freedom of speech, right to express your opinion and respect others' opinions are values that are missing in our societies these days, but are recreated by the system and the concept of the camp which was based on equality, respect for others

and for time. Those are values that participants have earned within the camp and that they will carry home and will translate in their daily lives and their behavior.

There may be no need to emphasize one's national identity if there is no other one around or if there is no threat to that identity. When we redefine this identity through questions and through dialogue among ourselves and with members of the national group and with members of the opposite group, the redefining will be in a non-offensive and controversial way taking into consideration the existence of the other person and his rights. The national identity for Palestinians cannot be developed without the presence of the Israelis and vice versa.

This effect may be small for some people, but in our view, it is very important, even at the individual level, and it remains a step towards the peace process and towards coexistence between the parties. We found in the feedback from the individuals involved that this effect extends when participants return to their normal lives. They tell their families and friends what happened to them so that this project's impact would go beyond its time and space and will work in the future and end the meeting of enemies in a friendly and civilized way.

At the end of my report I would like to thank the German crew and the committee, and the donors, who made it possible to transform the encounter of enemies into a civilized and friendly meeting. The Academy in Walberberg, placed in peaceful and idyllic surroundings, contributed to the well-being of all participants without any discrimination or bias.

We have proven that dialogue is the solution, not war.

Avig + Tawasul Seminar – Kath. Jugendakademie Walberberg Mohammad Sh. – Moderator in the Palestinian Team

Summer camp for young Palestinians and young Israelis in Germany

First, I would like to thank everyone for the big efforts having been invested in this summer camp 2009: Big thanks to Mr. Mohammad Judah for his coordination, for his efforts, and for all he has done for the groups and the team to make this camp succeed. Another big thank to the German team for their help and support all day long in every way. Finally, thanks to the facilitators' and the translators' team for the hard and good work they did for the participants during the sessions and also at the breaks and time off. Thanks to Helga, the committee and the donors who supported all of us to come to Germany and to make this summer camp see the light after all the hardship that most of the participants had gone through.



I would like to mention that recruiting participants was not an easy task to do. Mr. Judah has done lots of work to recruit the participants and also to prepare them to the camp by giving them so much information about the camp, the travelling, the place, behaviours, the seminar's program, the workshops, the methods and how to work in small and large groups. Organizing the visas, the way to Germany and the return journey to Jordan, was not an easy job to do, but Mr. Judah and the team helped the group to come back home safe after the good, hard and intensive work everyone did in the camp.

After having facilitated at many occasions as well as in this camp for the second time, I would appreciate the camp dialogue program as having been extremely efficient. The way Mr. Judah split up the sessions'

timetable and the themes was great! The timetable was designed to help everyone to check with him/herself which information he/she would like to share, and then to continue with the personal stories of the participants to be followed by the collective narrative.

The participants had to be open for dialogue, they were to listen and to understand whether they agreed or not with the other side. By listening and trying to understand they were to be sensitive to the other person's feelings and story. The stories of both sides were hard to bear. Most of the Palestinians' stories were extremely strong, as they told about their daily suffering. In our group (Asma, Eitan and me) there were some hard Palestinian stories that made both sides cry. Four times it happened that participants breaking out in tears left the room for some minutes. There were so many topics the participants talked about: the Israeli army's behaviour, the way they would insult and humiliate Palestinians whether on the check-points or while doing a "military operation", as they call it.

The trust issue was also raised frequently. At the beginning, both sides just ignored trust. They didn't like to talk about it, as they said there was no trust between them. Even at the end of the camp some of the participants from both sides still didn't want to say they trusted the other side. This was sensible when they talked about land, settlements, the wall, the borders, the water issue, the refugees etc.

In our group there were three girls from Jerusalem, and when an Israeli asked the Palestinians from the Westbank, how they felt that there were girls not belonging to the Palestinian authority, the Palestinian group referred to that by saying "NO, Jerusalem is the capital of Palestine and, of course, they are part of us. We are all Palestinians, but the occupation divided the land according to Israel's needs and interests. Jerusalem is in our hearts and we all consider us part of it". The three Palestinian girls, on their part, attacked the Israelis for putting that question, which made it pretty clear to the Israeli group that the Palestinian group is united and cannot be divided. At the same time there were vivid debates when the participants met in their national groups. There was disagreement at times and not all arguments were unanimously shared. Almost everyone was fighting for their position, demonstrating why they came to the camp, and trying to convince the other members of the un-national group of their ideological position.

The peace negotiation part was really great, and many participants agreed to that by saying: "Now we are doing something most effective". The members of the two negotiation committees came from the various workshop groups. This mixture made the peace negotiation really powerful and presented the conflict in a good way. In the discussion, problems were addressed freely and convincingly from both sides. The idea of how I understand the negotiation is not to agree or disagree but to experience the negotiation process itself. It was great and amazing to see how well the young people did their job, even at the end, when the negotiations' results, the agreements and the disagreements, were presented to the public in a press conference.

There was a continuation of the work team. Eitan and myself were on the team together already last year. It was very successful and a great experience. This year Asma, Eitan and me have done all we were planning to do in our meetings in Palestine before we went to Germany. Each one of us had to fulfill their task. In the reality of the camp, however, it was not easy to deal with all the issues and emotions. We gave the chance to everybody to express her/his understanding of the conflict and to utter their feelings, in short to retain his individuality in the whole process. I am sure, all took the chance and demonstrated their intention to meet the other side and to work together.

Asma, our translator, was very successful in doing her hard job. I like to thank her for her effort to help everyone express themselves in their own way and language. The whole team has done hard and good work, and facilitating together with Eitan was a wonderful experience.

Thank you again, I wish everyone all the best and peace to all of us.
Mohammad Shbayta



INITIATIVE BREAKING BARRIERS

founded by Keren Assaf, Tel Aviv and Rami Nasser-Eddin, Jerusalem
Mount Zion Peace Award of the Benedict-Abbey Hagia Maria Sion 2003

‘Breaking Barriers’ Israel and Palestine 2009 – Facilitators’ reports

Compiled and commented by Wilfriede Dieter



Keren und Rami in front of Zions Gate, Jerusalem
(Foto Frieder Bickle)

Keren and Rami have met for the first time in May 2001 on the Japanese Peace Boat, cruising the Mediterranean and attending training courses in conflict transformation. To their amazement both realized there, far from the actual conflict, how much their ideas about a peace making process coincided. At that time, at the height of the 2nd Intifada, for the project “Vacation from War” the search for partner organizations in Israel and Palestine for the planned encounters proved to be difficult.

Finally Helga Dieter got to know Keren and Rami. Since summer 2002 they have organized groups from both sides that with enthusiasm came to the seminars in Germany. They founded the initiative “Breaking Barriers” at the first holiday camp hosted by the “Vacation from War” Campaign in summer 2002. Since about 600 friends of friends of friends heard the whispering –propaganda about the encounters and came for “Vacation from War” to Germany.

Breaking Barriers – Women’s Seminar – Ev. Akademie Hofgeismar Gili Pliskin – Moderator in the Israeli Team

This year’s women’s seminar was somehow different than in the past. It was a bit shorter (12 days instead of 14) and far more intense. On the one hand it took me longer to adjust back to reality and on the second hand – I could hardly wait to write this report. It was very meaningful and emotional this year. For many reasons. First of all, after all the massive Israeli attacks on Gaza, we were not sure if it was possible to conduct the seminars all together. There had been so much hurt and pain and damage and so many casualties - that sitting together in a room and “getting to know each other” seemed to be a thing farthest from reality. We knew that now it was even more important than before not to give in, to insist on bringing people from both sides to talk to each other, or the wounds would become too deep to heal. But we also knew this year the attacks on Gaza would have implications. That something this year would be different. And it was.

As in previous years, we worked in 3 groups of 12 women each (6 Israeli and 6 Palestinian) and 2 facilitators (one Israeli and one Palestinian). This was the second time that Eliana, Lisa and I worked together as an Israeli team, and the first year we worked with Malaeka, Hager and Bana on the Palestinian side. It was an honor and a privilege to work with such a professional team of women – we had a great time together and I would like to see us working in the same setting in the future - it worked like magic! This year, for the first time, one of the groups had built in translation, which allowed participants (who did not speak English or feel comfortable with it) to express their thoughts and feelings in their own language. I was not part of that group, but I heard that it was very meaningful for the participants to have both languages present in the room which are also at the base of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. It is always interesting to witness language dynamics, especially in a context of clear power relations (more Palestinians understand Hebrew than Israelis understand Arabic).

I facilitated in an English speaking group of 12 women together with Bana, who turned out to be a perfect match for me. Chemistry between us was great, communication intensive, and after every session we found ourselves discussing what had gone on, finding that we shared feelings and thoughts about the process. This was a true gift which I don't take for granted – it doesn't always happen! From the first day we successfully worked together creating a safe space for participants from both sides helping solve group-dynamic problems. Rose sat silently in the sessions as a representative of the German team. Her role was to observe the process and take notes, and her presence was friendly, attentive and respectful. It was important always to have the same person in the group – this gave a sense of consistency that helped create an environment of trust and intimacy.

After the initial phase of “ice breaking” and “getting-to-know-each-other” exercises, Bana and I asked the group to divide into mixed couples and help each other in a trust building exercise. In this exercise they are supposed to rely on each other and be there for one another. Most of the participants joined in, though it later turned out it was not easy for the Palestinians to immediately trust the Israelis and communicate freely with them. One of the Palestinian women totally refused to take part in the exercise – and her Israeli partner was heartbroken. In a later discussion it turned out that this woman had mixed feelings about coming to the seminar and had never imagined that she would have to communicate directly with an individual Israeli person. To her Israelis are the enemy, and she only met them before in a military context at the checkpoints, when Israeli soldiers tend to be very harsh on Palestinians passing through. She said she had not come to the seminar to communicate with individuals, but to express her voice to a group – a group from the enemy's side. It was difficult for some of the Israelis to hear that, but we highly appreciated her directness and honesty, which set the grounds for honest and open communication in our group throughout the whole seminar.

Bana and I were concerned about this participant, not knowing exactly how to approach her fears and deal with them in a sensitive and productive way. To our luck and surprise – the cosmic universe gave us a hand and created the perfect scenario for further ice breaking. We had begun the following day with an exercise called “one on one” – something we do every morning till the last day of the seminar – in which we ask each woman to find a partner from the other side and spend 15 minutes talking about a topic of their choice. It can be related to the seminar or not, but it usually has something to do with the conflict and with exchanging personal and political information. That same Palestinian woman participant from the day before said 15 minutes was too long for such an exercise, and repeated her stand that she had not come to the seminar for a “one on one” with the enemy. Bana asked her at least to make an effort to do it, and she reluctantly agreed. An Israeli woman approached her and invited her to go outside for a walk, as the weather was sunny and gorgeous. As they went down the stairs, the Israeli woman tripped and fell down the stairs. Her Palestinian partner, who a moment before was not willing to look her in the eye, instinctively reached out to catch her and prevented her from falling. As soon as she was stabilized, the Palestinian woman seemed confused about the interaction that had just happened, and it was

fascinating to watch this scene. It looked as if she wanted to ask her if she was ok, but obviously felt uncomfortable. Eventually they went outside and sat down for a talk. We did not know how it would work and were almost sure they would be the first couple to come back to the room, but...it turned out that everyone had come back and they were missing. We had to go and look for them outside and tell them that time was up. Both seemed disappointed. When they were back in the room something between them seemed soft. And open. When it was their turn to speak they looked at each other and one offered the other to go ahead first. It was very heartwarming to observe, and paved the way for more direct and trustful interactions in the group as a whole.



Gili in center

So trust was built sooner than we had expected. Something happened after that day: both sides were genuinely eager not only to express themselves and convey their important messages, but also to be heard and understood. This year our group was unique in the participants' commitment to understanding as well as explaining. There seemed to be thirst on both sides. To hear. To know. To learn. To understand. On a human level. Though both sides had come with a lot of pain they seemed to portray their experiences in a way the other side could bear to listen to. The Palestinian participants spoke out their truth in a very soft, clear and emotional way that helped the Israeli women open up to really listening without feeling intimidated or threatened or defensive. Both sides gave space and respect to one's personal experience of reality, as well as to one's pain. The Palestinian women said, more than once, that they were thankful to the Israeli women for truly listening to them. This helped build trust, and also made it possible for Palestinians to listen to the Israelis, which had not been easy for them in the past.

A good example for that was to be seen during the two sessions we devoted to discussing what had happened in Gaza. Each participant was asked to express her experience of that period in her life – whether she had been closely affected by the attacks or not. Gaza was the most sensitive issue this year, since most Palestinians regard Israel's attack as the most brutal in the history of the

Occupation. I had imagined this session mostly to give space to the Palestinians to tell their stories and to give vent to their pain and rage. I also imagined the Israelis would have a hard time listening, since some Palestinians call what happened in Gaza their Holocaust, which is of course a sensitive comparison for Israelis. When we started the session, I was sure a Palestinian woman would talk first, but as it happened – one of the Israeli participants was the first to speak. She is a woman living in Sderot, the Israeli city that was most severely hurt by Palestinian missiles during this Gaza war. I said to myself (silently) “oh no, this is going to cause a disaster”. I was sure that the Palestinian women would be furious that an Israeli was talking about her own pain, since it was clear that the Palestinians were the main sufferers in this situation. To my amazement, even though the Israeli woman described in great detail and great length what she and her friends had gone through – none of the Palestinians interfered or expressed dismay at her story. While talking the Israeli woman also acknowledged the great suffering that was going on for people in Gaza at that time and she expressed a lot of sadness. This is an example of the depth and complexity of the discussion in our group. It was really something special. It seemed as if no matter how painful one’s experience was – the other side could bear listening to it. Never before have I witnessed so much compassion and willingness in a room.

We even had a hilarious session in which all the participants – Israelis and Palestinians – released a lot of tension through laughter. It was a very special session in which Wilfriede, the German coordinator, was present. Like every year in the women’s seminar – we had a special session for discussing women’s creations and art. Every woman was asked to bring a woman’s creation she admires, to present it to the group and explain why she brought it and why it touches her. This year they brought beautiful, simply beautiful things – music, videos, paintings, poems, pictures etc’. They had marvellous presentations on their personal laptops (which they also used in the family narrative to show pictures of women meaningful to them), and there was a lot of interest within the group. One of the things I remember most clearly is a Palestinian artist who draws political caricatures (Omayya Joha). The Israelis were fascinated and one of them asked if her work was known internationally and where she could see more of it. The session in general was very lively – they asked many questions and were very enthusiastic to share knowledge and opinion and to learn new things. The last participant to report was an Israeli woman who wanted us to listen to a famous vocal artist (Meredith Monk). She had a CD but nothing to play it on, so one of the Palestinians invited her to use her laptop. She was touched. Then, when listening to the music, which reached extremely high notes, some participants looked at each other, began smiling, started laughing, until they all were cracking up on the floor. It was what you would call in Hebrew a “laughing attack”. It was wonderful to witness, and very releasing. It was another crucial point in breaking the ice – and after the session they all sat together in the lobby, for the first time, continuing the discussion and sharing even more photos and personal info on their laptops. They were in a good mood and continued giggling that whole afternoon and evening.

From what we heard from the other facilitators – the situation was far more difficult and tense in other groups. There was much more anger, hatred, resistance and personal remarks – and less willingness to listen, at least in the first half of the seminar. It was interesting to see the Israelis interact between sessions, comparing experiences and being even a bit jealous of each other.

Another interesting thing to see was how activities that were held in a whole-seminar-format, such as screenings of movies, affected what happened in each of the groups. Following the movie “Arna’s Children”, for example, there was a lot of pain and shock on both sides, mostly on the Palestinians’ side, and there was a great fear among the Israelis in my group that it would set the whole process back. This fear was expressed each time something difficult and loaded was discussed. One of the Israeli women who had bonded with a Palestinian from another group came to me in tears and told me that that woman had stopped talking to her and didn’t even look in her eyes any more. We talked about the complexity of the situation and how difficult and intimidating it

must be for a Palestinian woman to have such warm feelings towards a Israeli woman - back home she would be considered a perpetrator. A couple of days later they talked again and had obviously resumed their friendship.

The Palestinians kept saying they did not come to the seminar to be friends with the Israelis. They said this was nearly impossible. When we realized that the Israelis didn't understand how scary and even dangerous it can be for Palestinians to be in contact with Israelis, we devoted a whole session to discuss it. It was towards the end of the seminar, and many honest and sensitive things came up. The Palestinian women shared with the Israelis the information that every Palestinian who was in touch with an Israeli would be suspected of being a collaborator by their own folks, since the Israeli security forces try to recruit Palestinians as such. They explained how scared everyone was and that after this seminar Palestinians might see them as traitors. When the Israelis had difficulty in understanding this, one of the Palestinians compared it to the fact that the Israeli society regards people who don't serve in the army as traitors. It was amazing to see reality unfold itself in the room, and 12 pairs of eyes, each time from a different side, opened widely and willingly – to see, to witness, to understand. I ended this session by saying that I wanted to encourage all of them to overcome the fear of becoming friends, and that based on my personal experience in the Breaking Barrier seminars – as a participant as well as a facilitator – I had learned that friendships can be not only personal – but political too. I said that the strongest political tool that I had were my Palestinian friends – many of which I got to know in Germany – since they were my immediate source of information. Better and more accurate than anything I would get from the media. I told them how different it was to listen to the news when you knew somebody who was actually in danger, and how amazing it was to know that whenever something happened in Tel-Aviv – someone in Palestine cared and was worried about me.

In the end, as it always happens when it comes to human beings - some hearts were opened, some contact info exchanged, some tears shed. When we said goodbye at Frankfurt Airport some of the women were very emotional. The Palestinian woman who at the beginning of the seminar refused to talk to the Israelis had already softened up, but still seemed to hold back and not fully give in to the sadness she was feeling. After we had said goodbye and the Israeli group was walking away – one of the Israeli women suddenly ran back and gave that Palestinian woman her earrings, so she would have something to remember her. They both broke into tears and embraced in a long hug, knowing it might be the last time they saw each other. It was amazing to witness.

When writing these words it has only been 10 days since the seminar has ended, and I can already see that something very special happened. Some women were affected even more deeply than in previous seminars. It is obvious from the intensity in which the Israeli participants communicate, meet, interact and ask for information since the seminar has ended. They regard each other as a support group, knowing that no one back home can understand what they had experienced. They also communicate with the Palestinians on Facebook and through a special online group that the group that Bana and I facilitated has created. I am deeply touched to see this. An Israeli woman who considered herself one of the most Zionist in the group is now planning to go visit her new friends in the West Bank, which is something many Israelis would never dare to do. I am sure the depth of the influence of this seminar is yet to become obvious, but amazing things have already happened, such as a few right wing Israeli women having completely changed their opinions and wanting to know more, and one woman who ended the relationship with her long term boyfriend upon her return since she decided she couldn't live with someone who was so different from her politically and who did not see Palestinians as equals. This was not how she saw it before the seminar. Several women contacted me since we returned and asked me for information and advice on how to be active. This always is our dream, and it rarely comes true!

Besides the process, which was truly amazing, I would like to convey my highest appreciation to the Committee for choosing such a beautiful, comfortable, almost magical location

for this seminar. The Evangelische Akademie in Hofgeismar was more perfect than I could ever imagine. Being through so many seminars, in so many different locations in Germany (on the Breaking Barriers seminars as well as other projects) – I have never come across such an ideal environment for dealing with such stressful issues. Comfortable rooms with bathroom and showers included, wonderful food ready for us when we came out of exhausting sessions, beautiful nature everywhere you look.

The relaxing Shiatsu was such a wonderful addition, and I truly hope that if you choose to do it again it will be available for everyone throughout the whole seminar because feedback was amazing and women nearly killed each other to get a treatment, and there weren't enough spots for everyone. There was wonderful feedback on how relaxing and professional Sybille's sessions were literally.

We appreciate very much the great effort and support we received from the German team, which consisted of Wilfriede, Rose, Shulamith and Barbara. It is an amazing feeling to know that you are taking care of us, that someone is there to help us with anything we need, and that all of us – facilitators as well as participants – always have an ear – be it in English, Arabic or Hebrew.–It was a great contribution to have members of the German staff who speak both Hebrew and Arabic – it made us feel at home and allowed women who found it hard to use English, especially on sensitive matters, to speak their own language. I think that the fact that the German team was there for us – on and off schedule – was a blessing. We appreciate the freedom and support that was given us on adjusting the schedule according to the process, and also the great investment in making the trips pleasurable for everyone. It was very noticeable how much effort and thought was invested before and during the seminar to make it successful, and we highly appreciate it.

I have been involved in many peace activities – and I truly think there is nothing that compares to the “Vacation from War” seminars. From my experience - no other seminar leaves such a strong impression in the hearts of its participants. I want to thank Helga for creating such an amazing opportunity for women to talk directly about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as to thank Wilfriede for making this dream a reality. You have our endless gratitude for bringing this seminar to life and for everything that you have done for us. The more we conduct these seminars – the more I feel it is important to create a space in which women can speak to each other directly. Not through men. Not through soldiers. Not through diplomats. I really think it's one-of-a-kind project, and I thank you Helga, Wilfriede, Keren, Rami, The Committee and the generous donors for making it possible year after year! Know that it is not taken for granted and that each one of us carries deep gratitude in her heart.

August 2009

Thank you from the bottom of my heart,

Gili Pliskin, Tel-Aviv, Israel-Palestine

Breaking Barriers – Women's Seminar – Ev. Akademie Hofgeismar Bana – Moderator in the Palestinian Team

Objectives:

- To influence a group of strong women and create some sort of solidarity and activism.
- To give the participants more skills of conflict resolution and constructive ways to work in a group.
- To give the participants more information about the real situation on the ground, through personal stories and first-hand experience.
- To develop practical projects in which the participants will be involved in both societies in the future.

Target Group:

We target Palestinian women living in the occupied Palestinian territories, women between 20 and 30 years old, who are interested in meetings with Israeli women to discuss the Palestinian-Israeli conflict from a political and gender perspective. We choose participants who have the ability to participate in a fruitful discussion and convey their message in a very open and articulate way, as well as have the ability to listen to the point of view of their Israeli counterparts.

Methods:

During the first two days of the seminar the ice breaking activities offered by a German team, to whom we are most grateful for their cooperation, wonderful and creative ideas that really helped bridge an emotional gap between the two sides. On the second day of the seminar, we the facilitators of each group, worked on activities that have to do with building trust between Israeli and Palestinian women through drawing, creating an identity necklace to reflect the important principles and values of each participant as well as to introduce the individual to the group. In the beginning it was very difficult for the participants to trust each other especially in the activity when they were supposed to draw while blindfolded. The room was full of tension, difficult moments, and tough emotions, disappointment and fear. However, the purpose of such activities is to prepare for the more sensitive issues that were to be discussed in the following days.

Following that was the discussion about the personal narrative. The participants were asked to draw a time-line of their lives, mentioning three to four incidents that drew their attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, then the topic was open for discussion, and followed by a panel where we, the facilitators, ask questions and each participant answers, but no one can respond to others' answers. This day was a very special one, after all the hardships of the day before, women from both sides were really interested in learning about one another, they were very attentive and paid close attention to each and every speaker. In my opinion this was the most important activity during the seminar, it had a huge impact on the attitude of the women from both sides, they were able to understand, acknowledge and express support to the other side because the stories that were told were from a personal experience and truly expressed the feelings of the speaker. The stories that were mentioned really touched each and every participant, that women started to cry and expressed their support and solidarity.

In the session about family narrative, each participant was asked to draw a map of Palestine/Israel on which they were to point out the process their families went through, they were asked to present the map in front of the group and talk about their background. For example, one of the Palestinian participants told her personal story of being born in the Diaspora and hearing about Palestine only from her parents, and at some point in her life, her family moved to Palestine, she expressed her feelings about finally living in her homeland, she also spoke about the refugee problem in the Arab world, especially in Lebanon where her mom's family resides. In a very articulate way, she managed to inform the Israeli women of the difficulties that people face as refugees, their daily struggle for survival and their failure to work or study because of the restrictions that they live under and thus such people become powerless and unable to improve their status.

As part of the historical narrative, the Palestinian groups decided to present their historical narrative in one presentation; they gathered information about the Palestinian cause and created Power Point presentations, made an exhibit of pictures and data about different topics. Furthermore, they made a sketch about a pregnant woman who was not allowed to cross the checkpoint, an incident that is unfortunately commonly experienced in the occupied Palestinian territories.



One of the most difficult moments on both side and specially on the Palestinian side was the screening of the movie “Arna’s children”, the movie brings up all the memories about loss, Intifada and the real circumstances and reality each one of them lives in, it was hard for them to open up a discussion even in the uni-national group.

One of the toughest sessions was that about the Gaza war in December 08-January 09; both parties expressed their true and genuine feelings about what happened, the Palestinian women expressed the emotional difficulty in remembering the war, the need to help and support the Palestinians in Gaza, yet

the atmosphere was full of powerlessness and the hopelessness. The stories that were mentioned by the Palestinian women in that session were about civilians` fates they knew which made the stories seem so realistic and genuine and of course could touch the emotions and hearts of listeners.

The women's creation session was in my eyes a very special session especially that it came after very difficult days, yet again, the participants both Palestinian and Israeli had a very interesting and enriching session; they expressed their interests and introduced one another to a world of women's art. Women were very interested, they were very attentive and some of them shared their feelings and expressed that through art they found many common grounds. For example, Omayya Joha, a very famous caricaturist was mentioned by a Palestinian woman, this character interested one of the Israeli women who works in animation. Also, an Israeli woman wanted to introduce us to some kind of music (Meredith Monk) - using the laptop of one of the Palestinian participants. The music then played totally transformed the atmosphere in the room, all of a sudden the room was full of joy and laughter, despite the difficult process that both sides had been going through, they actually had found the moment when both enjoyed a common art.

Outcomes

After a few days of very intensive discussions, women from both nationalities started to realize that the power balance was not equal and that something had to be changed. The Palestinian group was willing to inform and update their Israeli colleagues about the situation and about what should go on after the seminar was over. At the end of the seminar many women suggested to keep in contact and they created an online group for them to inform each other about what is happening and to learn from one another through posting articles or pointing out to each other informative websites or activities.

Obstacles

In the beginning it was very difficult for the Palestinian women to sit and discuss very sensitive and difficult topics with Israelis, given that Palestinians living in the occupied Palestinian territories hardly come across civilian Israelis. Having said that; the idea of spending hours and days in sessions and living with Israelis was a huge challenge for them and a burden at times. Such feelings come from a very difficult reality, the daily humiliation and degradation that they go through on a daily basis, whether that is experienced on the way to work or to the university and back home, or curfews and incursions. The whole process was not simple, it was a very complicated one, the most

difficult time for the Palestinian women was reliving humiliating and extremely sad moments while informing their Israeli counterparts of the reality of the situation, at times Palestinian women were not able to continue what they wanted to say, they burst into tears.

Success stories

I facilitated in an English speaking group together with Gili. In my group in general, it was very difficult for the Palestinian women to overcome the feeling of sitting with Israeli women and expressing their feelings freely. I remember very well the first moments in the first session, one Palestinian participant complained about the length of the "one-on-one" activity (where two participants, one Israeli and one Palestinian have to chat for 15 minutes every morning), she thought it was too long for a chat, and felt that she could not spend so much time every morning with an Israeli woman, especially that she had to talk freely about any topic. She complained to me several times, and I also sensed that she was not comfortable at all. This issue was raised first in the first uni-national meeting and it was common for a big part of the participants, one had a very difficult time that specific day and I needed to have a long conversation with her. After several chats and a lot of encouragement and support, she realized that she must go on with the seminar and must participate. The next morning, we, the facilitators, had a bad feeling about the participation of the participants in this specific activity, but all of them participated and enjoyed the free and comfortable atmosphere to bring in their own ideas and pain.

I realized that despite the difficult moments and the hardships, people are people and the caring and human touch that one has will always prevail no matter what happens.

One of the participants who lost her brother last year by the Israeli army, had a hard time, in all sessions, but somehow she could see that not all of the Israelis are the same and that she could talk to them as human beings. She could tell them her wish to see them in the demonstrations against the occupation. You might look at this as an obvious thing but for a Palestinian participant it was a very big step towards the other, the enemy.

After very intensive days, both the Palestinian and Israeli participants realized that there was something in common. The farewell at Frankfurt airport was very emotional and touching. A Palestinian woman who had clashed with an Israeli woman during the first few days of the seminar was very emotional, the Israeli woman walked towards the escalator and suddenly ran back towards the Palestinian, gave her earrings to her and they both hugged each other. Both groups waved at each other saying the word "Salam"- peace in Arabic, such simple gestures left both sides with a very positive energy and a huge will to be active and to bring some change to this world one day!

Recommendation

The seminar was wonderful, it is an amazing idea and it has had an enormous effect on many people. We were very fortunate to have the Shiatsu sessions in the middle of the days, for the participants it had a magic touch, on each and every one of them. I think it was extremely important to have such sessions, it was like healing all the stress and getting new energy to continue the difficult process that each participant passes, and please do not forget the staff.

Big part of the success of this seminar, if we could say so, was the great place we were fortunate to be hosted in. I deeply felt how the green around us, the food, the room and the staff behavior helped us to have a quiet time and to help the participants and ourselves to survive through hard times.

Thank you,



Breaking Barriers – Gender Mixed Seminar – Jugendakademie Walberberg

Keren – Moderator in the Israeli Team

The Israeli participants this year were different than previous ones in few senses. The percent of Mizrahi Jews, also 3 Ethiopian women and 2 from Sderot, and also the big amount of not-left wingers, not necessarily parallel. No doubt the Gaza war has influenced also in that sense. It was shown of course also in the joint process. The change many participants have gone through was in my opinion very significant, on the other hand it might have been a good idea to put in every group one person who is more close to left-wing. Nevertheless it is an achievement because these are people that rarely come to this kind of meetings. In my group alone were 4-5 ex- and present combat soldiers that serve/d in Palestine.

The Palestinian participants came very loaded and there weren't so many parties together like last year etc. On the other hand they talked with each other whenever they had some free time for that, between workshops and in the evenings. It was really important for them to understand and to clarify, and through that also personal connections were created. The Israelis have complained few times about the gap between what is being said to them in private conversations or in the 1-on-1s, and what is being said in the group. Besides a point of truth in that, it was also in my opinion hard for them to accept many things that the Palestinians were not willing to give up or compromise., for example to "admit" that the Zionist movement was right, or giving up the right of return. These are things that the Israelis refused to hear, and it took time and effort so they will realize that they are trying to force their thoughts on the other side, in order to "listen" to them. in many points,



As the seminar went by, I saw some of them realizing and also saying in the workshops "they are right", but to give up their power in the room was difficult for them. This time, though, the Palestinians in my group didn't take this role on themselves and didn't "surrender". The process wasn't linear but in waves. They started to touch "heavy issues" in a very early stage. The personal stories were a critical point as always, but this time I felt the Israelis are more scared to let it touch them. After the historical and cultural evenings of the Palestinians also happened a crucial turning point in my group, and the empathy became more possible for some of them. Of course it didn't stay this way until the end. also "Arnas children" created something very important and opened a deep dilemma.

The cultural evenings were very important and also very impressive this year. The Palestinian culture night was enlightening to the Israelis, as it contradicted their racism and showed them an aspect they weren't aware of really.

A very important part of the reflection and awareness raising work was done in the uni-national group, because the diversity of the group, the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi issue was really strong, also sexism. As a facilitator I chose to deal with these issues directly, and also the rest of the staff. We needed to support the people inside the group that are usually oppressed, and dealing with it is inseparable in my eyes from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and from working against racism in general. "The men in my group were very dominant and it was important that it will be dealt with.

and not only in my group. I think that we are progressing in finding the way of supporting people, while helping them dealing and changing their own racism and sexism, but it is not simple.

Of course that many Ashkenazim, specially men, were upset from this dealing with the connection between oppressions. Also they felt guilty, and weren't too happy about giving up their privileges. As Micky from my group told me (a woman), there is the feeling that as more strong you are, there is less space to tell your story of your pain, and sometimes it doesn't really feel strong. As I was saying before, many of the Israelis this year really aren't the stronger. So this was an interesting dealing. In the culture evening it was the climax of the tension, but it was important to stand by the oppressed as a statement, and they had to learn an important lesson about containing and listening, because of one sketch that some participants saw as racist towards Mizrachim and also sexist, that was changed in the end. It is not possible to underestimate the importance of this uni-national internal process in this seminar, and some of my group also mentioned some people in the Israeli side that made a real change in their views.

The traumas that people in the group brought with them from the army, (also one person from my group was in a very right-wing youth movement as a youngster, not far from CAHANA) raised a lot of dilemmas and guilt, about the army service, themselves and their believes from home. At one point Vered (Ethiopian Jewish woman who served in the occupied territories) said that this has no connection to "education" or "origin" (as someone claimed, quite racist of course) but anyone can find themselves in a checkpoint, acting brutally, and without a reason. The realization, that cruel things happen and it is towards their group friends, was really difficult for them. In general - I think this year it was stronger - the dilemmas, as well as the attempts to deny the reality and resist the process, because it's so threatening. The fact that they met strong Palestinians, that brought themselves totally but on the other hand didn't try to be "too nice", created some shock and forced them to deal.

Many participants complained that they don't have enough time to talk. Many of the Israelis said in the end of the seminar that it is not enough to open a face-book group, and they made in the last day a meeting to think what can be done. Their views about what needs to be done are quite different, but there is an option of continuation, though not clear if together or not. I'm not sure the Palestinians are willing for joint action and also that the Israelis will do things by themselves, besides meetings. The main change is that the participants can and will spread their experience and realizations in places and groups that usually are not closed to this kind of things: in Sderot, in the Ethiopian community, Mizrachi traditional right-wing voters, Zionist-nationalistic groups and even non-extremist settlers. I have no doubt that this circle is growing bigger. Many participants want to send friends and family next year.

I want to say that as more translators group we can make, the wider the circle would become. In general this whole work should be made in the mother languages in my belief, even if the group speaks English. This should be in the budget.

Thank you for another year of significant and important process.

Ofer – Moderator in the Israeli Team

...This seminar is the most meaningful encounter between Israelis and Palestinians I have ever experienced (and I have experienced quite a few). Having said that, I also think in a broader look, we must think out possibilities for the participants to expand the process for beyond these two weeks. Without creating something continuous we are creating a one-time experience which strong as it may be is also very limited in its capability of making changes.

How can we improve the process?

The one-on-one dialogue really helped maintaining a framework of personal connection and talk. The personal narrative workshop this year took a more informative path. I think we should think of

guiding questions which will help focusing the workshop more on feelings and personal conclusions. Regarding the family narrative we should do as well. We need something more creative in order to make it... more than just a chronicle of events.

We united the two workshops concerning 48 and 67 and it seems to me completely sufficient after the historical narrative workshop. It's a place where the influence of the different narratives on the positions towards the reality is made apparent. It is a breaking point in the process because these differences create a sense of despair (mostly amongst Israelis).

Looking back, the strongest and most meaningful discussions took place when we asked them to talk about what's on their mind right now rather than planning a topic. It is also true that many of the topics they brought up were induced by the methods we used. What's really important is to identify the position of the group and to allow them to determine the pace of the process while taking into consideration all of the participants and the main goal of the process.

I think that there is yet a need to clarify the picture of the actual reality/situation both on the human and **political** level. At time the narratives create a fake disconnection between the personal and the political.

The seminar is a strong experience for most of them and the participants need a lot of attention and listening in order to be able to make changes in what is many times contradictory to the truths they were brought up upon. I think it's crucially important to maintain the facilitator's autonomy because each group has its own balance and sensitivities.



Imad – Coordinator in the Palestinian Team

Target Group:

- The results of the last Israeli war on Gaza added more complexity to the situation in the middle east, Palestinians feel more oppressed and that makes them hesitate more in participation in mixed programs with their occupiers, this year we had found difficulties because candidates changed their mind in the last minute and decided not to participate.

Finally the Palestinian group consisted of 30 participants divided into four mixed groups with four facilitators, one translator and one coordinator, the participants were in the age between 20-30 years old, part of them are university students coming from Palestinian universities, and the other part are working, the vast majority of them are educated and this is the first experience for them to meet normal civil Israelis.

They came from almost all the cities of the West Bank , Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nablus, Jenin, Tulkarm, Jericho, Hebron, and Ramallah. Part of them are refugees living in camps, other part are from small villages, and some are from cities.

Implementation Process:

- The process started with ice breaking with the help of three volunteers from the German staff. Every two hours the four groups were moving in between the three German trainers while one group staid with its own facilitator whom doing the ice breaking by themselves.

- Getting to know each other was designed to be in a one to one setting at the beginning of every working day but also during the workshops on the second day the groups did activities to get to know each other inside the mixed four groups.
- The process of dealing with the conflict started from the personal narrative to the family narrative and to the historical narrative, this structure helps to move from the most sensitive with the personal experiences to the family story and its narratives that related. The family narrative brings directly some historical facts that make all groups move to the whole historical narrative. The Palestinian group-members focused on their reality more than the history this time; and that was because the effect of the last Israeli war on Gaza and the complexity of the Palestinian reality nowadays.
- In the historical narrative workshops some of the participants jumped to the conflict resolution and started to discuss it. During the workshops of the conflict analyzing and conflict resolution we could see real dialogue between them. They all were interested to see how the other side "as people" not politicians see the future, and they can start discovering the compromising process.
- The Palestinian cultural night was after dealing with historical narrative, it was an opportunity for the group to express their natural feelings in cultural and comedy way which give them place to breathe after dealing with hot issues. It was very interesting that the Israeli participants and some visitors interacted and expressed their good feelings and impressions in that night, with this effect the personal and smooth contacts started between the Palestinian and the other involved participants.
- The rally activity in Köln on the first free day was very good of interaction between Palestinian and Israelis; the second free day when Palestinians wanted to go to Fantasia Land only some Israeli joined them.
- The Brussels day was good for the participants because it was the only free day "all the day".

Methods:

- Challenging them by having direct contact and real conversation and let the interaction through framework of cooperated staff was another experience for them.
- Dialogue is the perfect way in the meeting that gives the participants space to express their feelings and present their ideas while in the same time they have to respect other's feelings and listen to their presentations, this was very clear when they were always asking for more time for discussion.
- Active listening workshop, in which the group splits to one-nationality groups and then to mixed groups, discussing the difficulties and positive things exist for them by being a part of "Breaking Barriers".
- Panel method, which is based on 4 main questions: 1) What are you proud about being Israeli / Palestinian? 2) What do you have to say to the other side as an Israeli / Palestinian? 3) What would you never want to see being done or said to your people? 4) What do you need from the other side in order to be your ally? We answer the questions in circle; this is a space for the participants to speak and for the others to listen.
- Conflict resolution, where the participants got new skills and new methods.
- Final evaluation discussion: each participant wrote to each other, moreover, there was a discussion where they expressed their opinion, and we got a feedback from the trainers that were involved.

Out comes

- The seminar started with many separated individuals, even inside the same national group, the dynamic was very individualistic in the meetings that they had before the seminar. The seminar gave the participants the place to understand each other inside the same nationality and understand the other nationality, they could manage to exchange their ideas, thoughts, and visions for the future, moreover they got to know each other personally and exchange their

emails so they can communicate their opinions in the future, and the seminar could be just a start for them.

- The ability of self-expression among participants has been encouraged through creative means.
- There was an increase in the participants' information especially in the concepts of the history of each other.
- There was an increase in the participants' ability to work as a team and help each other.
- The participants had more self confidence that they have the ability and the power to change in their societies.
- There were positive changes upon participants' attitude towards the other side.
- The topics that the program deal with are not easy and each one of them needs a lot of discussion, so sometimes the time was not found for discussion such as Nazi and terrorist workshop.

Successful stories

The dialogue has its dynamic, part of the dynamic can be seen directly during the seminar, but the vast majority comes on later; when the participant is back home, with his/her family and friends, each one of them went back with unique experience, here are some:

- One Palestinian participant named Abeer was before the seminar in position of kicking out all the Jews from the historical Palestine. Her idea for the solution was to go back to history before 1948 "establishing Israel". She said that all the Jews must go back to the places that they came from in order to have peace, and at the same time all the Palestinian refugees that had been kicked out from their own places at their home land must come back home. At the end of the seminar and after she had met Jews that are born in Palestine and even their parents lived there all their life and how they are connected to these places she changed her mind and expressed that change after having this experience.
- Lina is a young Palestinian girl from Beaneh – a Palestinian village in 1948 (inside Israel). When the second Intifada started she was a child, after Israel built the separation-wall it was impossible for her to get to know people from Palestine of 1967 (Westbank, Gaza). Even there are just 40 km between her village and the next Palestinian 67 city she never met them. This seminar was her first time to know people from 1967 and talk with them, and get to know information from them. She declared that and she was very happy of it. She asked all of them to write her e-mails, and she wrote to everyone.
- Hind had no interest in politics at all. She is living an easy life in Beit-Safafa next to Jerusalem. We talked about this village, because it is divided between 67 (Westbank) and 48 (Israel), and the people in the 48th part have the Israeli ID. After the seminar she said: "All my life I didn't know who and where I am. I have got a new national feeling. This is the first time that I feel as Palestinian." While she said this the tears started to fall from her eyes during the last discussion in the uni-national group. This seminar was just a start for her to open the eyes for the reality.
- One of the participants expressed the feeling she had throughout the seminar: "I felt that we lived as one big family here, without any differences between us, and I wonder why this cannot be implemented back there in Israel-Palestine"

Eilat Maoz (Facilitator of the translation group with Ahmad Saffi)

Ma'yam'S Bericht kursiv

This report is a summery and analysis of the process undertaken by the Israeli group I was working with. The analysis is an outcome of my own personal interpretation.

Jews and Arabs in Israel are almost entirely separate. Encounters when do take place are often hierarchical and unequal. The seminar in Germany attempts at creating equal conditions which was, at least for the Israelis in my group, an unfamiliar experience which forced them to confront their prejudice and created mutual tension.

I have facilitated in a "translation group", which means that most of the participants in this group do not have sufficient fluency in English. – new immigrants, residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods, etc. *If up until now Israelis were used to Hebrew, their mother tongue, being the dominant language, this seminar created a situation in which Arabic was in equal position to Hebrew.*

The Israelis expected to meet Palestinians the way they know them from the media, meaning rural, religious, old fashioned and perhaps violent and brutal, the way they are tended to be presented in the Israeli press and television. Meeting with Palestinians in their age, who dress like them speak perfect English, are interested in similar things as they do, confronted them with an entirely different reality...

My group was very heterogenic one. Half of the participants belonged to the middle-high class in Israeli society, mostly Ashkenazi, and the other half to the middle-low one, mostly Sephardic (which bares an economical, social and political meaning in Israeli society).. Some defined themselves as right wing and the rest said they are "swinging". Additionally the majority of the group lives in different cities, some in the periphery...

Preparation meetings and forming of the group

In the two preparation meetings held in Tel Aviv before the seminar... *they expressed their expectations. Some said they are curious to meet Palestinians and hear what they have to say. Some said they want to present to Palestinians another side of Israel and others expected that the seminars will give them answers troubling them with regard to the Israeli Palestinian conflict. For some of them it was important to state that they don't think that in the end they will change their views.* A woman said that she is coming to the seminar with no expectations what so ever. Her father, who originated in Egypt always used to tell her that he knows "their mentality" that "Arabs can be your best friends on one day and stab you in the back on the next". Others said that they are afraid to go to Germany. All in all, these meetings were important to begin forming the group and to lower some of the fears...

Ice breaking sessions and getting to know each other

The ice breaking sessions, carried out by members of the German team were, all in all, successful. Everyone enjoyed the juggling activity and it enabled the participants from the two national-groups to communicate without using much words. The theater activity was also very good for this purpose, since the facilitator of the activity was very sensitive to the needs of the group and enabled them to speak to each other. The activity that we held ourselves was a nice time for the group to become familiar with the facilitators.

....In each of the sessions the participants demonstrated there was full cooperation between them. At first there where few shy ones who didn't know how to make contact but later in the day everyone was laughing, talking and getting to know each other On one hand this day's activity indeed brake he ice and lowered the sense of fear of the Israeli group from meeting with Palestinians and on the other it was the chance for them to realize how similar they are to the Palestinians. In general, all this was an important starting point for the process.

The purpose of the workshop "getting to know each other" was to communicate with one another and establish a basic sense of trust. We saw that when they are divided into pairs or small groups and given a mission, they will usually find a way to communicate with each other - somehow. Part of the Palestinians said they came to represent the Palestinian people and its suffering from the 60 years long occupation. These statements provoked antagonism amongst the Israeli participants which presented themselves as individuals that came in order to listen and represent no one but themselves.

On the last part of the day we organized a long session in small groups of 4 people... This was the first time that the group started dealing with the main topics, and it was actually the first time that they had to deal with a real dialogue. For the Israelis, this was a very hard experience. All of a sudden they have listened to things that they did not want to hear, for example a Palestinian participant telling them that she does not accept their right to live in her/their country. This was raised in the uni-national meeting and we discussed it in length. They said over and over again that they came to listen – but they were resisting what they heard. They also repeated that to their opinion, the Palestinian participants came to the seminar as a unified group, whereas they came as individuals. This enabled me to ask them: Who represents whom? This was also relevant for the inner-group dynamics because it was very clear, from this early stage, that one of the men in the group, who comes from a well-established Israeli family, became very prominent in the Israeli group and that many of the other participants allowed him to speak for them.

The day ended with one on one, in which the participants splat into mixed couples and discussed freely whatever they wanted to. It turned out that these conversations contributed greatly to the Israelis trust in the Palestinians. They said that during the one on one the Palestinians shared personal views which often were different from what they have heard in the workshop. In spite of their claim to represent only themselves the Israelis ceaselessly defended the integrity of Israel and the IDF's and made sure to faithfully represent the Israeli official narrative.

Personal narrative

The personal narrative segment was one of the most touching and emotionally intense parts of the seminar. In the majority of stories they were the powerful side in the incident both as soldiers or settlers. One exceptional story was told by an Israeli participant from Sderot, a city near Gaza, which has been attacked by Hamas missiles for several years. She talked about the conflict as something that hurts her personally in her daily life because of the missiles that fall all the time.

A woman told about her military service experiences, in which one night she took a ride to the base with a truck, and after some time she realized that the truck is full of Palestinian prisoners. She was shocked to see people with their eyes and hands tied. She was telling this in a room where several of the Palestinians were in Israeli prison for various periods of time and she said that she had never talked about this before. Nor did she ever think that she would tell this to Palestinians. Many of the Palestinian participants told about their difficult experiences in checkpoints, some told stories about loosing close ones. This influenced some of the Israelis by telling about being close to suicide bombing attacks or hearing about them. Others, especially the men, felt that they have to tell about being "nice soldiers" during their military service: giving medical treatment to prisoners or letting an ambulance to cross at a checkpoint. They all stated that they have never witnessed any violation of human rights.

During the uni-national session one of the participants in the Israeli group said something about the fact that the army usually sends, in her words "the less educated, less well manners, more violent, barbarian... oftentimes new immigrants" sectors of the Israeli society to the checkpoints, and that this is the reason why there are so many violations of rights taking place. Some of the others agreed with her, but two or three resisted this approach – being new immigrants or coming from disadvantaged sectors themselves they asked whether bombing Gaza from an airplane, a task carried out by the elite of Israeli soldiers, is less barbaric than what is being done at the checkpoints. This returned us to the question of who determines what is a crime and what is acceptable. It also was important to relate criticism about the occupation with inter-Israeli social problems.

The Palestinians stories were more directly connected with the conflict in the sense that they told about their daily lives which is directly affected by the conflict. It was difficult for the Israelis to hear the Palestinians' stories since they felt very harshly accused. They thought that the Palestinians blame them personally for their daily suffering and it made them bitter. At the same time there were Israeli participants which showed empathy to the Palestinian stories without fearing that this will undermine their own personal narrative as less important. Most of the Palestinians said they want the Israelis to express regret and sympathy to what happened in '48 and with the occupation in general. The Israelis felt uncomfortable with having to apologies for something they are not even sure is unjust.

Family narrative

This workshop was very strong and enabled to expose another layer of the political reality. Each participant told his family story, three generations back. Most of the Palestinians told about families that have been living in the same place in Palestine for generations. Some told stories about people becoming refugees. The Israelis talked about their family's different countries of origin. Some emphasized their suffering there and **the historical events that influenced their families to migrate to Israel. The stories in way justified their family's choice of living in Israel.** One of the Ethiopian women told the story of coming to Israel by foot, in months of journeys in the deserts of Sudan and Egypt, where many relatives lost their lives from thirst and hunger. The other one told about how before coming to Israeli she was told that the holy land is covered with gold and has everything she could ever ask for, but when she arrived she was met by racism and discrimination. The two Ethiopian girls were talking to the Palestinian group who explained to them about the refugee problem and about the right of return. It was very evident that from their personal experience as refugees, they could relate to the wish of coming back to your country and land. They also said that they really don't understand why Israel does not allow Palestinian refugees to return. One of them said that she would like maybe one day to return to live in Ethiopia. In the hegemonic Israeli narrative, this conversation is almost unthinkable – Jewish women, who immigrated to Israel, saying something that does not comply with the Zionist understanding of "either us or them" but really looking at the humanistic story of exile and refuge. This does not mean that these women no longer saw or see themselves as "Zionists", but it means that they were still able to give a different interpretation of the hegemonic story and to imagine a different future.

Later some Palestinian participants said that "the fact that your family is not originally from Israel proves that you have no right over the land as opposed to the Palestinians which families are here since ever". This indeed caused turmoil within the group and Israelis insisted on explaining that their families had no bad intentions to come to Israel and that they were a small minority without protection that had no choice but coming here. It seemed that at this point it was crucial for the Israelis that the Palestinians will understand their familie's choice to come to Israel. The Israelis, being empathic to the Palestinians' stories, expected the same from them. Additionally some of the participants found it difficult to share with the Palestinians the hardships of integration about immigrating to Israel, the discrimination against eastern Jews etc. they didn't want to present the Jewish community in Israel at that time in a negative way. On the other hand telling these stories was inevitable since they are inseparable part of their family narrative.

Historical narrative

This segment of the program was composed of a few segments. First, one full day of uni-national workshops, to decide about the content of the presentation and prepare it. Then, mutual presentations and discussion...

The group started working on its presentation, where inner-conflicts in the Israeli society were touched upon. Or example, they negotiated how to deal with the discrimination of Mizrachi Jews or immigrants from Ethiopia. They were also concerned about the question whether to include the Nakba in their presentation or not. Although some of them very much wished to do so, in the end it wasn't evident in the presentation itself.

The Palestinian presentation was very well planned and presented, and it raised the issue of collective representation vs. personal representation very clearly inside the group. Again, it was difficult for the Israelis to understand why the Palestinians find it so important to speak as one unified group, rather as "individuals"...

In the other group this day was the most tantalizing for the Israeli group. At the beginning of the day we splat into to the nation-groups, each was working to present their own narrative. When the Israelis realized that the Palestinians are about to present in one big group (rather than in the small working groups) they were upset. They said they are interested only in the presentation of the people from our working group...They were concerned with the thought that the Palestinians will present one united while the Israelis are presenting a diversity of stories – something that might make them look weak in front of the Palestinians.

Some of them recreated the official narrative of Israel. For some it was important to put in sides which are usually excluded from the collective memory and the hegemonic narrative. They ended up including elements from the bible, the Jewish history in the diaspora, the waves of immigration to Israel and finished optimistically with a peace song. It seemed that the need to present unity to the Palestinians made them some what loose their critical quality. The first to present were the Palestinians. Some of the Israelis were shocked, upset and embarrassed on the fact that "all of the Palestinian narrative dealt with blaming the Israelis for their suffering". Some of the Israelis felt solidarity and empathy for the Palestinians after the presentation. The Israeli presentation clearly showed the need for their right to live in Israel in the Palestinians' recognition. The Palestinians reacted warmly to the Israeli presentation and even danced with them in the end.

1948-1967

In these workshops we concentrated more on processing the idea of historical knowledge and historical responsibility. The main topic in the discussion was what is the relation between things that happened in the past and today's reality and how do we, who were not born in the time of the Nakba or the 1967 war, have responsibility over the past. What concept of justice are we looking for and what are we actually talking about when we are talking about "Peace". This was another opportunity to touch upon the issue of refugees and, more than anything else, it raised the question of the right on the land and the right to live on the land, which was quite complicated for both groups. How do we create historical justice without creating injustice in the present....

The session focusing on these two events enabled the participants to talk history from a more personal point of view. The Israelis all agreed that the meaning of '48 is the independence that gives them all their privileges as Israelis. It seemed that at this point they began to understand, what the needs of the Palestinians are, and really listened and understood what the Palestinians are going through under the occupation. One of the Palestinians told about his grandmother that still keeps the key to the house in her village - destroyed in '48. An Israeli participant said in response that his grandparents were sent to this exact place after their arrival to Israel and started a new village there and this is today the house of his parents where he was born and raised. This story at this stage of the seminar made clear and evident the complexity of the reality of the conflict and made the two sides more willing to deal with it directly.

Arna's children

The movie was a very emotional experience for both groups, however for the Israeli group it was a very dramatic turning point. Some of the participants found it very difficult to watch a film that is concentrated on the Palestinian narrative. At the uni-national meeting following the film some of the participants cried. They asked why they are shown these films, why they did not receive a chance to present their own narrative on the issue. They kept asking for symmetry. One of the participants suddenly said, in a sort of revelation: "I get it now – all the time, we, the Israelis, are asking for symmetry within the seminar, whereas the Palestinians here are asking for symmetry, for

equality, in real life." Another participant burst into tears asking me "Why did you bring me here, to hear all this Palestinian suffering? I don't want to hear about it, I suffer myself." But something happened: She came back in the evening saying that she had just spoken to her boyfriend back home. When she began explaining her feelings he replied "Oh, come on, kill all the Arabs". That was the moment when she suddenly realized all that she has heard during the seminar. From someone - used to using these expressions herself - she all of a sudden could not even hear them...From this moment on, she was very open to the process and very receptive of the "other side"...

The movie was not simple to watch for the Israelis. All of them served in the army and some have served in the West Bank and Gaza. Some said it gave them flashback and that they identify with the soldiers in the movie. Another was upset that the movie only shows the Palestinian side and as somebody lives in Sderot under attacks of missiles she feels her story is not voiced in this movie. The men in the group had a problem with the movie that present's them as the 'bad guys'. They said that from one hand they were paining with the Palestinians but from the other hand they had to take part in this destruction.

One participant was angry of the rest of the group asking how can they identify with soldiers destroying like that houses of Palestinians. She cried and felt frustrated from a "situation that she is forced to be responsible for". Another participant said that "now she understands why people turn to terror actions and that if it had happened to her, feeling she has nothing to lose, she might do that too." The movie created a sharp dissonance that expressed in anger both to the seminar-framework and the Palestinians.

Conflict resolution

The uni-national groups we asked to describe their ideal state. On the one hand it seemed that the Israelis are now much more attentive to the Palestinians and willing to accept their views, on the other hand they had a very hard time describing an ideal state. It ended up that an utopian state for them meant a state with no Palestinians in it. They couldn't bridge the gap between conflict and ideal states. The Palestinians on their behalf have presented a full and detailed plan for a future ideal state. It somewhat embarrassed the Israelis but they seemed to agree on most of the points of the Palestinians. It was hard to decide if they found some agreement or rather were to exhausted from arguing.

conclusion

...Facilitating this seminar was a one time experience for me. It's powerful in the sense that it enables two mutually important processes to take place at the same time: on the one hand, empowerment of the Palestinian group and on the other, an opening of a window of questioning and understanding towards the "other side" among the Israelis. This dual process is only possible due to the political commitment of the seminar and its clear agenda to end the occupation.

The group that started the seminar with an unofficial attempt to present uniformity, slowly opened up and each participant showed her or his difference and uniqueness. All throughout the seminar the Israelis didn't stop saying how important the personal one-on-one sessions with the Palestinians were to them. Eventually it seemed that the Israelis are craving for recognition in their right to live safely. No less the Palestinians did in order to recognize the suffering and atrocities caused in past and present by the Israelis. At a certain point in the seminar the Israelis were able to express empathy and even regret. I can't say how authentic this feeling of regret was in all of them but for some it definitely was deep and honest. The Israelis ability to accept the Palestinians and their views depended a great deal on the Palestinians' recognition of the Israelis as humans and civilians and not as soldier's off-duty.

Many said they go back home with more questions than answers. They were left confused because the narrative they new and were brought up upon now, as a result of the meeting with the Palestinians seemed problematic and unconvincing. They of course did not neglect it entirely but the seminar created in them a more critical approach towards the familiar and unquestionable both in the narrative and the Israeli Palestinian conflict.