

# Committee for Basic Rights and Democracy

## Vacation from War

### Steps toward the Concrete Utopia of a Peaceful World Summer 2009

#### Participants' Comments Breaking Barriers – Gender Mixed Seminar – Youth-Academy Walberberg

##### **Liran: “I went there for my children!”**

If you had asked me before the seminar what is my reason for going, I don't think I could give a very accurate answer. I thought I wanted to go because I believe in peace, or because I'm left-wing, or because I don't know enough, or because my friends had gone in past years and I was simply curious. But today, in retrospect, I can definitely say I went there for my children. I left my family and my secure home for two weeks so I could return with more answers for their future. My present will not change, I learnt that, but maybe if more seminars of this kind will continue, my kids may have a different future than the one standing before me in their horizon.



*Liran (links) und Maayan*

I arrived in Germany to meet people like me – Palestinians with an academic education, a passion for life and fun, and a very good taste in fashion. Although I knew that these were the people I'd meet, I'm ashamed to admit that I was still a bit surprised. I am, after all, a result of mass media brainwash... I do expect every Muslim to wear a Kafyia on his head (like Yasser Arafat) or the women a headscarf, be violent, and be potential suicide-bombers.

I was also surprised to meet the Israelis around me... the diversity in cultures and believes was so great that this took me aback. I understood that the “problem” begins in my own home. First I must come to an understanding with my immediate “family” before I go blame my neighbors. But that is all philosophy... the seminar for me began on the plane with my Israeli partners – we all spoke excitedly of our expected meeting with the Palestinians, we all came very positive and willing to talk.

And then we met the Palestinians... it was the very first meeting, all the participants in one hall. They immediately took their places sitting one next to the other and by that creating a very

defined “us and them” situation. Later in the small groups we each had to introduce ourselves and say where we came from, and that too was very eye opening: the Israelis introduced themselves individually – a name, a city. While the Palestinians introduced themselves as members of a whole – Palestine.

This initial meeting made me understand that we may look the same, but we are different: Our place is safe, we come with some sort of superiority as we are free, independent. While they are fighting for a definition of who they are in each breath they take. So when I said, “I come to represent myself” and they said “I come to represent Palestine” I realized: there is an “us and them” – no one has to try to create it, it’s just there.

The first days were very frustrating. On the one hand our meetings had a very casual tone – games, drama, even Thai-chi, but on the other hand there was a lot of tension in the air, which no game could loosen. There was a big feeling of blame – we were to blame for their fate. But we, as individuals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, will not take the blame for things that happened over 60 years ago (we weren’t there). And this brings up another very acute issue in the dialogues – no matter what we talked about (be it the personal, historical or familiar narratives) it always came to the issue of: Who was in this land first?

For me, being an immigrant from Mexico (I came to Israel when I was 18) this issue was irrelevant, but I did realize that it was irrelevant because the laws were on my side – I am Jewish therefore my place in Israel cannot be argued. All of a sudden - I got the opportunity to see that all that was taken for granted - was a privilege on someone else’s account. Here comes another “us and them” – if I am happy they are sad, if I am free they are oppressed.

All this became even more emphasized when speaking of the separation wall, which for me was the most hurtful of all issues in the seminar. As a mother, there is a side of me which is content with the separation wall because it means less (or no) terrorist attacks. But as that same mother, the separation wall fills me with fear, because I understand that people under oppression can only become more and more frustrated, and in a few years, when my son will have to go to the army this frustration may endanger his life. So, I may be “happy” now, but we are all losing in this battle, the future does not look “happy” at all.

What was most effective for me in the seminar was the understanding of the word “narrative” – the subjectivity of our stories, of our perspectives... Their experience of this reality is so much different than mine. I can take their view or leave it – but I cannot and should not try to change it.

So we look the same (we are after-all cousins), we want the same (peace, quiet and prosperity), but we are not the same – we are “us” and they are “them”. The seminar made me respect that separation, it made me want to fix my “us” – we must ask ourselves many questions before we place any blame on “them”.

## **Breaking Barriers – Women’s Seminar – Ev. Akademie Hofgeismar**

### **For the donors**

Hofgeismar, 15.08.2009

Thank you for the opportunity to attend such a special seminar.

Life in Israel is very complex and many different desires get lost in our hectic way of life.

I thought that one of the main reasons why we are still at war is because of lack of knowledge which makes lack of caring and ignorance.

Now I know that for sure.

I also know much more and how hard and different life is for my neighbours.

I can’t keep my life as it is - knowing how daily life is interrupted constantly and that my country is acting in a racist and false way.

We are all born equal and only by chance I was born in West Jerusalem instead of a few kilometers east. I believe that this seminar will encourage projects concerning both sides and that each woman has many new thoughts and feelings to deal with.

I was a participant of the women's seminar and I'm very happy for that. The conversations were flowing with confidence and trust that we are able only for that. The openness from both sides was clean and true. Both sides spoke of pain and wishes. This kind of comfortable situation was only due to the fact that men were not here.

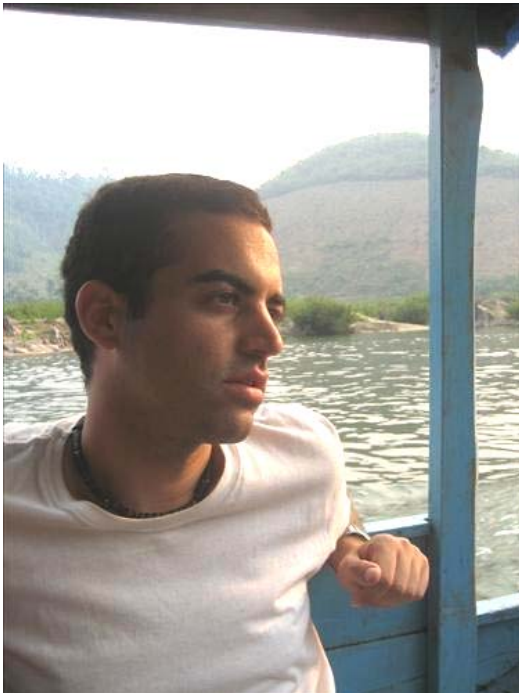
The place was beautiful and also added to the calming of our mad and furious days. The facilities from all sides were efficient and helpful.

I feel, and I think, many other women from here agree, that we are ending this seminar with a feeling of wanting to meet again and to continue our process.

Thank you again for your help and for enabling us for all this wonderful experience.

From an Israeli woman.

### **Participants' Comments of the Avig - Tawasul Seminar Youth-Academy Walberberg**



**Ari**

18.08.2009

Thousands of kilometres I had to travel, just to have the opportunity to look at the depth of the eyes of my neighbours, the neighbours who live right next door.

Slowly I looked at the depth of their eyes, what I saw wasn't the hatred I was expecting to see, as they were simply human eyes.

When those eyes were talking about their desire for peace with us, they were reflecting honesty and despair, they were shining and dimmed at the same time. Those eyes didn't give me any choice but to inscribe them in my heart and promise myself to always be an advocate of peace, no matter how much the terrorists will try to prevent me from doing it.

Now, after the seminar, as a Jewish religious guy, who deeply believes that the language of god is a language of peace, I'm now doing my best to

advocate for peace and for a two states solution, among religious communities.

I also would like to take the opportunity and thank all of you for what you have done and all what you're doing. The seminar has empowered me and when I get back to Israel I will try to enlarge my peace activities, I will also be happy to keep in contact and share with you what we have accomplished.

Best regards and again, many thanks

Ari



Assaf in disguise  
celebrating the Israeli Cultural Evening (Purim)

That was quite an interesting experience. I have been in a few meetings with Palestinians before but this seminar was something else.

First of all it was long. Two weeks of being all of the time with people from "the other side" is something that you can't really be indifferent to. Not only that we had so many hours of talking about the main issues of the conflict during the group meetings guided by the facilitators. We also had so much time for ourselves. So we could talk with people and really get to know them. You also had time for yourself to understand the process you are going through.

I think that the main thing I can say about the seminar is that I went through an important process with the Palestinians, the Israelies and mostly with myself.

It wasn't so easy or fun sometimes but I felt that it was such a big development in my life just because it was so intense these two weeks. I have learnt so much about the Palestinian's life, what really bothers them and not what is said to me by the press in Israel.

When I came back I became much more involved in the conflict, trying to keep my actions as much as non violent - understanding that violence will just create more violence. I think that this is an understanding many people went back with: "We have to stop this violence!" Even if it means that people didn't change completely, I think each one of us changed at least a bit

I think it gave us a lot of hope.

Thank you for this opportunity.

Assaf

## **Liel**

4.12.09

### **My Delegation Experience**

I was released from the army in summer 2007. Since then I have had different experiences that taught me there are different ways to deal with the political conflict. Instead of building a shelter of defense, or even ignoring the problem, I decided that trying to find a solution should be the right choice. In order to achieve this, dialog should take place. Therefore, in the last few years I have participated in several co-existence meetings, took Arabic lessons, and even organized several co-existence dialog sessions with different non-violent resistance organizations. The peak of this process was the "Vacation from War" delegation to Germany last summer.

After having only short-term experiences, where the members did not have enough time to create deep connections between each other, two weeks of co-existence camp sounded like a

great opportunity. I was thrilled to see that my expectations were fulfilled. During the delegation, I had the time to understand more clearly where the other side is coming from, what



their reality is and how it is different from what I imagined. Furthermore, the time and the different experiences within it created the option of transforming the political debate into a personal conversation. I was happy to see that eventually we could be friends despite our disagreement. The delegation taught me that a solution can only come with communication and compromise through dialog; not in disconnection, fighting and violence.

I returned to Israel only a while after the delegation. But during this time of traveling in Europe, I tried to stay in contact with my new friends. Several e-mails were sent to my Israeli group through our e-mail list and different conversations with the Palestinians took place in internet chat rooms. I felt that there was a will from these people to

create a new reality in the region. When I returned, the Israeli group began to meet once a month. These meetings had several goals: 1) to stay in contact 2) to plan our future acts 3) to know more about the conflict. In order to achieve the third goal, different meetings included political lecturers and even Knesset members.

Between these meetings, other actions took place. These were different from the delegation and connected to different degrees. Some people organized co-existence activities, others connected to existing organizations and joined their seminars and several joined demonstrations. The fact that we stayed as a group gave us a few advantages. It gave us the strength and privilege to interest each other in new projects and bring more people to each initiative. It also created a wider variety of ideas and many valuable relationships for further planning. Moreover, the support we gave each other had an essential role in keeping us together through this difficult mission.

Even on the personal level significant changes occurred. People that were never interested in politics, suddenly started to read more about the history of the conflict, they joined political initiatives and even planned new ones. Furthermore, people that did not have any connection with Palestinians suddenly had Palestinian friends and even went to visit them in the Palestinian territories.

These actions caused different reactions from our friends and families. To those who were not a part of the delegation it was complicated to understand our feelings and goals. They did not have the option to communicate with Palestinians and still see them as an enemy. This was added to the disbelief in Israeli politics and together they created cynical comments for our will to work. Our families reacted differently. Warnings before meeting Palestinians or visiting the Palestinian territories are a common response from worried parents. Despite the negative feedback, the fact that members of the delegation shared their positive experience created interest for new people to join the cause and to attend co-existence meetings.

On a personal level, I have been having different experiences related to the delegation. On the one hand, the delegation strengthened my connection to the subject and provided me a deeper understanding to the conflict and to the other side. This motivates me to continue in my efforts to create a new reality in the area. In order to work towards this goal, I act on different levels. First, I decided to join the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, where I study and live with Palestinian, Jordanian and American students. This place provides new reality and forms a sense of leadership in the students. I am happy to see that two of my delegation friends, one Israeli and one Palestinian, joined this program as well. Surprisingly, two sisters of other delegation friends also joined this school. Second, I joined different co-existence organizations to help them with present initiatives and to develop new methods for the future. And third, I

stay in contact with my Palestinian friends in order to maintain this comfort zone between people from rival nationalities.

On the other hand, the delegation and the political acts caused difficulties as well. Negative reactions from my family were a part of these difficulties. My parents are worried about my meetings with Palestinians and try to convince me to change my way. In addition, I continuously argue with my father about this subject. He says that I am naïve and willing to sell my country and home for a "childish dream". Some of my friends are also a part of the obstacles. Some say that I have gone too far and others are just sarcastic and do not believe in this cause or in politics in general.

Although the conflict itself and the social reactions can create problems, I decided for now to dedicate my effort to create a new reality. I want to continue my studies in this special program and in the future to move to Jerusalem in order to study politics. Furthermore, I stay in contact with my Palestinian friends and even spent a weekend in one of the Palestinian cities. I feel that the delegation had an integral role in creating this feeling in me. I believe that the obstacles along the way are just proofs for a lot of work that needs to be done. I am sure that the more people that will join this cause the closer we are to the solution. And the delegation is a great experience that creates in people the intent to join.

Thank you very much.

## **Shira**

15.09.2009

I would like to convey my feelings 6 weeks after the intensive meeting with the Palestinians, and tell you about the actions our group has taken since our return and our future plans.

I think that in those 2 weeks in Germany I didn't learn about the conflict's history, nor were the horrible facts new for me. What did happen was a deep change that made me understand the urgency of solving the conflict, and my duty as an Israeli citizen to fight the Israeli occupation and to not stay passive.

The meeting and bonding with those fantastic young Palestinians made me feel that living happily and passively in Tel Aviv is unjust, because of the fact that on the other side people live harsh daily realities, realities that I only see on the news. I came back a bit confused, so now what? Should I join a political party? Should I create a new left-wing organization or maybe find one that already exists? And I also felt that I returned a bit different and experienced difficulties talking with family and friends while being so understanding to the Palestinian suffering. Since the first week back I've continued meeting with the Israeli participants from Vacation-from-War, participants who felt the same as me. I also met two of the Palestinians participants.

Since our return from Germany, the Israeli delegation from Vacation-from-War – 2009 has been actively seeking a home for enthusiastic young Israelis. We went to two left-wing peace demonstrations, organized by "Peace Now", we participated in a "Combatants for Peace" meeting, in a "Geneva Initiative" meeting, joined a project of "Efshar Acheret", a new left-wing movement, the project is a joint Jewish-Arabic work day in an Arabic village inside Israel, and also took part in a tour of the Westbank with Israeli settlers in order to understand their point of view.

Now when I say "we" I'm talking of a group of about 5-12 participants of the delegation. When we arrived at a meeting of 20 people we were around half of the meeting! It was very shocking for the different organizations to see such a big group of new young people interested in their activities.

While participating in all kinds of activities, we decided to start organizing meetings of our own. We started with an Israeli meeting of "the organizers" - 12 of us; we invited 2 left-wing activists to talk with us. The next meeting is planned for the 21st of September; this meeting is intended for the whole Israeli delegation. There, we will discuss our future meetings with the Palestinians, plan our activities ahead, share feelings almost two months after the delegation,

hear a lecture from Dov Hanin, a member of the Israeli Parliament and long-time left-wing advocate and activist and finally decide on a general course of action, politically and socially. We have also set up an initial bi-lateral meeting with the Palestinians. It will take place in the beginning of October in the West Bank (zone C), at “Abed's Farm” - an organic farm near Beit Jalah. There we plan to spend the day together working on the farm, talking, laughing and dinning.



Shira (on the left) celebrating the Palestinian Cultural Evening

We have been tossing around a few ideas as to future programs. For example - we currently are planning a 6-month lecture program. After the enthusiasm we have arose amongst left-wing activists we decided to invite different political figures to lecture. Dov Hanin is the first among many who have shown interest. We have already made initial contact with Yossi Sarid, the former Minister of Education and with former Knesset Member, Yael Dayan; both have expressed their desire to meet with us.

However, we have encountered a few problems: We haven't a place to meet – Being a group of at least 30 people necessitates a minimum of facilities (we have many people who have expressed their desire to join us – making us much more than 30)...

We need a budget to cover the basics – renting a meeting location and transportation (especially transportation in the West Bank which is very expensive).

In short, we have a lot motivation, we have a group of very talented, intelligent and charismatic young men and women, and we are willing to put in the time and energy in order to make a difference. We believe that we have a duty to fulfil a certain purpose in the struggle for normality in our region, and we are willing to take on this challenge.

That's all for now,

Thank you for those two wonderful weeks in Germany

Shira