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Painful Past in the Service of Israeli Jewish-Arab Dialogue: The Work of the Center for Humanistic Education at the Ghetto Fighters House in Israel

David Netzer¹

The Centre for Humanistic Education (**CHE**) within the museum of Ghetto Fighters' House (**GFH**) in Israel, engages high-school students and teachers from the Arab and Jewish sectors in an examination of connections between the Holocaust; personal and social morals; and implications for present Israeli society.

Its action can be related to several domains: history of the Holocaust; moral education; civic education; and peace-education through intergroup dialogue. Livne, CHE pedagogical director since its beginning, categorizes and characterizes these subjects as follows:

CHE engages in three subjects: the Holocaust as a universal formative crisis; humanistic social and political values, manifested in the concept of democracy; Jewish-Arab dialogue as a leverage to social and political coexistence.

Since 1997 CHE has been working regularly with about 25 Jewish and Arab schools. With groups numbering an average of 15 participants, the project has been engaging about 350 participants annually.

The educational process progresses in three sequential stages:

¹ Based on my PhD thesis: *The Work and Impact of the Center for Humanistic Education at the Ghetto Fighters House, Israel: A Case Study* (Brighton, UK: University of Sussex, 2008). For a full PDF copy mail request to: netzerd@netvision.net.il

1. The Basic Workshop, focusing on in-depth study of selected issues grounded in the Holocaust. This part is done in school-based groups, hence culturally and nationally considerably homogenous.

2. A multicultural, binational seminar – dealing with perceptions of the Other along with historical and sociopolitical issues relating to Jewish-Arab relations. The working-groups are mixed, co-facilitated by an Arab and Jewish staff-member.

3. An ongoing multicultural, binational dialogue-group, which focuses on implementations of the democratic concept of shared citizenship.

Participation in all parts of the program is voluntary. The schools serve mainly as organizational platforms for recruiting participants.

CHE staff is made up of about 15 Jewish and Arab members. They include qualified teachers, social workers, students and informal-education professionals. The type of work is mainly group-facilitating.

The long shadow of the regional conflict

CHE process is situated in a setting dominated by a long and deep national conflict between the Jews and the Palestinian Arabs, both citizens of Israel. This conflict emanates from three main sources:

History and narratives: outcomes and memories of past traumas experienced by the two collectives, namely the Jewish Holocaust; and the Palestinian Nakba. These are formative traumatic events which are rooted deeply in the collective narratives of both groups, and have a deep impact on their perceptions and behaviours.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict: this perpetual, violent, unresolved conflict plays a central role in every Israeli's life and mobilizes huge resources in all spheres of life. The political border-line between the state of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, as fragile and vague as it is, is virtually non-existent in terms of perceptions of identity: most Israeli Arabs identify themselves as Palestinians; to most Israeli Jews the Palestinians are the enemy. Thus the conflict is not limited to the borders or the disputed territories; it also resides within the Israeli body politic.

Jewish-Arab power relations: Israel's definition as a Jewish state projects on the power relations between the Jewish majority and Arab minority in all walks of life. The Arabs are alienated and excluded from the basic state ethos; their disproportionate representation at the bottom of all major socio-economic scales, in other words their discrimination – is a concrete manifestation of the deeply structured asymmetry between Jews and Arabs in Israel.

All three sources are intertwined and connected in a vicious cycle of victimhood and fear; hatred and suspicion; rejection and frustration. Past memories fuel present emotions, present experiences reaffirm narratives rooted in past traumas.

CHE is working in one of the deepest splits within the Israeli society – the Jewish-Arab split. This split can be summarized as national majority-minority split,

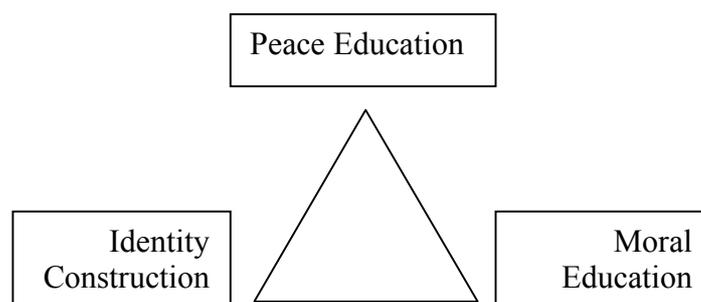
embedded in an active historical-political conflict. The CHE project brings together youth from the two national groups, Jews and Arabs, and engages them in what it calls 'humanistic dialogue'.

Conceptual Frameworks

Metaphorically speaking CHE operates within a triangle, the angles of which are collective narratives – mainly the Holocaust and the Nakba; discourse of democratic and humanistic values; and personal impact – mainly change of perceptions. In structural analytical terms these can also be associated respectively with peace-education through narrative-based dialogue; moral education denoting democratic humanism; examination and re-evaluation of social and personal identity.

The metaphor of a triangle serves to represent the interrelationship between the three fields, forming a holistic entity: CHE is an educational institution, a place where collective narratives play an essential role in the discourse, and an ideological public body – all at once.

CHE Conceptual Triangle



Drawing on the metaphorical CHE triangle, the following conceptual frameworks are deployed.

Education

There are five education-related aspects of CHE rationale:

(I) Pedagogical aspects of peace education [PE]

CHE engages in PE in the socio-political context of an intractable conflict. This particular branch of PE aspires to change perceptions of the other side by focusing on four main goals:

- Acknowledgment and legitimization of *their* collective narrative.
- Critical examination of *our* contribution to the conflict and to its resolution.
- Empathy for *their* suffering.
- Adoption of values conducive to coexistence. ²

² Salomon, 2004; Salomon, 2002:9, emphasis in original

This is implemented by integrating process and content. The process denotes interpersonal interaction in an intimate setting which characterizes frameworks of informal education.³

The content denotes the narrative of the Other – familiarizing with it, acknowledging and respecting it.⁴

(II) The psychological aspect of intergroup encounters.

Observing Palestinian-Israeli encounters, researchers identify a tension between two levels of interaction: interpersonal and intergroup interaction, side by side. This tension is regarded as one of the main dilemmas in these encounters, “the perception of the political person versus the psychological one”.⁵

Jewish-Arab youth encounters in Israel could be categorized to two major educational approaches, which correspond to a Personal-Collective continuum⁶ As in identity, where CHE takes an integrating path of personal and social, the approach relating to goals and methods in the intergroup encounters is a synthesis of the two.

(III) The sociological aspect of identity.

Identities, personal and social, are social constructs. CHE operates in a society governed by 'politics of identity'⁷.

The external threat accompanying the violent conflict fuels this pattern of politics of identity. Insecurity commonly feeds suspicion and intolerance towards Others. CHE has developed an educational methodology which confronts and challenges these tendencies. As with intergroup encounters, CHE integrates two opposite approaches on the Personal-Collective continuum, implementing a third – the 'interactionist approach'.⁸ The essence of this approach is providing equal space for socio-political contents and group, interpersonal and personal dynamics.

(IV) Holocaust Education

One of the defining features of CHE rationale is its approach to Holocaust education. From the 1980s onwards the national Israeli rationale of Holocaust education stresses the uniqueness of the Holocaust as a means of reinforcing Jewish and Israeli identity.⁹ CHE implements an alternative rationale, the essence of which is twofold:

First – historical perspective: a universal perception, substituting a predominantly Jewish one.

³ Colley, Hodkinson, Malcolm, 2002

⁴ Salomon, 2004; Bar-On, 2002

⁵ Katz and Kahanov, 1990, in Suleiman, 2004:326

⁶ Maoz, 2002

⁷ Li-on, 2007, Bar-Tal, 2000, Rouhana, 1997

⁸ Sagy, 2002

⁹ Porat, 2004

Second - educational goal: mobilizing history to enhance multicultural dialogue, overriding construction and reinforcement of national identity.

(V) Moral education

Humanism, denoting democratic pluralism and human compassion, provides participants from various social sectors a common ideological framework with which all can identify and feel comfortable. This framework is established from the first part of the process, in the basic workshop dealing with the Holocaust, and throughout the following parts. The Holocaust is studied as a universal extreme event, from which lessons can be drawn in relevant contexts across time and place. That universalistic value-oriented approach is implemented in later sequences when dealing with historic landmarks, such as the Palestinian Nakba and other burdened events concerning Jews and Arabs in Israel.

As any ideology, it can be regarded as subversive in the sense that it upholds in word and in practice values that are essentially political; and as such not necessarily consensually accepted in the surrounding society.

Illustrative Observations at Selected Activities

Following are eyewitness accounts of three different CHE activities. In each case the factual description of the event is followed by my interpretation and conceptualization in reference to CHE practice.

(I) The environment's reactions to involvement in CHE

Towards the end of the graduate-group activity-year of 2004/2005, a meeting was devoted to dealing with attitude among family and friends towards CHE activity. These represent the closest and most relevant social environment, the home-base of the participants.

The participants were asked to quote on posters things they're told. Most were negative, and strikingly similar on both sides – Jews and Arabs – like mirror reflections. Following is a thematically-edited collection of the quotes presented:

Minimizing, ridiculing:

- Naïve, dream on
- Are you bored, don't you have anything better to do?
- A waste of time, nothing good can come out of it.
- It's all talk, what's the point? (an Arab quote)

Criticizing, making accusations:

- Jew/Arab lover!
- The Jews will brainwash you.
- They teach you about the Holocaust so you'll feel sorry for them and forget what they're doing to us!
- You're forgetting who you are and to which side you belong!

Positive reactions:

- "Go get them", tell them everything!
- We live together in this place, we have to talk.
- Well, it might do at least some good...

- Well done! Only the youth can bring change.

After reading aloud all these quotes, accompanied by imitations and laughter, participants were asked how they react, what do they reply. The following were the dominant reactions cited:

- **Avoidance:** I don't talk about it, try to avoid the subject.
- **Persuading :** I tell in details what we do, to show that it's different than what they think
- **Recruitment of ideals and convictions:** "there are good people on the other side"; "any little step in the right direction can help"; "we must work together to bring change"; "there's no other way, if we want a better future".

Besides avoidance, the other two strategies require emotional identification with CHE, to some extent having to choose between two 'significant others'. This conflict, however, should not be taken to extremes: the participants are required to get their parents' consent to attending the activities. So, the quotes reflect scepticism, cynicism, apprehension – but not adamant objection. Those who face that are probably not among the participants.

Engaging in CHE activity is for most participants "rowing upstream", as put by Kalisman, CHE founder and director. It is not the normative thing to do in the present Israeli social and political climate – in both the Jewish and the Arab sectors.

CHE process challenges deep-rooted conventions in three topics:

- Involving Arabs in issues of the Holocaust – conventionally a Jewish area.
- Learning and discussing the Palestinian perspective of 1948 – a charged topic closely associated with the present conflict, therefore political and rarely touched in binational encounters. Moreover, it is rarely addressed in formal classrooms in both sectors for various political reasons.
- Promoting interpersonal (personal) dialogue between Jews and Arabs – where more commonly the dialogue, if occurs, is channelled to the intergroup (collective) level.

(II) "Can you ever feel you belong?"

This episode took place in a session on culture, in the spring seminar of 2002. It was filmed and is included in a CHE presentational film called Circle of Neighbours.

The participants, about 20 Jews and Arabs from a variety of places in the first of a three-day seminar, are handed a list of public days and holidays: historical, religious and others.

Facilitator: Choose one or two dates or holidays which are meaningful to you; explain what they mean to you; and what goes on in your family on these days.

After some time is given, a round of short presentations takes place. After some religious holidays are described, one of the Jewish boys tells about his choice:

Independence Day festivities.

Facilitator: Can one of the Arabs here describe what this day is for him/her?

Nadra We all sit at home. This day was a disaster for our family.

(Arab girl):

Facilitator: What if you want to go out – to the dances, fireworks and all that?

Iman Once, my parents told me: you want to go out – go; but remember that

(Arab girl): on that day we all lost lives, homes...think about it.

Since then I don't go to the festivities. I can't.

Julnar For me it's like a day of mourning – the memories of 1948, but also the

(Arab girl): results which we still suffer until today: Your Independence Day is not

mine, this isn't really my state.

Matan Our day of joy is your day of mourning. That's sad. It's something that

(Jewish happened in the past and still divides us...

boy): (To Julnar) do you imagine, though, that some day, some time in the

future, you can feel that you belong?

Julnar: Only if they'll put some other mind in my head...

Facilitator: You mean that only if you became somebody else you could feel differently about this? So long as you are you – Julnar – you'll feel that way about Independence Day, Israel, your place in it?

Julnar nods in approval.

This episode brings to the surface two major components of the social dynamics that are active in the CHE encounter: the historical ethos of both sides; and the personal-collective identity interplay.

The teenagers sitting in the room are the third generation after 1948, some of them may even be the fourth. Their construct of 1948 and of their connection to the collective State is the mediated product of their families, schools, surrounding society – not direct personal experience. Julnar demonstrates the profound effect these mediating agents have on her personal consciousness and identity as an Arab in Israel.

(III) "So much pain! What are we to do with it?!"

About twenty 16-17 year olds are sitting in a circle. They come from different places in the north – villages, kibbutzim, towns and cities. They are Jews and Arabs – Christians, Muslims and Druze. They constitute quite a good representation of the social stratification in this part of the country.

In the invitations to the seminar, the participants were asked to prepare a presentation of a past-story that runs in their family and to bring an object that is related to the family history.

The facilitator invites anyone willing to start with the family story.

Maayan, a Jewish Kibbutz girl, volunteers: *'My grandmother is a Holocaust survivor. She was a teenager at the time of the war. With her sister, my aunt, they managed to survive the ghetto and the camps. They are the only survivors from their family. In 1946, right after the war, they joined a youth group planning to make Aliyah [Hebrew: Jewish immigration] to Palestine. The British intercepted their illegal ship and held them in a detention camp in Cyprus for another year. They were then allowed to come here. My grandmother joined a Kibbutz not far from here. The Kibbutz was attacked by Arabs in the Independence War of 1948. Some of her friends were killed, she was injured.'* Maayan pulls a necklace out of her pocket.

'When I told my grandmother about this seminar, she gave me this: the only physical remain of her family's past.' Maayan sits down. There's heavy silence in the room.

Issam, an Arab boy from the village Jedaide: *'My grandfather lived in village called Birwe. It's not far from here, but even if you pass near it – you won't see it. It no longer exists. In the Nakba [Arabic: disaster; the name commonly used by Palestinians for the 1948 war] it was captured and later wiped out by the Israeli army. Its inhabitants are now dispersed in neighbouring villages in the Galilee. Many fled across the borders at the time and are still living in refugee camps in Lebanon and Syria. In my family the stories that run are about life in Birwe that is no more. I was already born in Jedaide. But when asked where I'm from I always say "I come from Birwe, now I live in Jedaide".'* Issam pauses, then takes out from his pocket a rusty iron key: *'This is a key that my father got from his father – my grandfather who's no longer alive. When he gave it to me he said: when the time comes – you must pass this to your son. This is the key of the house in Birwe. The only thing that remained from the house which they left for what they thought was only for a couple of days.'* Issam turns to Maayan, pointing his finger at her: *'This is what you have done to my family and my village!'*

The facilitator approaches him: 'Issam, can you tell Maayan what you want, in a way that she can relate to? You remember, of course, that she was not in that army; and you did not flee from the village. So, what do you want to say to Maayan herself?'

Issam is quiet for some time. Then he says: *'Yes, of course it is not Maayan who did it... the only thing I want to tell her and the rest of the Jewish participants here is – you should recognize our painful story. You didn't do it, we didn't do those things to you – but it hurts that you don't even know about us.'*

Maayan looks at him. She gets up and approaches him. They hug. Maayan looks up, her hands spread in desperation, and sighs: 'So much pain! So much pain – what are we to do with it?!'

The outcome of this confrontation of personal histories may be a fresh dialogue between equal victims of history, as reflected upon by some graduates. This dialogue is not instrumental in any practical end-product sense of the word: its objective is not to arrive at a solution, rule for one side or another, or likewise. Its goal is the dialogue itself: exchange of knowledge and acknowledgement as an expression of recognizing the Other.

This incident highlights three aspects of the dialogue promoted by CHE:

- 1) Active elicitation of the past, referring to it as a major element of one's identity.
- 2) Acknowledgment of coexisting historical narratives – personal and collective.
- 3) Cultivation of a person-to-person dialogue – overriding group-to-group, which is the more common practice in conflict-related encounters.

CHE has carved a new path in connecting two domains traditionally considered antagonistic like oil and water: Holocaust education, and Jewish-Arab dialogue.

CHE has developed an educational methodology which lowers the wall between two alien, even hostile Israeli groups - the Jews and the Arabs in Israel. It does so by integrating two main educational strategies into a comprehensive ideological framework.

1. Narrative-based dialogue: through establishing a dialogue which gives room for both collective trauma-ridden narratives – the Holocaust and the Nakba – participants develop empathy with each other. This is made possible because the painful narratives are presented from a personal angle: participants contribute their own connection to the collective narrative, through family and community stories.

2. Movement from politics of identity to personalization of identities: through activities aimed at encouraging expressions of various aspects of personal identity, participants' identity is expanded. Collective identity, as an exclusive feature, gives way to other aspects of identity – more personal and individuated. On these grounds different persons can find common language, bridging over divisive group affiliations.

Humanism, as described above, constitutes an ideological framework which connects the cultural, religious and national variety of participants. In adhering to this ideological framework; and by applying the educational strategy of dialogue through narratives and personalization of identities, CHE implements peace education in the difficult context of an intractable conflict.

CHE participants' accounts of their experience, elicited in questionnaires and interviews, indicate that it constitutes a profound way to bring the two distant groups of Israeli citizens closer; change perceptions of self and of each other; and look differently at the complex situation in which they live.

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