

Report: Community Empowerment in Israel

If there was a theme to the 10-day trip to Israel made by four of us in mid-August, it was the decided shift from bringing participants to our programs in Northern Ireland and Mississippi to doing programs within Israel and strengthening our connections to the Arab community there.

Debbie Frieze, Allan Cohen, Michael Johnston, and I made the trip to deliver our second program in partnership with the Rabin Center and to follow up on several invitations to bring our programs to other organizations and communities.

September 30, 2004



Rosh Ha'ayin and Kfar Kassem

Our friends at the Rabin Center in Tel Aviv have been in conversation for the past few months with city officials and educators in Rosh Ha'ayin and Kfar Kassem about what they could do to help bring the two neighboring but quarrelling towns together.

Rosh Ha'ayin was originally a traditional Yemenite Jewish community, but 20 years ago it began to attract a younger and more Westernized Jewish population. These two groups are divided. Local politics are still driven by old loyalties, but there have been recent changes. Today there are four women on the city council – an unusually high number in Israel.

Kfar Kassem is a poor Arab municipality dominated by four families, called *hamulahs*, and dealing with problems of violence, drugs, and conflict. Kfar Kassem is famous for an incident that occurred there in October 1956 at the beginning of the Suez War. An early curfew had been declared, unbeknownst to the villagers still in the fields. Villagers, returning home after the curfew, were shot by Israeli soldiers on the order of their superior officer, and 49 were killed. Initially, news of the event was censored. Eventually the case resulted in a landmark ruling by the Israeli Supreme Court that army and other security forces not only have the right, but the duty to refuse to execute commands which represent offenses against human rights and the state's legal code.

In the 1950s an industrial park was built on disputed land between Rosh Ha'ayin and Kfar Kassem. The major dispute between the two communities today is Kfar Kassem's insistence on receiving at least some of the taxes earned by that industrial park. Recently, there has been some progress toward negotiating a settlement, and the newly-elected mayor and government of Rosh Ha'ayin want to create a new

environment of cooperation and even reconciliation between the two communities.

The Rabin Center asked us to offer a slightly shortened version of our two-day Community Empowerment Program as their initial program for the two communities. They know we have the tools to create a foundation of relationship and a sense of possibility among the participants before they move forward to work on other projects together.

The first day of the program, we met at a community center in Kfar Kassem, 30 minutes from Tel Aviv. We were scheduled to begin at 1pm, but a quarter to a third of the group was missing. It turned out that our schedule conflicted with the schedule for Muslim prayers. No one had thought about that! So the first order of business was to rework the schedule to accommodate the observant Muslims in the group.

We had already found two wonderful, volunteer translators; Ilan Noy, a math teacher fluent in Hebrew and English who grew up near Rosh Ha'ayin, and Hassan Amer, a psychologist and teacher fluent in Arabic, Hebrew, and English, who lives in Kfar Kassem. The American team had worked with translators before, but only in two languages, not three.

There are a number of challenges to working with translators and with people who have a different first language. Obviously, it adds time (and with three languages, a degree of complexity) to whatever it is you are doing. But beneath that surface-level concern, are much more intriguing issues. Language is the primary carrier of the traditions and culture of a people. It is not merely descriptive of the world around us, with different words for 'table' or 'book.' Words also create the world and reality we live in by virtue of their very existence (a language may have no word for accountability, for example), and how

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we use them (in some cultures responsibility is synonymous with burden). When you work with people through another language, you have to wonder just what it is they are hearing.

At one point in the course, someone made the point that in Israel, and certainly in this group, Arabs generally are fluent in Hebrew. It is their second language. Why not save time and do the course in English and Hebrew, with only one translator. So we put the question to the group. There was a brief and very animated discussion, but it was clear that even though they understood the Hebrew, the Arabs wanted to use both translators. It seemed a point of equality and pride for them. "Let them hear our language for a change," one participant said.

We began the course with 30 participants in the room, including a number of orthodox Jews and observant Muslims. Each person there was drawn to the possibility of healing between their communities by their commitment to education. Most of them were educators from local schools who were encountering each other for the first time. There were also a few participants from the office of the mayor of Rosh Ha'ayin and from the e-learning company, Degem, committed to working with the group in the future.

Clearly our program, with its questions that probe ever deeper into underlying concerns and assumptions and small group discussions, was going to be a very new experience for all of them. At first, they weren't quite sure what to make of it. Early on, as each person was introducing themselves, Hassan brought up the issue of how to resolve the dispute over the industrial park. "There, I've spilt the milk," he said. But we then made it clear that we were not going to deal with spilt milk.

Nor were we going to deal with purposes and objectives, or even with making sure everyone understood what might happen after this program. We were there to do something without which all the understanding and purpose in the world crumble – to help them create a new foundation of relationship, a new listening for themselves and each other, and new possibilities that do not simply perpetuate the past.

It was a tough sell, however. Omri Koh, the director of Degem's multi-learning center in Rosh

Ha'ayin asked Edna Gat, the coordinator from the Rabin Center, to pull me aside so they could make me understand that we needed to go much faster, that we had to make everyone understand that the point of all this was the possibility of doing a project together. Couldn't we just get on with it? As it was, Omri was worried that no one would return for the second day of the program.

Edna and I explained our context and process to Omri as best we could. Either the explanation, my conviction, or my telling him we had years of experience at this and everything was right on track, relieved his anxiety enough that he was willing to stay with and trust the process. Later Edna would confess that when she called Ruthi Gilat at the Rabin Center to report on the day, she said it was a good session but she had no idea if anyone would come back the next day.

Israel is an impatient culture that pushes to get things done and to get them done faster. Where Americans might describe someone who makes things happen as effective, ambitious, or a go-getter, the everyday term in Israel is "pusher," as in, "She is a real pusher!" Our idea that "Sometimes you have to slow down to speed up" is even more counter to all common sense in a land where co-existence is a matter of utmost urgency.

Hassan had invited the four Americans and our Hebrew translator Ilan to have dinner at his home in Kfar Kassem. He wanted to extend the customary hospitality of the Arab community to his new colleagues and to give us a glimpse of the life of Arabs who live within Israel.

About twenty percent of the population of Israel is not Jewish. Almost all of this group is Arab Israelis who were either residents before the establishment of the State of Israel or their descendants. Three quarters of this population is Muslim, the rest are mostly Christians and Druze. While, unlike the Palestinian population, they are citizens of Israel, they generally feel discriminated against. Still, Hassan tells us, "Arabs inside Israel trust the Jews more than the Jews trust the Arabs."

It was a memorable evening – from the feast Hassan's wife and mother laid out before us, to the wide-ranging conversation, to the very Israeli-style

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driving back to our hotel in Tel Aviv. Dinner was a traditional Arab meal of many dishes, incredibly delicious and literally enough for five times our number. Hassan and his wife have three bright, happy children and are expecting a fourth. It was fun to relax and clown around with the children and good to have an opportunity to quiz Hassan with all our questions about local life and politics.

Before dark Hassan had driven us around parts of Kfar Kassem. The amount of construction on houses was noticeable. In Arab towns and villages, families customarily add on living quarters for the next generation. Construction materials and labor are inexpensive and readily available, so a house becomes a kind of living, changing organism. In the public sector, however, a lot of construction projects are started and left unfinished when the money runs out, giving an odd, half-deserted look to some neighborhoods.

The entire evening was yet another paradoxical experience of encountering, at its most ordinary level, a culture completely different from our own and still feeling very much included and at home.

The second day, we met at the multi-learning center in Rosh Ha'ayin. Everyone came back. (The only exceptions were two young men who had to go back to their work but who – along with two or three others from this group -- would show up a week later at the leadership day in Tel Aviv.) And the course works its magic again.

In a culture (not unlike America) driven by speaking, our work on listening is enormously powerful for these participants. Again and again, they catch themselves and each other in the ways they listen that limit their awareness and the possibilities in front of them.

At the end of the day, we leave them with no project to work on, no objectives to realize. Instead they have a new and previously unimaginable relationship with each other, an expanded range of abilities and possibilities, and renewed spirits and energy for the tasks ahead of them -- whatever they choose them to be. Omri is elated at the result, telling us it is much more than he had ever hoped for.

Now they didn't want us to leave. "When can

you come back?" they asked. "We want and need more of the empowerment you provide."

Tamra

Tamra is a municipality in the Galilee, 30 minutes northeast of Haifa with a population of about 25,000 – all of it Arab and Muslim. People commonly referred to Tamra as a village, which is the term used in Israel for towns that have no infrastructure. Almost half of its population is 19 years old or younger, and two-thirds of the population is younger than 45. Locals told us that the unemployment rate is 27 percent.

Tamra is also the hometown of Ahmad Hijazi, a leader of the Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam (Oasis of Peace) community founded in 1972 by a Dominican monk to be a place where Jews and Arabs could live together and conduct educational work for peace. Ahmad was part of the group from Israel that participated in our Intensive program in Northern Ireland in 2002.

In March, Ahmad asked us to consider offering a Community Empowerment Program in Tamra, saying, "When people are stuck where they are, they don't want to be reminded that they are able to do more than they are actually doing." So now we are going to visit Tamra and meet with community leaders there to discuss the possibility.

When Ahmad arrives to pick us up for the half-hour drive to Tamra, he is talking with someone in Arabic on his mobile phone. He is doing what all of us who work in communities do – making sure people show up at the meeting tonight.

You notice two things driving in to Tamra. On the outskirts of the town are a number of large banquet-type halls. These are the wedding halls and restaurants that cater to large, traditional wedding parties. Then as you enter the town, there is an archway over the road. The road, however, is not finished, so you have to drive alongside the arches on a side road. Ahmad tells us the entrance has been incomplete for the past 10 years, and is emblematic of many different municipal projects that are begun and then abandoned when the money runs out.

Since we don't have anything on the schedule

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until the meeting, we spend some time driving around and getting to know Ahmad's hometown. The entrance to Tamra is at the bottom of a large hill, so as you drive from the business district to the residential area, you are also climbing through a maze of narrow streets. Time and again as Ahmad steered the car around a bend, I thought we were turning into a driveway, only to be surprised when the street continued on. During the heat of mid-day, there was little traffic – mostly, Ahmad explained, men driving around to find out what's going on — and the few people out walking were either old men or young children.

There are five large family clans or *hamulahs* in Tamra. The Hijazi clan is one of the largest, with 6000 members, most of whom live in the same section of Tamra, and many of whom are named Ahmad. Once some foreign students who had met Ahmad at Neve Shalom/Wa'at al Salam showed up in Tamra asking for him. The locals laughed, and pointed toward several different houses, saying, "That's Ahmad Hijazi there, and that's Ahmad Hijazi, and that's Ahmad Hijazi. There must be 600 Ahmad Hijazis here!" Since the guests were foreigners, however, they guessed correctly that there was only one Ahmad Hijazi they could be looking for and sent them to him.

We stop to visit Ahmad's sister and brother-in-law who live on the second floor of a multi-story house. Other family members live on other floors. This is common in Tamra and other Arab villages where the city has run out of room to grow. Instead of spreading outward, people build upward. Later, I will read an article by a Brandeis University student who lived in Tamra for a year and reported that these three- and four-story buildings without handrails on the stairs account for a high number of injuries to Arab children from falls. (You can read more about life in Tamra in Elad's letters at http://www.pubpol.duke.edu/centers/hlp/programs/fellows/eelnekave/letters_tfh.html)

The couple are newlyweds, married just a few months. While we sit in their living room, newly furnished with wedding gifts, we talk, drink fruit juice, nibble on cookies and watch a video of their wedding. The tradition in the Arab community is for weddings to last three days with some of the festivities held at home, and the big meal and party held at

one of the wedding halls. Summer is the wedding season so entire families of friends and children can attend, but that tradition is being challenged more and more by the six-day, year-round work week.

All of us go to the restaurant that was one of the first to offer itself as a wedding hall and have a leisurely lunch that turns out to be of epic proportions. Afterward, we drive around the industrial edge of Tamra. The former mayor, recently defeated in his bid for re-election, is opening a small factory that will make a yogurt-type drink, so we stop to visit. Opening a new business is a high-risk venture, and here it must be even more so.

From the hills on the edge of town, Ahmad and I stand and count the mosques. There are several mosques in Tamra, six of which we can see dotted around the city. From this vantage point, you can also see the geographic reality of Tamra – it has little room for its growing population.

Land ownership and occupation is one of the central issues dividing the people who live in Israel. On a couple of sides Tamra's expansion is held back by what the local people call "observatories" – clusters of Jewish homes built on hills overlooking Tamra. A large grove of trees on another side of town is pointed out as an area that was planted as part of the ongoing commitment of the Jewish community to plant trees in Israel. But where some see tree planting as conservation and improving the land, others see it as encroaching on and appropriating the same land.

When we get back into Tamra it is early evening. The downtown streets are now crowded with people. Families are out walking together, teenagers are doing what teenagers everywhere do – standing around in clumps trying to look cool. In one neighborhood we pass, a wedding celebration is going on that seems to take up several blocks. There is a feeling of real community and street life here.

We stop at a bakery and buy fresh-baked cookies for our guests, then go to the community center where the event will be held. As we arrange the chairs in the room, people begin to wander in, including some who live in the neighborhood and show up out of curiosity when they see the lights on in the community center.

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Most everyone seems to know each other, and they appear genuinely delighted to meet us. I am fascinated with how the men shake hands. Their extended hands meet with a slap, then they clasp and shake. It reminds me of the American “high five.” By the time we all sit down, there are at least 30 of us crowded into the room and two small boys spying through the open windows.

Our gathering is a wonderful representation of the community. The newly elected mayor has come, as well as the deputy mayor. There are teachers, social workers, engineers, and lawyers, both men and women. Ahmad, acting as both the convener and the translator, introduces us. He tells those gathered a little of his experience of the Mastery Foundation and his idea of what we might provide for the community. As he is speaking, the call to prayer comes floating through the windows from a nearby mosque, and the evening feels soft and peaceful.

Once everyone in the room has introduced themselves, we ask them to break into small groups and answer this question, “Why did you accept the invitation to come here tonight?” Their answers reveal some common themes – wanting to contribute to the overall welfare of their community but not knowing how or where to do that; frustration and resignation at having tried to do something for the community but having little to show for their efforts; hoping to find a way to make a difference in the community even though many of the important decisions are not in the hands of the community.

And of course, they are deeply curious about these four strange Americans – two of whom are Jews – who are so interested in them and their village. We tell them something of the work we have done in Northern Ireland and Mississippi. They are intrigued by the idea that what we do is empower those committed to creating a new future, and they identify most readily with what they understand to be the situation of African Americans in the United States.

So, they ask, what can we do for them and for Tamra? Our first response is to tell the truth: the solutions to the problems of Tamra must come from the people of Tamra. We do not have answers or solutions to give. What we can do is empower

them with new ideas and tools that will transform the context of resignation they live with, the context of “they won’t let us” that defeats them before they even begin to act.

We can help them reclaim the power of having something to say about the way it is. Of course, people in Tamra are resigned, but clearly they are not committed to being resigned. They have a dream and a desire for a better Tamra. They are doing the best they can see to do, but they are frustrated that they cannot make more of a difference.

They are interested to hear that there are committed community leaders all over the world who also grow tired and frustrated. And they are curious about us and our commitment to empower and support such people – including those gathered in this room. There is real excitement at hearing what we have to say, and real interest in working with us. Yes, they have doubts, but the possibilities are stronger. And anyway, what do they have to lose?

“When can you come back?” they ask us. “When can we begin? What do you need? We will be here waiting for you.”

As we drive back to Haifa, I realize I already feel attached to this dusty village, the same way I feel attached to the other communities where we work. I ask Ahmad about the personal journey that took him from Tamra to where he is today, struggling for equality for his people, for coexistence, and for peace. Just the struggle for an education would be beyond the persistence of most of us. He grew up speaking Arabic and then had to become fluent enough in Hebrew and English to get his Master’s degree – a process he describes as “breaking your teeth on English.”

Perhaps every person who comes to community work – and particularly communities that are deeply divided – has traveled a long and difficult path. Certainly, the journey does not get any easier. The demands seem only to increase and the rewards, while substantial, are not monetary. I am reminded of something the American abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass said, “The reward for being in the struggle is the opportunity to be in the struggle.”



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Leo Baeck

In Haifa, we spend a day at the Leo Baeck Education Center with the staff from the Leo Baeck Community Center and the Lokey International Academy of Jewish Studies.

The Leo Baeck Education Center is the leading institution of Reform Judaism in Israel. Founded in 1938, it carries on a tradition of social action and education as well as providing services to at-risk populations. Today, the center includes a junior and senior high school, an early childhood education center, the community center, a sports center, the Lokey Academy, a synagogue, and several other community centers and outreach programs.

Last year, Eran Dubovi, then the head of the junior high school and now head of the entire Center, came to Northern Ireland to participate in our Intensive program there. Eran saw a number of possibilities in a collaboration between Leo Baeck and the Mastery Foundation, and set up this meeting for us. The night before, I ask him exactly what result he would like us produce in the two hours we will have. "Enthusiasm," he says.

There are 16 staff members at the meeting. Half of them are from the Community Center and its outreach programs, and half of them are from the Jewish studies academy. After the introductions, we follow our practice of connecting everyone at the table to our purpose for being together and to each other by asking a question and then having them discuss their answers in small groups. In this case, the question is, "Why did you accept the invitation to come to this meeting?"

Connection questions like this, looking for a thoughtful, personal answer rather than a pat answer, are a remarkable tool for having a group of people get quickly related to each other and focused on the purpose of the meeting. More than just a technique, such questions create a new space or opening for conversations and relationships that otherwise might never be discovered.

Everyone in this meeting spends a lot of time bringing people together and working with groups – either in community centers, meetings, or classes. So rather than simply spend our time with them talk-

ing about the Mastery Foundation and our work, we spend it teaching them how to create and use connection questions in their work. Not only will this be useful to them once the meeting is over, it gives them a real taste of what our programs are like.

They are great students and in half an hour's time have gotten the idea and generated dozens of questions they can use in their work. Here are a few of the questions designed by the Jewish studies staff: Where is God in your life? What do you want to leave behind when you are gone? Where and when did you have your last spiritual experience? From the community center staff: What is the most important thing for you about this neighborhood? What do you want your community to look like in 10 years and why? What do you want to change in yourself or others to create a closer connection?

At the end of two hours, all of us were energized and enthusiastic. Again, the question was, "When can you come back? When can you work with us?"

What is next?

Before we leave, we will also hold a one-day leadership program at the Rabin Center in Tel Aviv for 20 leaders from the Rabin Center and other organizations working on issues of peace and co-existence.

During the time between and around these meetings and programs, we have also met with many of those in our network of friends in Israel. In addition to the work we do on these trips, there is enormous value to us simply in being there and in the numerous conversations we have. As they say in a popular Israeli song, 'Dvarim she roim mikan, lo roim misham' – 'Things you see from here, you cannot see from there.'

Almost everyone we meet with expresses an interest in bringing our work into what they are already doing. They tell us again and again that they are empowered and encouraged by their participation with us. And we are moved and inspired by their heart and persistence in continuing to work for coexistence and peace in a situation that seems only to get worse.

Our plan for 2005 is to make two trips to Israel,

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one in the first quarter and one in the third or fourth quarter. On each of these visits, we can deliver one or two programs and do the work to set up more programs for the next visit.

This is an ambitious plan for an organization that has traditionally relied on a handful of volunteers to lead our programs and on those leaders to fund their own travel. With our resources already

stretched thin, I sometimes feel in Israel as if I have my finger over the hole in the dike, holding back the flood of requests and invitations on the other side.

Yet we have the courage of our commitment and faith in the generosity of our network of friends and supporters who see the possibilities and opportunities to make a difference and can only say, "Yes."

