

Ofer Shinar

The Families Forum Youth Educational Program in Israel

*During the thousands of hours a person spends in school,
only rarely does she gain an hour that by itself creates a real change.
The hour that we have spent with you is such a rare hour.*

An hour when the eyes are opened to see, the heart to feel and the mind to think. An hour in which a person undergoes a change for the better, because she becomes a more sensitive and empathetic person to her other. To any other person. You are making this rare and vast change in one short hour because of your stories of your daughter, Bat Chen, the moving diaries she has left and her wonderful gift of writing, and your activities at the Families Forum, the simple and so human messages you convey, and your strong, quite and believing personality.

Sigal Morag, Cultural Education coordinator, Gvanim High School,
20th October 2004 in a letter to Ayelet Shahak,
a member of the Families Forum

Children are regrettably immersed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They are victims, but also, as young adults and even younger, they are the soldiers. Hundreds of children of both sides have paid with their lives in recent years. Others were injured, and many are traumatized by the events.

The years of combat combined with the demise of the Oslo process has created a generation of disillusioned and frightened youth. Both societies stigmatize the other, not allowing children to realize that both sides share a common humanity. The urgency and the severity of the situation is clear to anyone who visits Israeli and Palestinian schools – views are more radical and oppositional than ever, with less knowledge of the circumstances of the conflict.

1 Primary Objectives, Priorities and Strategies

The Parents Circle – Families Forum («the Families Forum») is a unique grassroots organization, whose powers stem from the combined work of its members, more than 500 bereaved Palestinians and Israelis, whose

lives were struck by tragedy because of the ongoing conflict. The Families Forum is practicing an equal partnership between the Israeli and Palestinian groups, the latter headed by Dr. Adel Misk. Boaz Kitain, the former headmaster of the Neve Shalom-Wahat el Salam school, a unique Arab-Jewish primary school, is the General Manager of the Families Forum.

Our experience suggests that both Israeli and Palestinian youth and adults draw hope and strength from the unique stories of our members. The Families Forum aims to guard the most basic right of all children – the right to life. The Families Forum's educational program («the Program») allows youth to reflect on their personal choices and to consider the tragic consequences of violence on both sides.

Involving more than 20,000 Palestinian and Israeli children during 2004 in more than 870 individual meetings, the Program aims to serve as the framework for nation-wide reconciliation program for all the children of the two societies. The Families Forum present a view of the conflict that is essential to Israeli and Palestinian children. Their need to learn about the humanity of the other side to the conflict is not catered by the current Israeli or Palestinian educational authorities.

The Program aims at integration with the participating schools' curriculum. In many schools, the children will meet with a member of the Families Forum only after several activities regarding the conflict have already taken place. The first meeting leads up to a second encounter, with two members of the organization, one Palestinian and one Israeli. During the first meeting, a short film is being shown («Tears of Peace», available also on the Families Forum's website: www.theparentscircle.org), which depicts the stories of two fathers who lost their sons, an Israeli and a Palestinian. The film ends with the emotionally charged image of the bereaved fathers hugging. The film has been especially prepared for the educational activities of the PFCC, and has proven extremely effective in putting a human face on the other side to the conflict. Following the screening the members of the Families Forum conduct an open talk with the children about his or her personal story in relation to the conflict. The talk is aimed at letting the children express their emotions, ventilating their anger, fear and frustration, but allowing them to view the complex realities of both sides to the conflict.

The children face the difficult questions of revenge, but also the need to understand the position of the «enemy», the other side. The member of the Families Forum allows the children to view to conflict in a more rational light. The presence of a bereaved member of society allows the children to grasp the full implications of their beliefs and thoughts.

The co-operation between Israelis and Palestinians allows the Families Forum to approach each individual class with sensitivity towards the children's needs. For example, at an Israeli school in Natania, a city that has seen many suicide bombings, a girl who participated in a meeting with an Israeli and Palestinian member of the Families Forum, has asked

the Israeli member, how he dares to come with him a Palestinian, as one of her closest friends died recently in an attack. Khaled, the Palestinian member present at the lecture, has spoken to the girl, pointing that he feels he can understand her better than most Israelis, as he has lost two of his brothers, and he too feels frustrated and angry many times. His honest and clear response calmed the girl and allowed everyone present to feel empathy for all the victims of the conflict.

The Program reflects an attention to the needs of Palestinian and Israeli children as persons: the activities differ with different age groups, different local settings and cater for the special needs of each nationality. The Families Forum is not focused on a single sector of the Israeli society, but reflects its diversity, with activities held before Druze, Bedouins, Religious Jews, as well as Christians and Moslem Arabs. With regard to the Palestinian society, recent events allow the Families Forum to gain access to areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority, joining the significant activities already taking place in the East Jerusalem region.

By initiating the project at the meeting with a member of The Families Forum, an organization of victims from both sides, the students are encouraged to break the present dichotomy paradigm according to which each side monopolises its suffering and acknowledges only its own victimhood. In a conference on the social and psychological factors in the Palestinian Israeli conflict held in 2002, Prof. Gabi Salomon, noted that the dangers of monopolising victimhood can be prevented by generating empathy. During the same convention, Prof. Arie Nadler has offered the »mutual recognition of pain« as the tool to prevent the adverse affects the sense of singularity of their own victimhood has on both societies. Such mutuality is one of the goals of the project.

The Program protects and enhances the freedom of speech as well as the freedom of thought of all children involved, by allowing them to express their views in a free and supportive atmosphere. Such freedoms are often missing from the Israeli and Palestinian educational systems. The Program allows children to ask the most difficult questions, and express their deepest emotions and to dialogue with representatives of the other side. The training allows the Program staff to handle these rough emotions, promoting rational thinking and giving hope to the children. In this respect, the children are treated for what they are: children, and not adults. All views are heard with respect, giving the children their right to dignity and allowing them to give such right to children of the other side.

The main idea behind the educational work of the Families Forum is that allowing youth to share the personal loss of the members of the organization creates a deep emotional experience. The Program is aimed at allowing the children to realize that the pain and suffering caused by bereavement is a similar experience for Palestinians and Israelis alike. The activity does not aim to change the political perception of the children, but to allow them to humanize the other side to the conflict. A typical written feedback following a meeting suggests that many children recog-

nize that the activity allowed them to acquire a new perspective on the conflict and the other side. The shared pain and sense of grieving allows the youth to realize that both sides must seek a solution, that the continuation of the cycle of violence must not continue.

The uniqueness of the Families Forum educational activities stems from the credibility bereaved families' hold in the hearts and minds of both Palestinian and Israeli youth. Both languages reflect this unique place. The word »Shakool« in Hebrew signifies those who have lost a member of their families due the war and conflict, while the word »Shahid« in Arabic, signifies, in the Palestinian society, a person who died in the struggle with Israel.

Cynicism and lack of hope, which are often the most common responses of Israeli and Palestinian youth to the conflict and their personal futures, can be changed by the presence of a member of the Families Forum. The ability to provide hope is the most effective tool of the Families Forum educational activities. It stems from the most appropriate and practical grounds – the bonds between the Palestinian and Israeli members of the organization.

2 Partnership and Local Participation

The Families Forum is currently operating on the local level with representatives of the Israeli and Palestinian educational systems. As the situation allows, we aim to achieve wider recognition for the importance of the Program and its benefits for the children involved. One of the main goals of the Families Forum is the incorporation of similar content and methods in future official programs.

The Program is the result of many hours of joint planning by the schools' representatives; The Families Forum involves the educational staff in the school, assisting them in the preparation process leading up to the actual activities, thereby creating an effective partnership with Israeli and Palestinian schools. The Families Forum is constantly sharing its knowledge with the schools involved, allowing all involved to benefit from any improvements.

An additional project stemming from the educational activities of the Families Forum, an advocacy booklet about the children who lost their life because of the conflict, is a partnership with the international organization World Vision. This project intends to develop concepts of trust building and non-violence and emphasize our shared humanity. It aims to offer a message of hope to Palestinian and Israeli children that their communities respect their right for a safe, secure and healthy environment.

3 Evaluation, Research and Development

Each activity ends with the children filling an anonymous feedback form. The forms are being used to evaluate the effectiveness of the activity, as well as the individual members of the Families Forum involved in the activities.

The Families Forum youth educational activities are focused on promoting long term changes in both the Israeli and Palestinian societies. Given the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a quick, immediate solution has yet to be found. However, the thousands of written feedback forms anonymously filled by the children who participate in the Program suggest a tangible impact is achieved.

The Families Forum is constantly evaluating and developing the Program, with the aid of leading professionals such as Prof. Sami Adwan of Bethlehem University and Prof. Dan Bar-On of Ben-Gurion University, both experts on education for peace. The Families Forum operates an extensive training program for the staff of the Program, all bereaved families. The Program is co-managed by Khaled Abu-Awwad and Boaz Kitain, the General Manager of the Families Forum.

4 Adaptability and Replication

The Program has been acknowledged by many for its groundbreaking achievements with extensive reports covering the activities being published throughout the world; The Families Forum has been approached by numerous NGOs, researchers and individuals, asking for advice and inspiration. The Program is offering a new way of dealing with the children's difficult past, both on an individual and national level. The Program's method of operation is rarely used in the Middle East and the Families Forum welcomes any inquiry and dedicates many hours to the distribution of its knowledge.

The Program is operating in the complex conditions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but its message of hope, tolerance and reconciliation has the potential to benefit many other children who suffer from infringements of their basic freedoms of speech and thought. Members of other societies such as bereaved families, ex-soldiers and others, who enjoy unique credibility can benefit the youth of their respective societies by providing them with an opportunity to converge in dialogue on issues which are not talked about.

5 Present and Future Challenges

The Families Forum's educational activities are an intimate affair – they relate strongly to the individual abilities of the members who are partici-

pating in the program and leading the activities. These members are trusted with the difficult task of creating an emotional breakthrough. While the ability to create a long lasting change by such a program is limited, the effects of the emotional breakthrough are not to be taken lightly. A recent letter sent by an Israeli teacher after a series of activities by the Families Forum in his school noted that »it seems that messages that the educators are trying hard to convey during three years of teaching were reaching their targets in an hour an a half, and a feeling of change has been felt by the students«.

The Families Forum success also depends on both internal and external factors: internally, the organization is gradually introducing a more professional approach to its activities, in order to suit the ambitious goals of its educational activities. On the other hand, the recent changes (this article is written during January 2005) in the political landscape in both Israel and the Palestinian Authority significantly aid the Families Forum's work. The changes in the political field are echoed by a change in the consensus in both societies. Such a change allows activities promoting the need for reconciliation to be received with significantly more enthusiasm. Still, as the demise of the Oslo process has though us, changes such as those taking place in recent months can just as easily be reversed. In order to promote a popular support for a reconciliation process, the Families Forum should learn how to use these political changes to its benefit, but also how to work in times when hope is scarce.

Ofer Shinar ist Research Advisor des Parents Circle – Families Forum Bereaved Families Supporting Peace, Reconciliation and Tolerance.