

Creating a New Reality

At the Jerusalem Bilingual School They Insist They're Not a Bubble

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Two years since the arson attack on the school, it seems that the teachers and students have come out stronger for it. A new curriculum teaches the culture and traditions of the three religions, in one classroom with three teachers: "It's very unique; you won't find this at other schools."

The school day opens at the Max Rayne Hand in Hand School for Bilingual Education in Jerusalem School, children are running and playing in the school's open spaces. It looks like any other school, until you begin to notice that the announcements hung on the walls are in two languages – Hebrew and Arabic – and that the school's hallways are peppered with decorations of all kinds, for Christmas, Hanukkah, and the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. You can see Menorahs, miniature Christmas trees, and many other colorful decorations, representing all of the country's religious groups. Welcome to

the Max Rayne Hand in Hand school, more commonly known as the "Bilingual School" in Jerusalem, which was the victim of an arson attack two years ago.

Since the arson attack, whose perpetrators were trying to stop the school and the people who stand behind it, the school – nestled between Jewish and Arab neighborhoods and adjacent to the Teddy Stadium, right in the heart of the capital – has been through a lot. The wing of the school that was damaged by the fire has been repainted, and the white paint has apparently succeeded in covering the black stain left by brothers Shlomo and Nahman Twito, two Lehava activists.

Shuli Dichter, CEO of Hand in Hand [Centers for Jewish-Arab Education in Israel] tells us that the school has recovered from the incident, despite the hardships. "We didn't benefit from the attack; it was extremely damaging, though it was also a test of the strength of our community, and we came out empowered; there was so much support from so many places and in so many different ways. The more they try to defeat us, the more we will grow and blossom," he emphasizes. "There will be many more schools like ours, because it is clear that this is an appropriate response to the situation here, and more and more people are beginning to see it – we have been approached by dozens



"There will be many more schools like this." The Jerusalem Bilingual School. Photo by: Debbie Hill

of places that want to start a [bilingual] school of their own.”

Nadia Kinnani, co-principal of the school along with Arik Saporta (the latter principal of the middle and high-school, and the former, of the kindergarten and elementary school), has been connected to the school for 18 years – first as a mother and for the last seven years as the principal. “At first there was a group of parents who heard about the idea of establishing a Jewish-Arab school. A lot of people were excited about it, and we started as an experimental school in the center of town.”

Three teachers, one classroom, three religions

The school started off with three grades – first, second, and third. As time went on, more and more classes were added, and today the school has about 650 students. The NGO Hand in Hand runs another four bilingual schools [and an additional preschool], in Kafr Qara’, in the Galilee, in Haifa, and in Tel Aviv-Jaffa - with a total of 1,578 students. In the meantime, as part of its ongoing efforts to connect and bridge gaps, they decided to look for the best way to teach about the common ground between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, resulting in the development of a unique curriculum for teaching the cultural traditions of the three religions together. This year, the curriculum was offi-

cially approved [by the Ministry of Education]. The students meet for two hours a week for a lesson with three teachers in one classroom – one Muslim, one Jew, and one Christian. Each teacher independently teaches students about their religion, and once a month there is a joint lesson for all of the students together.

As New Year’s approaches, the teachers in the Heritage and Culture of Religion Program meet to plan the [monthly] meeting. The ten teachers in the program teach in second through ninth grades. They sit in the teachers’ room, over a cup of coffee, cookies, and dates, and discuss in two languages the lesson plan they are preparing for the students. “The feeling of togetherness, belonging, the motif of light,” says

one of the teachers during a brainstorming session, and another one adds: “In Islam, light comes out of the darkness, and in Judaism, light banishes the darkness.”

Under the guidance of pedagogical counselor Aramit Lotem, they search for the common theme of the three holidays. “Everything you have come from us anyways; it’s the same source,” laughs another teacher, whose religious affiliation doesn’t really matter at this point. Ulfat Salman, Nelly Ibrahim, and Hagit Turgeman are teachers in the program, each teaching her own religion. Ulfat recounts that three years ago the program began as a pilot program for second graders, and that, thanks to its success, it was expanded to more and more classes.



From right to left: teachers Ulfat Salman, Hagit Turgeman, and Nelly Ibrahim. Photo courtesy of Hand in Hand.

Does this lesson contribute more than other religion lessons?

Hagit: "The added value is that we first look at the things that the religions have in common, what's in common and what unites them, and only then do we look at the differences. There are shared values, the Creation story, similar themes from the holidays, similarities in the way they see the connection between people, and between man and God, and also the different and special things that make each religion unique."

Nelly: "It's very unique; you won't find this at other schools, only at our

school. We as teachers have learned many new things about the religions."

Ulfat: "We didn't come into this already knowing everything. It has helped us think outside of the box. For example, I had heard about how the Jewish people in the Pass-over holiday were liberated from slavery. In the class they talked about how being a slave and then being freed is not so simple. I had never thought about how difficult it was for people who had been accustomed to being slaves to suddenly be free."

How do you get along as three

teachers in one classroom? Aren't there arguments?

Ulfat: "We're used to this kind of dynamic. We respect one another, respect one another's religion. Even if I don't agree with everything, I respect it because it is her [my colleague's] religion, I don't interfere in her religion. We don't have a debate about what her religion says or what my religion says. As far as I see it, it's like a funnel. You understand that everything is relevant for the three of us."

Nelly: "It's the idea of mutual respect. Here is someone who is different from me, but I must respect



Joint Hanukkah-Christmas celebrations at the Jerusalem Bilingual School. Photo courtesy of Hand in Hand.

her. This is what we want the children to understand.”

Don't the students get confused?

Ulfat: When I teach the fourth graders about the prophets, and we talk about Moses, Muhammad and Jesus, the [Muslim] students have a lot of questions about Judaism and Christianity. It's essential that they hear about the other religions not from me, because I might say it from my point of view, from the perspective of my religion. When they hear it from the other teachers, who represent the other religions, they will understand it differently.”

Hagit: “The lesson helps them make the connections. It's not just one religion and another religion and another religion, but it's like one big desert full of tribes, and we all came from there. I think that with all the differences and uniqueness of each religion, it also connects us. It gives them a good foundation for learning about the uniqueness [of their religion], and it's also true that the teachers learn a lot from one another. For example, the story of the binding of Isaac, which I grew

up on and which there are schools today that choose not to teach it, or at least not to young children. It was a real crisis of faith for me – a father taking his son just because God told him to. It was easier to accept Islam's telling of the story of the binding of Ishmael. There it was clear that this was a test, because in the Jewish texts there is no mention of the word test. In the class, the children were taught that the boy [Ishmael] understood, and that he was wiser than his father. He was a special child with wisdom and understanding.”

Ulfat: “The son respects his father. The dialogue between the son and the father is important, it is important to teach that the father consults with the son.”

Hagit: “In our version you don't have that dialogue. [Or another example:] In Islam, the Creation story is not a story about order – there was darkness and then the world was created. By learning the Jewish Creation story, the Muslim children learned that the moment before the Creation, everything was like a cake with all the ingredients in place. It was all mixed up and he made or-

der. On the first day he created this and on the second day that. It's not boom, magic, but rather, one stage at a time. I think that religions can nourish one another. One religion helps clarify the dark places in another religion, sheds light on them from different angles. There's no way you won't blossom and learn from that. To prevent wars.”

How did you start teaching at the school?

Hagit: “I was a theater teacher, and when my son was about to go into first grade I looked for a school for him and didn't find one. I didn't like all of the public schools and I signed him up for an anthroposophic school, and just then the job opened up here. It couldn't see myself teaching in a regular, conservative school. I'm different, I need something different, something cosmopolitan with values. When the job was advertised I jumped at it and I didn't understand how I hadn't thought of it earlier. It fits me like a glove, I'm a Jerusalem-born [Jew] who's married to a Christian.”

Ulfat: “I got here through a friend of mine who worked at the school and told me that they were looking for a teacher. I've been here for 16 years already. At first the people around me had a hard time understanding what I was doing at such a school. I said that I taught Islam, Arabic, and math”. They said to me, “how can you teach Jewish children about Islam?” I said that I choose what to give to them, what to teach them. I am a model of Arab culture for them and I try to show them what is good about Arab culture and Islamic culture. And that's how I continued, and my three children went here. It's considered the best school in the area.”

Nelly: “I was an English teacher at another school and I decided to leave there and I said that I didn't want to be a teacher ever again.



Santa Claus distributing sufganiyot at the school. Photo courtesy of Hand in Hand.

Then I met Nadia, who told me that they were looking for a Christianity teacher, and now it's been five years since I've been here. I've learned a lot of things, even about my own religion, because for each subject I go into the Internet. My children studied here ten years ago because we believe in the idea of peace and co-existence."

Aramit Lotem, who has been accompanying the program since day one, emphasizes that these are not religion lessons but religious culture lessons. "This is a secular school and we emphasize the fact that the religions are connected to the culture from which we come, even if we are not religious or not believers," she explains. "The children accepted the lesson happily. There is something in it fundamentally based on curiosity, the fact that I don't speak for someone else but that each one tells how it is for her – in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. I don't project what I think on her; this is also a principle of equality – don't tell me who I am, I will tell you who I am."

Are there plans to expand the program to the high school as well?

"Expand? We will need to think more deeply about this, because high school is a different story. The system is complex. All of it really connects to questions of identity; we have a lot of work left to do before we expand."

Not a Bubble

"The school deals with a lot of complex issues," says Lotem. "The children come to school and they like or dislike other children not because they are Jewish or Christian. We have people here who are engaged in a daily act of creating a different reality, showing what is possible. It's not a bubble. It is an educational and social act that contains all of society's complexities, and it deals with the influences of the society we are part of. When things happen outside we don't have a wall that keeps them out. There are many difficult things. But people continue to come here in the morning and sit in the teachers' room together and walk together into the classrooms and treat the children in the class equally, regardless of whether they are Muslims, Christians, or Jews, and teachers don't need to be afraid to come wearing a Hijab or to speak

Arabic."

Elementary-school principal, Kinanni, explains that the school is like a greenhouse. "We think of it as a kind of greenhouse in which you plant seeds. Later on you take the seeds out into a wider field in the hope that you will really succeed in spreading the act and the circle beyond the framework of the school."

"They say that a bubble is disconnected from reality," Kinanni stresses. "It's true that the conditions are artificial. Outside of the school and within the society we live, we are not equal, but in terms of the discourse we are connected to reality; we deal with issues that are related to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, issues of gender equality, multiculturalism. We are preparing them. We cannot always stay in our comfort zone, and sometimes we get into places that aren't so comfortable for us. They have the tools to go out into the world and to make their statements."

How do you see the goal of the curriculum?

"To see what's in common, to highlight the differences. If only the Ministry of Education would ask us to present them with what we've done. The whole idea that you don't know about the other, that you are afraid of him, you build walls and distance yourself. The more you know, the less you are afraid. The subject of religion is a very complex issue, with different worldviews, and each teacher brings her own perspective. The women go through a process and are empowered. They bring their strong voices, which in the past hadn't necessarily been heard so clearly, because we've still got a long way to go in terms of women's position in society. So this is also a place where they are empowered. They are doing very bold work." ■



Heritage and Culture of Religion class at the Jerusalem Bilingual School. Photo courtesy of Pears Foundation.