

An Israeli Thanksgiving

By Rebecca Bardach, 12.8.2013



Like many American immigrants in Israel, I found myself last Thursday night at a table filled with family, friends, turkey and all the Thanksgiving fixings. With this celebratory gathering I realized: Israel has no Thanksgiving equivalent.

We observe a lot of holidays here, but not one that brings all Israelis together the way Thanksgiving does for Americans of diverse backgrounds and origins.

This reflects our larger society: 20 percent of Israel's citizens are Arab, but Jews and Arabs in Israel live largely separate lives. And yet we have citizenship in common. Israeli Arabs hold the same ID card and passport we do. They pay taxes. They vote. Arabic is an official state language alongside Hebrew. We have a future in common. And every day we make choices as to what kind of future this will be.

Four years ago, when my husband and I had to make the decision about where to send our oldest child to school, we faced this dilemma head on.

The Israeli school system is tracked – with Hebrew-language (secular, religious and ultra-orthodox) and Arabic-language tracks. On the one hand, this reflects the major social groups in Israel. It respects their differences and communal preferences. On the other hand, however, it perpetuates these differences, providing no space for students of disparate communities to come

together in a broadly inclusive framework, where they can learn about or from each other, understand their differences, or identify or create common ground.

And if today's students become tomorrow's citizens, what happens when children grow up rooted only in their own community, and without any opportunity to interact with others; to be challenged by and appreciative of diversity; or to jointly forge something meaningfully shared? Those were the realities we faced as we deliberated.

Should we go with the natural choice – progressive Jewish schools similar to the Jewish day schools both of us grew up in? Or consider something totally out of the box: Yad B'Yad, Hand in Hand (HIH), a bilingual Jewish-Arab school? Deep inside I knew there was no debate. We started at Hand in Hand, where two of our children attend today.

It's a school where Jews and Arabs study together.

They learn both Hebrew and Arabic in a bilingual framework. They learn about and observe each other's holidays. They learn to appreciate and celebrate their own cultural traditions and that of one another.

They learn about each other's histories. They learn how to examine things from different perspectives; to ask questions; to discuss; to listen. They learn to debate and to disagree and develop deep friendships.

This has been an enormously rewarding experience.

But it can also be difficult for children growing up in a divided society. But the alternative is no less challenging.

I saw this one morning a year before we had to choose our children's educational path as I entered my son's daycare and the four-year-old brother of one of his friends was playing while waiting for his mother.

He held his hands like a gun. As his mother came down the stairs he called out excitedly: "Mommy, Mommy, I killed Arabs, I killed Arabs!" I looked at his mother – a distant colleague, who worked at a local well-respected think tank – expectantly awaiting a shocked reprimand in this blatantly teachable moment.

"Come, sweetheart," she said instead. "We're late."

And she took his hand and led him off to the car.

The fact that either this did not bother her, or that she could not be bothered to address it is, unfortunately, all too commonplace. For this one anecdote, there are dozens more from my own experience, from friends, from colleagues, that show that it's not just fear and hatred that are pervasive, but so too are indifference and hopelessness about viable alternatives.

The shouts of "death to Arabs" that take place at Jerusalem soccer games and appear on walls

after extremists' "price tag" attacks are inarguably racist.

This type of indifference is far more difficult to contend with.

After all, I don't want my children to grow up hating others because they are not like them, or because they are not Jewish. And I don't want my kids hated because they are Jewish. Above all, I don't want any child in Israel growing up believing that no alternative to this kind of separation and hate is possible.

And I am not alone in this feeling. The Jewish and Arab students, teachers and parents at Hand in Hand to engage in both recognizing our differences, and creating something shared. Which is why we need an Israeli equivalent to Thanksgiving. We need a day that supersedes our differences – a day that can bring us together to celebrate and appreciate the core values and hopes that all citizens of Israel share.

It may not overlap with Hanukka again in our lifetime, but it will nonetheless kindle light in the darkness, and help us repair the divisions that separate us in Israel.

The author is a parent at Hand in Hand Jerusalem school and works at the Hand in Hand organization.