

THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

When a vision of togetherness is a lonely journey

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Starting this week I will be putting my six year old son into a minibus, alone, to school. It seems the driver will be picking up other students along the way to drop them at a different school near my son's school, but he will be the only child going to his school from our area.

A first grader just starting off his school career, he is the only child from our yishuv in Lower Galilee, Hannaton, who is attending "Galilee School," a Hand-in-Hand Arab-Jewish school located in Misgav. We do not live in that region. We live in the neighboring region of the Jezreel Valley. But two years ago — in an attempt to attract more Jewish students — the school opened its doors to children who do not live in Misgav, so we decided to give the school a try for our sixth child of seven.

We've sent children to religious public schools, secular public schools, religious-secular schools, democratic schools, "Tali" (religious enrichment) schools, and Anthroposophic (Waldorf) schools. Ever in search of an Israeli school that will suit our ideological and religious needs, the idea of a bi-lingual and multi-cultural school sounded like it could be a good fit – not a perfect one – perfect would look more like an Arab-Jewish Waldorf school with strong liberal Jewish content and many democratic elements – but certainly a step in the right direction.

Until now, I drove my son back and forth while the school tried to arrange regular transportation for him. The non-profit organization that sponsors this and other schools like it in Israel—"Hand-in-Hand"—promised to cover 50% of all Jewish first graders this year as a way to encourage Jewish parents to send their children to the school. But since we decided to send our son at the last minute, the arrangements for this to happen for my son—who does not live in the same region as the school and therefore is not guaranteed by the State transportation to and from the school—have taken a while to go into effect.

In retrospect, I am glad that this was the case, since it would have been very difficult for my son to make this transition successfully had we put him in a cab by himself the first day of school. While he did meet the other four Jewish children in his class, he met them only twice, and the other 19 children in his class speak only Arabic. I am told within a few months they will be speaking Hebrew, and the children will be able to communicate without a problem (Despite the fact that the

majority of students in the school are Arabs and so is the principal and many of the teachers and staff, the majority culture in Israel is Jewish and Hebrew speaking; therefore the Arab students have more of an incentive to learn Hebrew than the Jewish students have to learn Arabic, and the Jewish children rarely become as fluent in Arabic as the Arab children become fluent in Hebrew.)

Yes, the “Hand-in-Hand” Galilee School cannot seem to attract enough Jewish families from Misgav, while Arab families are waiting in line to send their children to the school. So while the sixth grade has a balanced number of Arab and Jewish children, there are some classes that have no Jewish students at all, and others – like my son’s – that are imbalanced. My son is one of five Jewish children in his class. The other 19 are Arab. And while this is a hopeful sign for the future of the school—considering that last year’s first grade had no Jewish students, so it seems the school’s attempts to attract more Jewish students are starting to work—it still leaves me wondering about this troubling phenomenon.

What bothers me about the disproportionate number of Arabs in the school is not that my son is outnumbered by Arabs. If his being surrounded by Arabs and Arabic bothered me, I would not have chosen to send him to a bi-lingual school at all. What bothers me about the fact that only four other families in the area chose to send their children to this school for first grade this year is the implications of that reality. Why is this the case, and what does it say about the Jews in this country and their vision for the future?

This is the question I and some of the parents of these other four children pondered during one of the meetings we had for the five Hebrew speakers to get to know one another before the school year started. Since all five children come from different yishuvim (and one from Carmiel) and never met one other, and since the Arab children in the first grade class do not yet speak Hebrew, we decided to give our children a chance to meet before school started to make their transition a bit easier.

One father had a very simple answer to the question: “Most Jews do not want their children to go to school with Arabs,” he said quite matter-of-factly. Another father explained that the climate among Israeli Jews is especially unfriendly to Arabs now because of what is happening in the region. Although not logical or fair, to my chagrin, talk of bomb shelters and warnings not to travel in our neighboring Arab countries does not help encourage Jewish Israelis to trust Arab Israelis, even if we are all Israeli citizens.

Another parent, a mother, explained that she thinks the reason is less political and more practical and emotional. The school is located in a rural area that is speckled with yishuvim and Arab villages. Children growing up in the area live a somewhat cloistered existence among their local friends, who become like family during their years in pre-school. To then pull them out of their social circle and send them to a school without these close friends is a difficult choice. So unless the regular regional school is not a good school or is so far from the family’s ideology, or the child is having social issues with the children on his or her yishuv, the simple and smooth choice is to send your child to the local regional school with all of his or her friends. In fact, it is precisely for this kind of more sheltered life for their children that many people choose to leave the city and raise their children on a yishuv, moshav, or kibbutz.

This argument should apply for Arab families as well, however. Arab children in the region also grow up cloistered among their local friends and family. Yet there is no shortage of Arab families in the region who want to send their children to a school with Jewish children. Is this because the Arab schools are not as good as this school or any of the Jewish schools? I don't know enough about the Arab schools in the area to answer that question. But I do know that the Jewish public schools in Israel are not so exceptional that any parent should feel so strongly about sending their child to one of those schools—especially if there is another attractive option.

It is still difficult for me to believe that only three families in all of Misgav (and I am told that this is a relatively good year!) chose this year to send their first graders to this warm and embracing little school at the edge of a quiet forest with a view towards a peaceful valley and a stream running through the garden. The school has only one class per grade, and in each classroom are two teachers—one Arab and one Jewish. By Israeli standards—which is usually about 30 children to a class with one teacher – this is a great set up. Not to mention the fact that for language and cultural studies the children are split up by mother tongue. (They do learn each other's language and culture jointly as well, but less intensively than what they learn separately.) That means that my son will be sitting in a class with only four other children when he learns to read and write this year, and when he studies TaNaCH (Bible). That alone in my book is reason enough to send a child to this school!

For me, however, the reasons were more ideological, of course. I believe that the only chance we have for peace in this country is to educate our children to embrace the “other”; to teach them that we are all human beings who want to live in freedom and peace. There are so many barriers for us to cross before we can truly be friends – a language barrier, a culture barrier, a religious barrier, a political barrier – as well as versions of history that often contradict and have caused pain for everyone involved. But if we do not find a way to cross these barriers, I do not see how we can expect to last very long on this Land.

I am a rabbi, and it is my belief that when we were given the chance to rebuild this country in the ashes of the Shoah, it was not to prove that might is right, but rather to prove that there can be another way—that compassion and cooperation can create a new vision. A new reality. If two warring nations with a history of sibling rivalry can manage to get along, we can prove to be a microcosm for a new world order. I believe this not because it is the most practical or efficient analysis (although I do think it makes more sense than any of the other strategies for peace I have heard so far), but because if I do not believe this, I have no reason to believe in anything. I will have no hope. No redemptive vision for the world. And without a redemptive vision, I have no reason to believe.

When I visited the “Hand-in-Hand” Galilee School for the first time and saw the sign in Arabic and Hebrew that reads “Together a Future for our Children” hanging in the school's entrance, and then thought about the message we are sending the Arab families in this school with the paucity of Jewish children who go there, I wanted to cry. Especially since I know this is the case with most Arab-Jewish programming in this country. My experience has always been that there is a majority of Arab participants and a minority of Jews. Despite the fact that we hear over and over again that it is the Jews who want peace and the Arabs who don't.

It is easy to blame the Arabs for the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict when Assad is massacring his people. It is harder to look around at our neighbors who are reaching out in a gesture of peaceful co-existence and work through daily interactions to build a vision of peace. Yes, it may take some sacrifice and perhaps even some discomfort, but frankly, what looks more frightening to me at the moment is perpetuating the status quo of segregation and mutual estrangement. While it may have been a difficult decision to send my son to a class with only four other students who speak his language, I also knew that by sending him to the school, I could help break a vicious cycle. The more Jewish students there are in a class, the more other Jewish parents are likely to send their children. Sending my son was a leap of faith of sorts—faith in the school and his wonderful teachers, faith in my son and in our family, faith in the other students and their parents, and faith in the future of the country.

On the second day of school, when I picked my son up alone in our nine-seat family van, the first thing he told me was that two boys hit him. They said something to him in Arabic that he did not understand, and when he did not react, they reacted physically out of frustration. My heart sank when my son told me this. So much for peaceful co-existence! was my initial thought. I was sure he would not want to go back to school the next day. I took him right inside the school to one of his teachers to ask what had happened. She confirmed the story but added that she immediately brought the three boys together and explained to them in both languages the situation, and within moments they all said they were sorry and moved on. They “made peace” as the Hebrew phrase for “making up” goes.

My son learned the hard way about how conflict can start from a simple misunderstanding caused by a cultural or language barrier. But he also learned that when the effort is made, this too can be overcome. And the next morning, my son did not say a word about this incident. He was excited to return to school. As I heard him counting to himself in Arabic in the back seat of the car, I smiled to myself.

This was certainly not the simpler choice for our family, and I am not even sure it is the best choice for my son in the short run. The transition from pre-school to first grade is hard enough without being thrown into a bi-lingual environment without any good friends at his side. He is definitely being pushed outside of his comfort zone on a few levels. As am I. But I fear that remaining in our comfort zones will get us nowhere towards peace.

Perhaps that is the answer to the question of why the ratio of Arab to Jew in the school is so imbalanced. Whether we like to hear it or not, Arabs have much less to lose by reaching out towards peace. They are a minority culture in a Jewish country, and sadly, they are not treated equally. That is why it is our moral obligation as the empowered majority to take that step, to be willing to sacrifice and step out of our comfort zones and reach out our hands and “make peace”.