



עובדים סוציאליים לשלום ולרווחה
عمال اجتماعيين من أجل السلام والرفاه
Social Workers for Peace and Social Welfare

The Yaffo Women's Group October 2010 Report

Facilitators: Nader Agbaria and Maya Haskel



*The Yaffo Women's group at their eighth and last conciliation session, October 27th 2010.
Ossim Shalom Facilitators: Nader Agbaria (standing, 3rd from left) and Maya Haskel (standing, 2nd from right)*

Yaffo, a mixed city south of Tel-Aviv, has a very fragile balance of peace. This peace sometimes erupts into violent outbursts, one of the many reasons why ICfC's Historical Conciliation program was so important there. The Yaffo women's group is composed of Arab and Jewish women who volunteer in grassroots programs at the community level. Established six years ago by the Tel Aviv-Yafo municipality, the group meets twice a month to talk about family life and motherhood, youth violence in their neglected neighborhoods, and community projects they should participate in.

Early on the members had agreed not to deal with the emotionally sensitive issues of the Jewish-Arab conflict, so they never delved into the critical issues of pained memory and historical narrative, which can inflame conflict. "*We call these subjects **politics***", says Sara, a 50 year old Jewish member, "*We try to keep our opinions inside, hiding our personal feelings about the cruel reality in Israel and the Middle East.*" Therefore, deciding to undertake the workshop series with ICfC and Ossim Shalom

was not easy for them, but the members of the group concluded they were ready to confront and embrace their broader responsibilities as members of a bi-national group in Israel.

Struggling through the most difficult and painful memories, the group worked with the ICfC/OS facilitators, learning about the root causes of the conflict through their own hopes, fears and concerns and developed a deeper understanding of and empathy for the "other."

"Now I feel that the devil is not so bad", Alia, an Arab woman said, "With the proper guidance from the facilitators we can deal with our differences. Still, it's a delicate situation and we have to take it slowly."

The group's introductory session with the facilitators ended with high hopes and a positive atmosphere, eventually leading to the second meeting - a three hour session focusing on identity. The next session was the much anticipated intensive weekend workshop. The excitement was felt when the women boarded the bus taking them from Yaffo to the hostel in "Neve Shalom," where their facilitators, Nader Agbaria, an Arab man, and Maya Haskel, a Jewish woman, awaited them.

The women, together with Ossim Shalom's facilitating staff, worked intensively all throughout the weekend. Nader and Maya understood that their main goal was to enable the women to overcome their fear of opening up while obtaining a secured and protected atmosphere. Workshops, activities, and discussions were held which bound the group strongly together. On Saturday, the facilitators expanded on the subject of concerns, fears, needs and hopes. Some women used personal stories to explain what fears and hopes meant to them personally.

Maha, a 60 year old Arab member, was one of the women who told her story: "I was raised in a house that held no resentment towards the Jews. My father never had anything against them. But once when I was a little girl, he was taken away. We didn't know where they took him. My mother went to look for him but nobody knew where he was. After 40 days he came back, after being interrogated by Israeli forces. They mistook him for another man. This was very painful and affected me very much..."

Maha continued to share this personal, formative experience: "There is a price for getting close to the Jews. I have a brother that converted to Judaism and now the family is not in contact with him anymore. It tore the family apart. It hurts me. It hurts me to think that his sons will enlist to the IDF and that they might have to fight against our dear relatives in Gaza. I'm afraid that someone will get killed. It makes me think about inter-racial marriage. I'm against that."

The group was fascinated by this story. Although these touchy subjects of identity and historical narratives were raised, the group exercised understanding and support toward each other. "There were many personal stories concerning identity and the conflict that I never knew about. We've been hiding them for years. Now that we talked about them, it gives us some sort of relief," said Sharrifa. The day concluded with a spontaneous birthday party that was held in honor of Shula, a 45 year old Jewish member.

Throughout the series of conciliation workshops, this group of women experienced a profound change in the way they look at the Arab-Jewish conflict. "This weekend really opened us up. We saw that we can disagree and still be friends. It also showed me that we are in many ways similar to one another. The fear of talking about these subjects did not disappear completely, but still it's a very important step for us."

These group members are now using the skills they've learned to expand their bi-national co-existence activities in the turbulent city. These "barefoot conciliators" are bringing the new attitudes and tools to their own communities in order to ensure profound change for the long run.