



Good neighbors may stay

On behalf of the Arab Educational Institute in Bethlehem Els Thissen had been requested to work with Attitudinal Healing with Palestinian people. She gladly reciprocated and left for Israel, accompanied by her partner in all, Anja van Aarle.

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Large parts of Palestine are being controlled by Israel. In the middle of the once lively streets of Bethlehem is now a nine meter high barbed wire wall, there are control towers, cages and armed soldiers. The Israeli policy concerning passes with very long queues, as well as water supply problems create enormous problems for the daily comings and goings for the Palestinians living on the West Banks. This creates an ideal situation to focus on the AH principal 8: *We can choose and direct ourselves to be peaceful inside regardless of what is happening outside.*

We presented a group of Palestinian youngsters -both Muslim and Christian- with a card with this principal and asked them what it meant to them. We were pleased to hear that they have similar sayings in their own traditions and discovered that our intentions are all the same. Living from a state of inner peace turned out to be interesting because - in peace- you are much better equipped to make clear choices in all

situations, even the hard ones. I have no answers to the actual problems these people are facing. And maybe the answers can be found in a changed inner state of being. When asked in the street teenagers answered: 'If the Israelis are good neighbors they may stay, then they don't have to go back.' The Course would say that forgiveness is the only sensible answer to any kind of attack. That is how attack is being robbed of its consequences. Hate simply is no match for love. (T26.VII.17:2-3).'

A solution to problems may occur if one exchanges being right for being happy

A dynamic situation

What struck me in the group meetings was the great connection with religion. Churches and mosks are filled and prayer takes a prominent position. That is why I used the word prayer instead of affirmation: prayer is a



word that is understood. Another difference with regard to work was the difference in group sizes and working hours. Whereas here we start at ten o'clock sharp, over there people are walking in and out, mothers bringing their babies and children with them. In short: a dynamic situation. The focus lies with the family, and the mothers voice everything. They feel a great responsibility and want their children to do well, have a good education, have a healthy life and do well in general. It's a painful fact that the Palestinians have to go abroad for most academic education. And often - since this is a decision that lies with the Israelis- they are not allowed to come back.

Nor are they allowed to fly from Tel Aviv, but instead have to travel 10 hours to a Jordanian airport. Added to this there is no saying how long they will be detained by road blocks and such. This sort of nuisance is to be found on almost every level of daily life. Almost all families have experienced the absence of fathers and sons during times of imprisonment. That is because you can be arrested for no apparent reason. That kind of constant uncertainty, combined with poverty, limited access to good health care and housing generates loads of stress. Yet the wish to want to learn to live together prevails, with both Palestinians and Israelis. And that longing primarily exists within young

people and older females. We heard the latter say: we are not looking for guilty parties, we are looking for solutions to a bad situation. And youngsters refuse to give up hope. We have experienced the Palestinians as a hospitable and open minded people. They enjoy the contact with foreigners so that they won't be forgotten.

Prayer takes a prominent place and is a word that is understood

Giving up being right in order to gain happiness

During a large assembly of females someone told how shocked she was by that day's news. A Palestinian man who was working in Jerusalem fell off his scaffolding and wounded his head. The Israeli who owned that particular house dragged him outside the gates and left him there without medical aid. The man died. I asked the people present to carry the deceased man in their hearts, which they then did; in deep silence. And then I asked would they rather be the Israeli man? After they said no I said: 'If that is the case you may be able to feel compassion for him, and if so you may want to carry him in your heart too.' And once again there was this deafening silence and willingness to comply. I felt truly blessed to witness this. A solution to problems

may occur once people are willing to give up being right in order to be happy. And on the other side of the wall there may also be a great longing for peace. This resonated throughout and gives reason for hope.

We also worked in some refugee camps near Bethlehem. They have been there since 1948 when the Palestinians were driven off their homeland. According to the United Nations resolution 194 they have the right to return. Many of their villages and houses however have already been destroyed or repossessed. If people stick to that right of return there is no guarantee for a solution in this situation. The reason people choose to stay in the refugee camps is because housing, education and health care are free of charge. At the same time it is a different sort of prison. What surprised me the most are the Israelian settlements built on top of the hills of Palestinian land. Walled in, with loads of barbed wire and army controlled, the people seem to be voluntarily imprisoned, even though there is a highway in that area strictly forbidden for Palestinians. The surrounding areas have been repossessed and the Palestinian fruit- and olive orchards have been stripped for the overall security, resulting in a desert of dry grounds.

There are numerous NGO's that contribute greatly to making daily life easier for the population. Also there are people completely committed to projects with which the Palestinian women can generate money. And Milad whom we met leads a non religious after school care center for all children, both boys and girls, Muslim and Christian: they all play music together, sing and dance. In doing so he succeeds in breaking through a number of local religious taboos. We were in a school where mothers were offered to learn to communicate better with their children. This was because this might give them the opportunity to stop screaming or hitting. It was remarkable that the effect was noticed by the men, who then also requested male groups of the same order. There

is a great curiosity to learn to deal differently with each other.

High levels of spirituality

The area around Bethlehem is I think a highly spiritual place. Plans are being made to give a International AH facilitator training. This is the ideal place to practice looking past prejudices to that which connects us, to see the lamp instead of the lampshade. For me also, this was a personal invitation to be present with an open heart under such demanding circumstances.

Fighting over Jesus in Bethlehem is not what it's about. Every religion has its own church or temple where Jesus was supposedly born. Religion is being expressed strongly through clothes and long beards. It might be helpful to walk in one's neighbors shoes for a while or wear their clothes, to really gain understanding. When I realize that Jesus may come to me in whatever and every form it may result in my seeing my own neighbors in a different light. And of course it is up to people themselves to discover this. Shortly after my return I received a call from a Jewish man who's mother had survived concentration camp Sobibor. He had been living in Jerusalem and still had not come to terms with the fact that, years ago, he waved his friend goodbye and the bus in which he sat exploded a hundred

Fighting over Jesus in Bethlehem cannot be what it's about

meters down the road as a result of a terrorist attack. He wanted to be at peace with this and he wanted his life back. I've heard Palestinians say the same. If people want this it's most encouraging. If Anja and I have been of any help that's great. He also asked if we would do the same work in Jerusalem where his son still lives. We certainly would. ♥