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A Year Since the Events of May 2021, in Acco, There's a Demand for Expanding Shared Learning

"Nothing grows where there is hate."

200 schools in mixed cities conduct shared learning of spoken English for Jewish and Arab students. || The project relies on philanthropy, and the Ministry of Education is considering its expansion to additional schools and fields of study. || The target population is 35,000 students and the estimated cost is approx. 50 million NIS. || In Acco, there is a demand for more classes amidst anxiety and tensions around Jerusalem Day flag parades: "You have to know how to react quickly and not to be afraid to convey messages of acceptance and tolerance."

By Omer Sharvit

A year ago, the flag parades in Jerusalem incited riots across Israel, but especially in mixed cities. One of the focal points was in Akko, first with an attempted lynching of a Jew by Arabs, followed by arson of the Efendi Hotel and the Uri Buri Restaurant. The city experienced a major trauma. "Trauma is a gentle word. This was a dream and the shattering of the dream," says Orit Assayeg, Head of the Education Department in Akko City Council.

"We are a city that promotes equality and equity, but the political events that occurred in other places in Israel severely affected us. With the existing high crime rates in Arab society, we saw those who hadn't paid protection targeted with guest houses in the Old City set on fire, and of course there was an anti-establishment trend that led to damaging symbols of government," she added.

The violent incidents in Akko have abated but the tension remains in the air. A painful reminder occurred two weeks ago, with the attack of two Jewish brothers in the Old City. The education system in the city has a major role in the rebuilding of relations between Arabs and Jews, and according to Assayeg, immediately upon the outbreak of the events last year, an action plan began to be developed:

"Nothing can grow where there is hate, and there will be no change. Our job is to educate the children and teach them to mediate disputes. From the major rift in May, we embarked upon a municipal work plan. We lost control of our society, and buildings were set ablaze that night, in the morning we met to do something – principals, teachers, and educational leaders – because education has a major role to play in designing the future. We could not let this be dismissed from the agenda. Despite the pain, we got up in the morning and decided to take care of our problems."



A car going up in flames during the riots between Arabs and Jews in Akko, May 12, 2021, photo: Roni Ofer/Flash90

Education for Shared Living

One of the ways shared living is promoted in Akko is through teaching school partnerships, teaching joint English classes for Jewish and Arab schoolchildren who otherwise would not meet. The program is based on a model developed in Northern Ireland, following years of conflict and separation.

In Akko, the program operates in the three State middle schools, Hilmi Sh'afi, Rose, and Aliya Shniya, all of which are affiliated with the ORT educational network. The meetings between the students occur ten times during the year in a regular time slot of two to four hours.

The original classes are divided into two, and the students are mixed, with new classes formed for the purpose of the program. The lessons are taught by a Jewish and Arab teacher together for each class, and the lessons rotate between the different school campuses.

Shared Learning has been taking place in Akko for several years, and is operated by the Abraham Initiatives. But, the events of May 2021 intensified the need for a program like this that facilitates encounters and builds connections between students from both groups. As Assayeg says, "This is an exceptional program that educates for shared living, but without focusing on the Arab-Jewish relationship, but rather utilizing English as an international language that bridges differences and crosses cultures. Language is a bridge and through English studies the students meet on equal and neutral ground. After last May, we made adjustments to the program and prioritized the training for principals and teachers, they are also going through a meaningful process."

A Shared Learning group of students from Lady Davis School in Tel Aviv and Almustakbal School in Jaffa learning English (photo: Abraham Initiatives Spokesperson's Office)



Waiting for the Ministry of Education budget

The Shared Learning program has been operating in Israel since 2014 run by the Abraham Initiatives in Akko, by the CET [Center for Educational Technology, a partner of Abraham Initiatives] in the Sharon and Triangle regions, and the Education Department of the Jerusalem Municipality throughout the city. The program is based on partnerships between Jewish and Arab schools in the same geographical vicinity for the purpose of promoting shared living, equality of identities, education for diversity and partnership, together with education for peace, multiculturalism, and multilingualism.

The initiative has been endorsed by the Chief Scientist [of the Ministry of Education]. Research conducted by the Chief Scientist's Office on shared learning in Ramle indicated that it promotes tolerance of the other, reduces prejudices, and improves teaching of spoken English - which is the Achilles' heel of teaching the language in Israel.

In total, there are 200 schools in Israel conducting shared learning in cities and regions where there are mixed populations. Approximately 600 teachers and 3,000 students are participating, and the Abraham Initiatives would like to see a lot more.

In a position paper that the Abraham Initiatives submitted to the Ministry of Education, they recommend introducing shared learning in all of the mixed cities – Lod, Ramle, Tel Aviv-Jaffa, Akko, Haifa, Maalot Tarshiha and Nof Hagalil, as well as in areas of mixed regional councils. The track can be a full-day meeting once every two weeks, combining fields such as languages, arts, and technology, or can focus on two-hour meetings on one subject.

In two months, the recommendations of a committee headed by the [Education Ministry] Deputy Director General, Avi Danon, will be submitted to the Minister of Education, whose role it is to consider promoting shared living and the shared learning program is supposed to get a significant push. Yael Maayan, Director of Education at the Abraham Initiatives is also a member of the committee, and last Thursday, she

facilitated a conference in Akko introducing the program to decision makers and key players.



English Shared Learning of Jewish and Arab students in the Misgav and Taha Hussein Sachnin Schools (Photo: Abraham Initiatives Spokesperson's Office)

Together with teachers and students who participated in the conference, one of the brains behind the model, Prof. Tony Gallagher from Northern Ireland, was in attendance, as well as MKs from the coalition, Mossi Raz (Meretz), Inbar Bezek (Yesh Atid), and Moshe Tur-Paz (Yesh Atid). The demand for expanding the program exists, and for that purpose, resources are needed.

As Maayan says, “The situation is such that philanthropy sustains the model. We are limited in the scope of the program only because of this. There are other places that want to adopt the program, but we don’t have the budget. It requires financing transportation, teacher training and teaching hours, as well as much logistical coordination. Within the Ministry of Education, it is believed that this is the way to introduce students from all sectors in Israeli society to each other, not just Jews and Arabs.”

The Abraham Initiatives estimates that the cost amounts to ILS 1,935 per student in the program, with a target population of 35,000 students in mixed cities in fifth to tenth grade. In total, the amount required to conduct the program for one subject for up to one full day [every two weeks] for six grade levels is between ILS 50 to 60 million.



Abraham Initiatives Shared Learning Project conference with MKs attending, Mossi Raz (Meretz), Inbar Bezek (Yesh Atid), and Moshe Tur-Paz (Yesh Atid) (Photo: Abraham Initiatives Spokesperson's Office)

To know how to respond quickly

There is an interest in Akko too for expanding the program, as Assayeg says, “This is a core program that the Ministry of Education must adopt and embrace, and not just allow it to be based on fundraising or what the municipality provides for the matter. It has to be given a place and resources that will buttress its inclusion in the education system everywhere in the State of Israel.”

From her point of view, education for shared society is one of the tools for reducing hostility and promoting understanding within the mixed population. “Shared learning does not suffice for us. We also have shared community forum and shared youth councils. We are a city that deals extensively with this issue in every framework available, from kindergartens through high schools.

“Ahead of the convergence of National Memorial Day and religious holidays in Arab society, we made an effort to bridge between the populations and mitigate tensions.



This included community organizing over Ramadan, with Arab parents and youth workers on the streets together to ensure the safety and security of our youth.

“After last May, we designed a ‘Doctrine for Municipal Learning,’ on how the education system needs to conduct itself the next time a nationalist incident occurs:

“What should principals do, where should they position themselves, what messages are delivered on social media and in notices to students at grade-level gatherings in order to prevent the manipulation of susceptible students by cynical and political forces.

Orit Assayeg, Director of the Education Authority, Akko photo: courtesy of the subject)

“When you manage things and don’t run away, you can cope. There is tension in anticipation of the upcoming Jerusalem Day flag parade, and we shall see how it plays out. You have to know how to respond quickly and not be afraid of conveying messages of tolerance and acceptance.”



English Shared Learning group at the ORT Grinbar School, Tivon and Basmat Middle School, Tivon (Photo: Abraham Initiatives Spokesperson's Office)