

Learning to fight for peace

They meet in a small room with 20-odd chairs placed in a circle and thick curtains to keep the hot sun out. This is where they will interact for three days, while supervisors behind a wall of mirrors observe how relations between the two groups develop. They consider conflicts and discussions between the young people outside this area as 'background noise' and of no real importance to the result of the meeting. The only thing that counts is the dynamic between the two groups inside this room.

This method used by the School for Peace in the unique village of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, midway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, is considered a model for working out conflicts. Hostile groups from Cyprus, Kosovo and Northern Ireland have already spent time at the school, as well as Northern Italians and Sicilians, Europeans and Americans. A comparative study by the Guttman Centre of Applied Social Research concluded that the School for Peace offers the most effective model for Jewish-Arab contacts. Peace experts from Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam teach at the Universities of Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem, and explain at conferences across the world what makes their method so new and promising. Some 35,000 participants have passed through the School for Peace. Four hundred have attended the moderator course and are now working for peace projects in Israel and abroad.

It is not simple to explain how the method works, because it conflicts with daily experience. "Our gut tells us that in order to banish hatred and prejudice people only have to get to know each other," explains Nava Sonnenschein, founder of the School for Peace, "but understanding and sympathy alone aren't enough to solve conflicts between groups." She fought as an Israeli soldier in the Yom Kippur war against Egypt and Syria in 1973 and founded the School for Peace six years later because too many of her friends had "senselessly lost their lives".

The whole point of the School for Peace is for people to confront painful issues. The dynamics of the conflict must become visible; after the sessions no one needs to think that another participant is "a pretty nice guy". It often happens that the emotional split between the groups has deepened. "And yet we achieve our aim," says Sonnenschein. "The participants become aware of the role they play in the conflict. From then on, they can no longer consider themselves as victims."

The first day is the "let's-be-nice-day". Ten girls and six boys, all secondary school students, sit mixed together. Only one or two can be immediately identified as Jewish or Palestinian by their clothing and behaviour. The silent Daniël shows his origins by the star of David he has drawn on the back of his hand while Dror, sitting next to him, is wearing bleached jeans with navel and nose piercings, clearly demonstrating she doesn't come from an Islamic family. Taber and Rabab, however, are dressed in white and their

curls are flattened with hair gel; the outfit Palestinian young people often wear on special occasions.

The Jewish students attend Jerusalem's Rennais-Casal school, which has mourned several victims of suicide bombings. The Palestinians come from Deir Hannah, a village in the north of Israel. They are among the privileged minority of Palestinians that carry an Israeli passport – only 20% of the population. Although these young people all live in the same country, they have never in their lives had a conversation with someone from 'the other side'.

In an effort to change all that, an Arab and a Jewish moderator lead the meeting. "Speak openly, but insult no one," they say, establishing the rules of behaviour, first in Arabic then in Hebrew. Unlike in real life, the Palestinian Israelis are accorded the same status here as their Jewish counterparts. This is the only way to inspire the desired dynamic.

Everyone laughs nervously and with a sense of relief while they talk about hobbies and school. It is determined that in the Palestinian group, everyone believes in God in one way or another, while the Jews include atheists and fundamentalists alike. They also discover that the Jewish parents allow boyfriends and girlfriends to sleep at each other's houses, while among the Palestinians even the boys must obey the decree of their father, who dictates what time they must be home – alone, of course.

After this friendly little talk, the discussion leaders get a sense of how the group is feeling by asking the following question: "What shall we call our group?"

"Friends of Israel", Anran proposes. Anran, age 17, lives in Bisgat Ze'ev, a Jewish settlement in occupied territory, and wants to be a soldier to protect his people against the "killer Arabs". He only came here so he could "air his grievances".

The Palestinians reject his proposal. "We don't identify with the name Israel. Let's call ourselves 'Friends of Peace'."

Dror, 16 years old, thinks that's a good idea. She calls herself "politically left-wing", likes rock music, believes the Palestinians should have the same rights "as we Jews".

"Why can't you identify with the name Israel?" Anran continues. "Are you against the state? Do you want us to disappear or what?" He throws a pen at Taher. "Imagine this was a magic wand, what would you wish for?"

Taher doesn't wish anything, at least not out loud.

"Come on, say it!" Anran's classmates join in to encourage the Palestinian to speak out about his position on Israel.

The Jewish moderator Elenor Amit interrupts them. "First, I would like to establish that the Palestinians are only speaking Hebrew, and secondly that the Jews are talking much more and demanding answers from the Palestinians." Amit, 27 years old, is a psychology student from a right-wing conservative family and participated herself in a workshop in

Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam as a student. Since then, she has been involved in the peace movement.

Behind the two-way mirror Nava Sonnenschein says: "That was an astute observation. From that kind of detail you can deduce the power structure between the two groups: in this room the Jews are the stronger group, just as they are in the state."

Initially Sonnenschein applied the usual conflict management method used in the U.S.: participants express their feelings and try to find similarities. They operated on the principle that you can't argue with feelings. If a Jew said he was scared of Arabs, then Nava Sonnenschein asked the Arabs to try and imagine the Jew's fear and vice versa. The discussions revolved around the roots of the fear, leaving the conflict itself out of the equation.

"The Jews experienced the discussions as artificial, the Palestinians returned home frustrated because nothing had changed in the reality of the oppression," Sonnenschein remembers. Even when a meeting was harmonious, the effect remained limited. "Our brain plays a game with us called sub-typification. If we experience an individual from the enemy camp as nice, we simply declare him an exception and therefore we don't have to reconsider how we see the conflict." Which is why she came up with the current method, which underlines the identity of each individual as part of a group.

The second day. The moderators place photographs in the middle of the circle. Everyone has to select one and interpret it.

Anran chooses a photo of a soldier. "The army ensures our safety."

Dror picks up a picture of two people on the beach. "I see a Jew and a Palestinian having fun together."

Rabab opts for a woman dressed in rags, carrying all her possessions in two plastic bags. "We are an impoverished people. They've stolen our country; we don't have the same opportunities as the Israelis. That has to change if we want peace." Rabab, 16 years old, is tall and slim, wants to study psychology; she came "to find out how the Jewish people really are."

The moderators don't intervene when Rabab says "we" and takes on the role of spokeswoman for her group. After all, this is how the group dynamic gets going.

"How do you know the woman in the picture is an Arab? She could just as easily be a Jew," Anran snaps at her. "You people are always feeling sorry for yourselves. Stop always talking about the past and try and look to the future for a change!"

Rabab snarls back: "You took our land away from us and made hundreds of thousands of people into refugees." The other Palestinians side with her. Dror falls silent while all the others talk at once, start screaming and shift into what Sonnenschein calls the "battle over moral supremacy of the weapons".

Now it becomes a question of who is responsible for the barbaric war: “There will never be peace as long as Palestinians continue to blow up civilians.” Answer: “The Israeli army kills civilians every day.” Defence: “Those are accidents, not intentional.” What follows is a variation on the theme: who started first? Who suffered most? The Jews bring up the holocaust and the pogroms, the Palestinians counter with the occupation of their lands. Both parties take to the defensive and justify their own violence as a reaction to violence from the other side.

The tension in the room seems to be bouncing off the walls. In the observation area behind the two-way mirror, Sonnenschein sits back relaxed, and plays with her glasses. “The Palestinians feel stronger; they are united behind Rabab. That’s an important experience for them. Their demands have made the Jewish group insecure, particularly Dror. Anran has avoided the discussion about land and fled into the battle over moral superiority of the weapons.”

A book that Sonnenschein co-authored with other scholars explains two theories of how group conflicts arise. According to the first, the battle over natural resources is the cause. In the case of the Israeli- Palestinian conflict, the resource is land. The second theory assumes that belonging to a group and increasing self-esteem through prejudice and hatred is part of everyone’s identity.

From the perspective of the second theory, the chances of successfully solving the conflict are markedly gloomier. After all, the conflict is tied up with human nature and doesn’t start with the battle over of resources. Nevertheless, Sonnenschein believes there is a chance: “We can try to heighten the consciousness of every individual around this psychological mechanism and thus reduce the conflict potential.”

Rabab’s accusation that the Israelis stole Palestinian land can be reduced to the battle over the distribution of resources. In the discussion of the deaths of civilians, both groups try to morally elevate themselves above the others and legitimise their own violence. Emotions rise proportionately. The noise volume increases until the moderators interrupt the session and both groups withdraw for individual discussions.

In the Jewish group, despair reigns. “Their eyes are full of hatred,” Anran hisses, “and ours are full of fear.”

Even left-winger Dror is disappointed. “I’m really trying to understand them. But why don’t they denounce the suicide bombings?”

Anet Bayer, a girl whose grandparents were holocaust survivors, says: “We can only survive if we are strong.”

The moderator suggests: “You all see yourselves in a weaker position. Don’t the Palestinians also have their reasons to feel victimised?”

The group disagrees completely. The Arabs are the ones who feel powerful, they are the ones making more and more demands after all: land, return of the refugees, end of the

occupation... "It's fine with me if they're humiliated at the checkpoints!" Anet Bayer blurts out.

"A stalemate" has arisen in the talks is called. Elenor Amit calls for a short break. Even before she reaches the School for Peace staff room, her tension is released in a flood of tears. "I'm afraid every time that I won't be able to get the groups beyond this point and that they'll return home radicalised. That they'll only experience powerlessness and rage without asking about the causes."

Twenty-odd years of binational encounters have given Sonnenschein the smile of the Buddha. She reassures Amit: "It's having an effect on them, just wait." The next day, and again three months later, the students are asked to write their impressions. "Based on comparisons of the two, it appears that they assess the encounter more favourably after some time has passed than after only one day."

After everyone sits down following the break Daniël, the quiet one, discovers he is the only one on the Palestinian side of the circle. He stands up and sits down in an empty chair on the other side. Both groups must now role play that they are negotiating a new constitution. What should the national symbols look like? What rights are given to the Palestinian minority?

Twenty Jewish and 20 Palestinian families found answers to these questions 30 years ago. They founded the village Neve Shalom, "Peaceful Oasis", or in Arabic Wahat al-Salam. The village, home to the School for Peace, proves it is possible for Jews and Palestinians to live together on equal terms. The town hall publications are bilingual, the mayor is alternately a Jew and then a Palestinian, and Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam's primary school is the only one in Israel with mixed classes.

The idea is not to "melt" the ethnic identities. Different identities are in fact emphasised. This is the only way – according to the philosophy of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam – that neither side will feel suppressed and that the experiment will work. Nor does the community avoid conflict. When Tom Kitain, an Israeli army pilot from Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, died in a plane crash in Lebanon in 1997, his parents wanted to erect a monument. The Palestinians were furious: "His mission was to kill our compatriots." A compromise was found: a discreet memorial plaque on the fence of the outdoor basketball court where Tom Kitain often played with Jews and Arabs alike. "In memory of a child of peace, who was killed by war."

Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam has supporters all over the world. In Israel, however, it mainly has enemies. As if to flout the villagers, the Sharon government has planned to locate an army reserve post nearby. Meanwhile, construction of a school building promised by the previous Israeli government has been cancelled.

Many Palestinian groups are not given permission to travel to Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam. Sometimes these sessions have to take place in Turkey, Germany or Cyprus. That is, unless a group decides to take the chance of crossing the border illegally, avoids the checkpoints, then takes taxis near to the final checkpoint and walking several kilometres to get to the village. Anyone who gets caught risks prison, and sometimes a beating.

Those who make it are safe for three days on the neutral territory of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam.

Meanwhile, back at the School for Peace, where these students are attempting to write a new constitution, the Palestinians have managed to negotiate the ability to conduct peace negotiations in Arabic and demanded an interpreter. First item on the agenda: the fate of the more than 3.5 million Palestinian refugees living outside the borders of Israel.

“You can’t seriously demand that they all be allowed to return,” interjects even the left-wing Dror. “Where do you want them all to live? In my pocket?”

Rabab argues that every Jew in the world has the right to immigrate to Israel, even if they’ve never lived there.

“Yes, but that’s already in the Bible,” counters Mariana, the daughter of Russian immigrants who is in fact not religious at all.

Anran stands up and starts to pace back and forth. The monitor tells him he has to sit down. “These negotiations don’t interest me one bit,” he says defensively.

Both groups continue to hold separate discussions and then return to the negotiating table until they hold a role play press conference to present an astoundingly liberal constitution for the new Israel. The official language is English, alongside Arabic and Hebrew; the refugees are allowed back in, but only in the desert areas. Palestinians will have access to all professions with the exception of the terrorist prevention division of the Secret Service. The only thing the group failed to agree on was a name for the country.

At the end of three days, a rose and a branch of thorns is placed in the middle of the circle, which the participants must present – together or separately – to someone from the other group. Dror gives the rose and the thorn branch to Rabab: “The rose because you discussed things with us, the thorn branch because you don’t condemn the terrorism.”

Rabab gives both to Anran: “Because you’re good inside, but you can’t listen.”

Anran gives Taher only the rose: “Because you remained silent.”

For more information on the School for Peace: www.sfpeace.org.

For more information on the village of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam: www.nswas.com.

*The English translation of the book about the School for Peace by Rabah Halabi will be published this year: *Israeli and Palestinian Identities in Dialogue: The School for Peace Approach* (Rutgers University press, ISBN 0 8135 3413 3).*