

Societies Emerging from Conflict – A Process of Reconciliation
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Ladies and Gentlemen:

In this brief intervention, which it is an honor to present before you, I would like to focus on the importance of education in any process of reconciliation – a process that must begin in the midst of conflict and maintain itself while emerging from conflict. The Middle East Children's Association, which I co-direct together with Dr. Ghassan Abdullah, who spoke a few minutes ago, focuses solely on this issue and we have gathered some experience over the years, some of which I would like to share with you. In these few minutes, I will briefly review how I view the concept of peace education, what its functional role is in our society during conflict, and how we propose to use these insights towards a better future emerging from the conflict.

First, by way of introduction, allow me to mention that this time of year is referred to by Jewish people around the world as the days of awe – the time between our New Year and our day of atonement. It is a time of reflection over what was, and great trepidation toward what will be. These feelings are surely ones very relevant to many of us now - in our region of the Middle East, and in places around the world, and even in New York City as we noted this morning. It is interesting however, that with all of the many prayers and ceremonies which are an integral part of the rituals of our New Year, there is only one which is mandatory. This essential portion of the ceremony is not, as one may naturally think, the many prayers emphasizing the good deeds that were done over the past year, nor the atonement for the evil acts which we have committed, it is not even the requests for what is awaiting us in the year to come. The most crucial ritual is the simple act of blowing a ram's horn – what we refer to as the "shofar" – which is supposed to wake people up, to warn them of the importance of this time of reflection. It is an act, which is focused purely on raising questions, not on the giving of answers.

This is how I view the role of education in general or education towards peace and its significance in any peace process. It is not the indoctrination of what is good and what is evil. That is too simple. I can assure you that even the most atrocious acts of mankind, are justified by the perpetrator stating that this is done in the name of values, which we all share. The real task of an educator is to raise the sensitivity in the minds of the students, the future generation, towards the questions, raise their attention, not to a black and white presentation of facts, but to the moral dilemmas and constant complexity of the world we live in.

In a region of conflict, such as our own, and surely around the world, education towards positive values, can easily be translated into maintaining a conflict. If we wish, one can easily demonstrate all evil that we do not aspire towards, as emanating from the presumed enemy, and all good as the aspiration of one's own people. And thus, quite ironically, education towards the sanctity of life, towards human rights, towards national pride, or towards basic tolerance and respect can contribute to a process of hatred and demonization. And so, a process of reconciliation is only possible if we give our students the tools to balance values which may come into

conflict, to always recognize, how the materialization of one value may conflict with another, and how to always be aware of this complexity and how to make the difficult choices which come on the way, with a combination of humility and decisiveness. Our role is, for example, to provide our students with the challenging tools of recognizing that while defending oneself and one's country against a series of suicide bombings and terrorist attacks, one cannot ignore the human rights of the society of those perceived to be harboring them. Similarly, while establishing a national identity and independence, one cannot ignore the sanctity of life of a society perceived to be the oppressor. These are not easy dilemmas, and the concrete decisions, which result from them, are even more complex.

And so education is basically preparing the future generation for a difficult, but essential balancing act. Why is this complex balancing act significant for an emerging peace between Palestinians and Israelis and for all societies in conflict? will state four aspects:

First, by recognizing complexity we are responding to needs of the societies. Children need to grow up with security and stability. It is their right, and we adults must provide this for them. In regions such as ours, we are, unfortunately not yet providing this in the physical sense. But in aspiring to do so, we must work to change this insecurity on the psychological level where we may temporarily have more of an impact. By trying to market false and simplistic solutions to a complex situation, we are heightening the emotional insecurity. By demonizing the enemy, we are teaching the children that we believe things to be clear-cut. Children understand that things are not so simple; they understand that we do not have solutions that are easy, or we would not be in these situations in the first place. By not recognizing the complexity, we make them feel alone and isolated, sometimes even guilty of their own feelings of anger and dismay. Thus, demonization stunts the emotional growth of children. If we share the complexity, to its confusing proportions, we are making room to legitimize a complex viewing of a multi-perspective situation. By modeling cooperation of educators who seek to contend with conflicting issues, without ignoring their own beliefs, we allow for an environment in which others can feel safe to do so as well.

This leads to the second aspect of the balancing act, which is hope. Israeli and Palestinian educators are sadly united by the feeling that the children of both sides have lost hope. There is nothing like the loss of hope to avoid rebuilding a better future, to promote desperate and intolerable acts. We cannot afford to lose hope, we cannot afford not to imagine a better future. The value of education is in creating a microcosm of future possibilities. Our work of Palestinians and Israelis joining together under the threats of violence and hatred is not ignorant of the reality, but rather hopeful towards a future one. The ability to recognize the balancing act restores the hope that we are not hopeless.

Third, teaching complexity gives room to recognizing the value of a process and slow steps towards achievement. Peace is not a concept that emerges immediately with the signing of agreements, or the shaking of hands. Peace is a process and each step, should be celebrated and learned from just like any other process. Just bringing two people together seems to be a basic measure in order to begin thinking about working. For us, the mere aspect of sitting together is a significant achievement. Writing lessor

plans are not the revising of an entire curriculum, but they are crucial steps in creating a basis for future amendments on the educational. These are just several examples what require from us an immense amount of creativity and perseverance. It is important for our future generation to know that just as they slowly learn to read, write and any other skill, so too does peace emerge gradually. We may suffer setbacks, tragedy, but we move forward. As in Xenos famous paradox, each step requires half a step preceding it. Recognizing the complexity allows us to appreciate the value of each step and to have the patience in awaiting the next one.

The final aspect, which I would like to mention, is the importance in catering to different segments of the society. A society is composed of diverse sectors. Sometimes, an otherwise diverse society may unite against a common enemy – to the extent that some probably fear peace. But a stable peace must include societal consensus. If we do not give a generation the tools to recognize differences and complexity within themselves, there can never be a united front towards peace. Peace should not be made by a small groups of people who are not affected by the economic and physical aspects of its potential failure. It must be addressed by a society as a whole, with different viewpoints and loyalties. Only by recognizing complexity, can we legitimately allow a society with diverse ideas to join hands in order to extend them without relinquishing their own national loyalties or identities.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we have already lost many innocent children's lives to the conflict, I request that you join us in promoting through any possible channel that the balancing act of peace education become a critical part of any future political negotiations. Many policy makers will not criticize our work, they may even embrace it, but I fear that it is left on the level of lip service only. Experience in the Middle East has taught us that a peace process without a significant educational component cannot last. From our experience on the grassroots level, I would therefore concretely suggest that any future peace negotiation require several factors. Here are a few specific examples:

- a. A commitment of each government to set up an educational task force (similar to a security task force or an economic task force). Such groups will be comprised of educators and will be involved in viewing how the process progresses and what educational aspects it must address. These task forces of the negotiating parties should also convene together for joint cooperation. (Through my long-term partnership with Ghassan, I can assure you that such a partnership though challenging, is both possible and enriching.)
- b. Require support of the ministries of education towards mandatory teacher training in each subject matter helping each teacher infuse ideas of understanding and tolerance into their own lessons, while addressing their relevance and complexities.
- c. Require that every school to directly expose the students through at least one type of program to the human face of the former enemy. (This is in addition the indirect effect of the massive teacher training which I mentioned above.)
- d. Demand a periodic assessment of textbooks. Textbooks must continuously be revised over time. During a peace process, with the ongoing dynamic changes it brings with it, it is necessary for more frequent updating in an attempt to reflect these changes rather than maintain the past ones. This assessment should be first and foremost internal.

And last but not least, require both governments to make all the provisions in order to ensure that each child is able to arrive safely at a fully equipped school, and to implement the recommendations above.

It is probably the wisest talent of an educator to know when to stop talking, and so I will stop here and open this embryonic list to be further revised and adopted. Our region has suffered dearly in the past and specifically over the past few years. As an Israeli who has seen from close the fear and tragedy which my people have experienced, and as a human being who empathizes with the loss and trauma of all people in our region – Jews and Arabs, Palestinians and Israelis – I believe that we cannot afford to despair, but rather we are obligated to hear a soul stirring sound of the “shofar” - raising questions and listening to the different voices, and providing our children with the tools to do the same.