

Concluding Remarks

The Challenge of Israel's Education System

Every education system, in any society, is supposed to transmit to its students the society's goals and values. In Israel's case, it fosters the belief in the justness of the Zionist enterprise, i.e. the legitimacy of the Jews' return to their historic homeland, to establish a sovereign Jewish state and live a normal life after thousands years of exile and suffering as minority among other peoples. As long as a state of war existed, the Arabs were portrayed as trying to prevent the Jews from realizing their national liberation, acting to threaten their very physical existence and claiming exclusive right to the territory to which the Jews had returned, their historic homeland. The education system had to instill an identification with Israel's positions in the conflict, to the extent of being willing to sacrifice their lives in times of threat to the existence of Israel.

Today - following the signing of peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan and the ongoing negotiations with Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority - the education system has to contend with a complex situation. The nature of the conflict has been changed. It is less intensive but has not yet been resolved. There are contacts between Jews and Arabs on various levels but at the same time violent incidents, attacks and displays of opposition to the Israeli control in Judea and Samaria still occur. Simultaneously, there are attempts to reach peace and build confidence between the two sides, the results of which are still far from certain. The education system needs to present yesterday's enemy as tomorrow's neighbor, with whom relations of mutual respect and peace will be maintained. At the same time, it is possible that peace may not be achieved. To further complicate matters, Israeli society itself is divided ideologically and the authors of the books do not remain neutral on controversial issues. There is no unanimity on the analysis of the development of the conflict, or regarding the price both sides should pay for peace.

The conclusion of this report is that the textbooks which are currently used in the state-run and the religious state-run streams - which together make up 85% of the students - meet these objectives.

Two Languages

A distinction between two languages is discernable in Israeli textbooks: in the state-run and the religious state-run streams, the language is factual without using offensive terms and there is a sincere effort to remove stereotypes and educate towards tolerance. Here there are expressions of sensitivity and empathy towards the distress of Arabs, respect for Islam and for the contribution of the Arabs to human civilization, tales of friendship, stories and poems written by Arab authors, detailed information about the Muslim holy places and the strong attachment of the Arabs to Jerusalem. In a few books there is criticism of the Israeli positions during the conflict. The two main atlases which are used in the schools give updated maps of the areas of the Palestinian Authority according to the accords between Israel and the Palestinians.

In the ultra-orthodox stream the attitude is quite different: derogatory adjectives, prejudices, patronizing expressions and disrespect to Arabs. Two examples reflect the two attitudes:

A first grade reader in the ultra-orthodox stream presents the following story:

"The Holy One, Blessed Be He, came to the Ishmaelites and asked them: 'Do you want to receive the Torah?' They said: 'What is written in it?' He said to them: 'Thou shalt not steal.' They said to Him: 'We cannot accept the Torah, it is difficult for us not to steal.' And so, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, went from nation to nation, and not one of them wanted to receive the Torah. When He went to the Jewish people, they immediately said: 'We will do and we will hear.'" (45, **Everything in its Time**, first grade reader, 1995, pp.233-234)

A seventh grade reader used in the state-run stream states the following:

"Many people think: The dove is a bird that pursues peace. This belief is incorrect; it is a prejudice: people believe it without checking it. There are a lot of prejudices. For example:

1. The Jews control the world and exploit all those who live in it.
2. The blacks are inferior; they are incapable of being scientists.
3. The Arabs only understand the language of force.

During the year, make a long list of prejudices. Write them down and keep them in a special folder called, 'That's what they say, but it is not true – prejudices.' Try to find a drawing or caricature that fits each prejudice. Be ready to explain orally why these are prejudices." (78, **I Understand**, 1993, p.259).

The Common Beliefs

It should be emphasized that there are fundamental beliefs common to all the textbooks, despite the differences mentioned.

The books of all the streams share the basic values of Zionist ideology that the existence of a sovereign Jewish state on the territory of the Land of Israel and immigration of Jews to it (Aliyah) are legitimate and justified. This belief is taken for granted even if not all of them use the Zionist terminology. In no book is there any indoctrination against the Arabs as a nation or call to violence. All of the books express a yearning for peace and for an end to war.

A Hope for the Future

"We did not have a common language, but the hatred of the adults also had not affected us yet. Children's games do not need words," says the narrator in a story about his friend Abed, who disappeared after the war started. Removal of prejudices, derogatory terms and suspicions from textbooks is one of the steps that need to be taken to prevent hatred from attaching itself to adults as well, and to promote mutual understanding and respect between the peoples.

The objective of this report is to support the realization of this hope.

