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Sparks of Change/Oranim Project 2017 Summary

"We came here to show the American people that in spite of the conflict between Arabs and Jews... we can live together."-Sparks of Change 2017 participant

In spring 2017, Oranim College International School facilitated the second annual Sparks of Change delegation of Jewish and Arab young people from Israel to the United States led by Dr. Roberta Bell-Kligler. The program included encounters with American school students (Jewish and non-Jewish), home hospitality, and touring. The program aimed to promote coexistence and to help American students better understand Israeli society, life in Israel, and Arab-Jewish relationships.

Growth of Program

The delegation from Israel expanded from four high school students in 2016 to six students and included an education student from Oranim College, enabling the delegation to expand its reach to impact future teachers of Israel. One Arab and one Jewish teacher accompanied the students. In response to feedback from participants last year, the preparation for the delegation that occurred at Oranim College prior to travelling to the USA was expanded to include more hours of preparation and deeper exploration of certain issues, including the history of Israel and diverse narratives. Students also had the opportunity to practice speaking English on relevant issues. The preparation sessions were led by Oranim College lecturers.

Surveys

The goal of the surveys was to evaluate the program and its impact on participants.

Pre-Travel Questionnaire

Prior to their travels, participants wrote about their expectations for the program. Many of their expectations centered on the connections that they hoped would develop between the Jewish and Arab members of the delegation.

They hoped that these relationships would enable them to be more aware of and understanding of the "other" side. As one Jewish participant wrote: "I'll be even more sensitive about the conflict and the Arabs in Israel and I will understand their side."

These new connections and understanding have the potential to impact not only the participants in the program but others as well, including future generations. One participant wrote: "I will teach my kids in the future."

Participants looked forward to sharing their message of coexistence with people in the United States: "to show the people in the USA that Arabs and Jews can live together." Others wanted to "help them get the real idea about the Arab-Israeli conflict".

Participants also looked forward to learning more about American society and American Jewish society in particular.

Post-Travel Questionnaire

At the end of the program, participants reported a high level of satisfaction with the program as a whole. As one participant responded when asked about whether or not to recommend the program: “Definitely! It was an experience of a lifetime.”

As hoped, one of the highlights of the program was the friendships made between Jews and Arabs on the delegation. One wrote: “This trip showed me the good side about the Jewish people that live in Israel and that we can live together and be... friends.” All of the high school students who participated in the program wrote that they intend to keep in touch with the Israelis from the other school.

Participants reported that SOC helped them to understand the other sector better. All participants responded positively to the question: “Following the delegation, do you feel that you understand Jewish teens better (if you are Arab)/ Arab teens better (if you are Jewish)?” One wrote: “It’s really interesting to know more about your neighbors.”

This understanding led them to have more positive attitudes toward people from the other sector. As one Jewish participant wrote: “Before the trip I never spent so much time with Arabs. I understand that they are good people, people who want to live in peace.” Another wrote that understanding the other’s culture showed how much they shared: “I learned a bit about the teenagers’ culture and lifestyle, that it is almost identical to ours.”

The education student from Oranim pointed out that this increased understanding and acceptance applies not only to Jewish/Arab culture, but any culture that is different than our own: “If people live in Israel, in a country where they encounter different cultures all the time (not only Jewish and Arab), they need to learn to understand and accept the culture of others.” We hope that as an educator she will share this increased understanding and acceptance of other cultures with her students.

At the same time, when asked to describe the trip’s impact on their thoughts about coexistence, many participants wrote that the trip made them see the challenges of coexistence. One wrote: “I realized that it’s gonna be a long and hard process.” Another wrote: “It will be very difficult to change the situation.” Similarly, one participant explained: “This trip made me develop a more realistic opinion about the situation in Israel, based on more facts.”

Despite the challenges, participants saw sharing the message of coexistence as the most important part of the trip: “The best thing that we give is our message about coexistence.”

Participants took home lessons from what they experienced in the United States. They saw American society as openminded and accepting, and believed this could be a model for their own society in Israel: “It is a great society they are openminded... and that is how we should be.”

Participants look forward to sharing what they learned, and particularly the message of coexistence, with their communities in Israel and the next generation. They feel committed to pass along the knowledge and understanding they gained. In the words of the participants: “We must share [with] the world our message and... let it continue with the next generation;” and “I will show them that it is very easy to coexist with Jews when we left the politics far away from us, and we must live together.” Participants wanted to share their hope for change: “I will share it to change the idea of many Arabs that hate Jews” and “I will tell everyone that I think that they can change and... Arabs and Jews [can] live together.”

Two respondents said that they planned to give a lesson to students at their school about what they learned on the delegation. It seems that the program motivated participants to want to work to bring about change.

Although we did not survey the Americans who participated in the program, quotes from the Baltimore Jewish Times article demonstrate how the program impacted their understanding of Israel and the Jewish – Arab conflict. One American teacher interviewed said: “I think a lot of [the American students] are surprised that so many Jews feel isolated from Arabs who live right next to them.” An American student explained: “The separation of church and state is something that we take for granted... The religious ideals really seep into politics in Israel, and that seeps into a lot of the bad feelings between Zionists and Arabs. That’s something that I didn’t think much about before this program. It’s hard for me to understand, because Israel is so small when you look on a map, but it means so much to both of these groups. It is pivotal that there is a nonviolent compromise, but I don’t know what it is.”

Recommendations for the Future

Based on the success of the 2016 and 2017 programs, we recommend expanding this project to other countries besides the United States in order to increase its impact. Certainly, we recommend increasing the number of high schoolers participating in the delegation as well as involving more students from Oranim College. We hope to open a course next year that will train Oranim students to work with the Sparks of Change delegation. By reaching out to future teachers of Israel, we can impact not only the students of education themselves but also the hundreds of Israeli children that they will teach in the future.

Edited from report by Rachael Schultz, Director of Program Evaluations, Oranim International School