



## **HUMAN DIGNITY IN ISRAELI ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: A RATIONALE FOR A PROJECT IN NINE SCHOOLS**

### **THE SETTING**

Respect for the dignity of every human being is a core Jewish, Israeli, and universal value. As stated in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "*all human beings are equal in dignity and rights.*" Yet in many countries, including Israel, the respect for human dignity is in deep trouble.

Once we lived here with the sense of a small, intimate society, characterized by strong social cohesiveness. Despite social strata and economic difficulties, Israel had always enjoyed a pervasive sense of national intimacy, what sociologists call "an assumption of relationship," a general feeling that we are all connected and that we care for each other. The national atmosphere has shifted. While in moments of crisis one can still feel the connectedness, today, alienation, anxiety and apprehension are now part of the national tenor.

Behind this shift is a host of factors. Among the most important is the fact that for forty years we have occupied the cities and villages of millions of Palestinians. The occupation has impacted on who we are and on how we behave as a people. Leading Palestinians and heads of the Israeli security service describe humiliation as a main cause of the Palestinian uprising. Inevitably, some of our soldiers actively humiliate Palestinians, going far beyond the immediate demands of their jobs. Hundreds of thousands of our youth have been "schooled," during their army service, in the use of force against another people.

The struggle with the Palestinians has taken a toll on our national resilience. In the wake of the recent Intifada, we continue to be a people troubled by a terrible economic situation and by the constant fear of terror. According to the Israel Center for the



Treatment of Psychotrauma, Israelis live today with an awareness of "long-term emergency..... In a long term emergency situation, the whole of society is exposed daily to constant and ongoing threat to our personal survival, either through direct personal experience or through the media. This situation of constant threat affects all areas of life: going to school or to work, going out for the evening or even just walking down the street. Many people fear for their safety and the safety of their children, even during activities that used to be every day, such as spending time with friends."

Israelis tend to be vital, spontaneous, joyous and warm. And yet, today, common decency in daily social interactions is for many of us a fond memory. Many of us actively disrespect each other's human dignity. Some examples: Between 1980 and 1999, national police statistics show that overall incidents of physical threats multiplied times six, and incidents of actual violence tripled. One million Israelis live today in families in which the man is violent towards his wife. A recent study showed that 57% of the public believe that sometimes women deserve to be beaten. According to public opinion surveys, most Israelis think that our outstanding characteristics are crassness, loudness, and lack of consideration for the other. There are overwhelming accounts of dignity-abuses in the treatment of foreign workers, new immigrants and the Arab minority. In a Sikkuy-commissioned study, 68% of secular respondents thought that religious people relate to them with disrespect and 46% of religious respondents thought that secular people relate to them with disrespect. 58% thought that public officials accord little help to citizens. 65% of respondents aged 18-21 thought that in the IDF humiliation of soldiers by officers was quite prevalent.

We cannot seek a behavior model among our national leaders. Teachers shout at unruly students: "Be quiet. This is not the Knesset!" The Israeli Knesset (Parliament) members are seen by many as *negative* examples of behavior. They have earned this distinction. A senior Knesset member was quoted in the press as he attacked a new female Knesset member on the floor of the Knesset: "If I had a daughter like you, I would kill my wife!"



Another Knesset member, regarding one of her colleagues: "She behaved like a dog."  
The Deputy Finance Minister was quoted regarding the protest of disabled Israelis: "They want a government grant? Let them run to the national Insurance Agency."

## **HUMAN DIGNITY IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:**

### **WHY IS THE PROJECT RELEVANT?**

Inevitably, Israeli schools reflect the shift in the national climate. An international study places Israel among the leading countries in the Western world, regarding the level of student violence in Israeli schools. However, the problem also includes the teachers' approach to their students. In a 1998 survey of 1,600 Israeli students, 57% stated that their teachers do not respect them. A 2002 study shows that 13% of elementary school students have been grabbed or shoved by their teachers. 14% have been pinched or slapped by teachers, and 9% have been punched or kicked by their teachers. Insulting teacher behavior was shown, in a recent survey, to be the leading cause for students' generally "feeling bad" at school. The Person to Person human dignity project is designed to address this state of affairs.

Change is incremental and difficult to achieve. And yet change there is: Halfway through a three year Person to Person dignity project, the 900 students of a Jerusalem high-school reported an initial 15% improvement in the "human dignity quotient" reflected in their teachers' relationships with them. A four year project in a Jaffa technological high school, in a disadvantaged community, showed that scholastic achievement improves as a result of their human dignity project. Students study better and teachers teach better when the school climate enhances respect for human dignity. Person to Person commissioned an independent study among pupils which demonstrated that, in schools where serious work on human dignity has taken place, the level of violence is significantly reduced.



## **HOW DO WE DEVELOP A CLIMATE OF HUMAN DIGNITY IN A SCHOOL?**

We seek change in every area of the school. In one depressed neighborhood, at the end of a dignity workshop for the elementary school's Student Council, a sixth-grade girl commented that "We really have *two* schools here – one in the classroom and one in the playground during recess. You have to reach the playground if you want to make a difference here."

This is one of our central goals: to "reach the playground," where no teacher is nearby, and where only students' commitment to dignified behavior will make the difference. We work through the school hierarchy, with the understanding that behavioral change is linked most importantly to the personal example of those who hold power. Thus, the management team is trained to model dignity in their dealings with the teachers, the teachers with their students, the student leadership with their fellow students.

Proceeding "top-down," beginning with the management team, we operate along two major axes:

1. Raising awareness of the need to respect the human dignity of every person in the school, identifying where dignity is lacking and practicing new, dignified and dignifying behaviors.
2. Implementing visible, structural changes in the daily routine of the school.

The approach is based on the conception that consciousness-raising without tangible change tends to evaporate, while organizational changes without consciousness-raising tend to be technical and superficial.

We guide the staff through a series of workshops in which we enhance both the awareness of dignity and dignity-abuse in the daily life of the school. Awareness encompasses the minor, daily interactions – cliques in the teachers' room, sexist remarks of teachers toward each other, lack of cooperation – and also the significant transactions, such as the degree to which the principal includes staff in making policy decisions.

We assist the staff in crystallizing their "human dignity vision," and then join them in choosing a new organizational structure whose implementation will ensure that dignity



becomes an integral part of everyone's daily lives in the school. For example, a school may choose to institute a student-teacher Parliament or a program of student-led mediation. We often accompany subject-teachers in bringing forth human dignity issues in the curricular material they are already teaching.

Teachers are urged to examine their teaching approach in a fundamental way. In the midst of her human dignity training, one fourth-grade teacher decided that taking homework assignments from children was questionable in terms of their dignity, and she began allowing the children to choose whether to give her their assignments. The change brought a shift in the children's attitude, and she continued to receive assignments from most children, enabling her to approach the children who were ashamed or reluctant to turn in their assignments.

In addition to our focus on internal school issues, we often support the staff in reaching out to parents, including them in the raising of awareness of the importance of human dignity in the relationships with their children.

## **CONCLUSION**

The development of human dignity as a core behavioral value is crucial to Israel's future as a humane, caring society. In a workshop for officers in an IDF training base, one colonel commented: "It's good that you are here, but the *real* need for this work is in our elementary schools." We believe that the opportunity to advance human dignity in nine schools, in disadvantaged localities, holds the potential to demonstrate that the implementation of in-depth human dignity programs can make a significant difference in the outlook, in the level of hope, and in the daily behavior of populations in which "common knowledge" holds that dignity is likeliest to be a forgotten value.

The narrative documenting of the successes, difficulties, and challenges of this initiative's implementation will furnish a wealth of data and insight into what it is that enables a school to become a model and a source of human-dignity advancement in its community.

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