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Learning beyond Borders

Alex Altshuler

I was involved in the Learning Exchange Network project mainly during the years 2007–2008, both as an active participant and as a member of the Social Justice and Civil Society committee, in the framework of the Haifa–Boston Connection. I was inspired by the spirit and commitment of both the Boston and Haifa leaders. At that time I coordinated recovery projects at the volunteer organization SELAH–Israel Crisis Management Center, which focused on immigrants in Northern Israel following the Israel-Lebanon war in 2006. SELAH’s core mission is providing essential assistance and emotional support to immigrants who face crisis situations; its involvement in postwar recovery processes in Northern Israel was very intensive. In addition, I developed and coordinated a newly established project on integrative emergency preparedness at the Center for Social Responsibility of the University of Haifa. My involvement in the Learning Exchange project began after a two-year involvement in the Open Apartments project, which was supported by the Haifa–Boston Connection and other partners. This project aimed to empower people in the poorer neighborhoods in the city of Haifa through student-initiated projects that included both guidance and project development. My personal involvement was mainly with the immigrant youth-at-risk. I brought this experience to the Learning Exchange program; I learned much, much more than I brought.

One of the important impacts of my experience participating in the Learning Exchange was the transformation of my internal models or “borders,” which were substantially challenged. Some of those dimensions of change are clear. First of all, it was remarkable indeed on the local level in Haifa, for all of us — Jewish Russian and Ethiopian immigrants, Arabs, Israeli-born Jews, women and men, senior citizens and youngsters — to sit together not “just to talk,” but to address critical and controversial

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social and national issues. This dialogue was not just among the people who were present at that moment in the hall, but to some extent it was a dialogue between larger groups since the participants had leadership positions in their organizations, communities, and other arenas. We were able to take our experiences to all those larger circles and in so doing bring some new “colors,” thoughts, and ideas to those environments. The change of the mental borders for me did not mean that I lost my identity or changed my opinions, but it definitely meant that I know much more about “the other,” my internal world became richer and I received some kind of a key to other circumstances, histories, customs, and much more. By no means easy or ideal, this process was a very deep and important one for me.

The other dimension or circle that served as a very powerful impulse to building bridges and to changing the borders was the meeting between the American (from Boston) and the Israeli (from Haifa) groups. These very meaningful and powerful experiences were characterized by fruitful professional and interpersonal dialogues. I discovered that the issues of poverty and food security, present in Haifa, were also very much present in the Boston area; I could see the U.S. and Boston ways to deal with that (for example, the activities of the Greater Boston Food Bank). Other organizations, such as Project Hope, Hyde Square Task Force, and others we visited were also very inspiring. I discovered that the issue of security is unfortunately very “hot” in both countries — in Israel resulting from wars and terror, and in Boston mainly resulting from community violence. The challenges for immigrants in the two countries were both similar and different, as are the organizations that address immigrants’ needs. Their operational forms are different, but the same fundamental passion inspires the leaders — to address people in need through a very complicated process of transition.

My experience with the Learning Exchange was by no means only professional or intellectual; it was deeply personal. Frankly speaking, I did not feel myself to be simply a guest in Boston, but rather I felt welcomed as a friend — just a great feeling! The hospitality was more than warm! I felt that I came to Boston to learn from friends who have the same basic goal — to make our social reality around us at least a little bit more welcoming and secure. Indeed, we live in a very small world, which is characterized by so many divisions. I am not against these divisions. They formulate our identities and constitute us. They are important. But we have to look beyond them and build bridges across our separate identities. I believe that we may feel (and be) both united and different. One small story from a discussion in Boston reflects many of the elements of that jointedness. I had multiple talks in Boston with Fannette Modek from Haifa, who represented the Seniors Lobby. Surprisingly, there, in Boston, I discovered that she also has Russian-Jewish roots and we spoke a little bit in Russian (two Israelis speak Russian in Boston). I understood that, with her young soul, she should be in the Youth Lobby. It is just an unexplained mistake that she is with the Seniors Lobby. I learned from her, in Boston, a lot about her efforts in providing

assistance to Africa, an issue that interests me greatly. I learned much, much more from her. Unity and peace in the world is possible if we just could have much more dialogue. The “dialogue” was the key word for me in the Learning Exchange project.

My personal and social insight from the project may be formulated in various ways. I prefer to think of the impacts on me in a simple and symbolic way: We are similar and different at the same time; we can learn a lot from “the other” — various “others” in different situations — if we have a need and the passion to do that. We really need people who will enable that process and will “open the door.” Let’s keep learning and “opening the doors” for others in every single moment we have within our reach!

