

To our friends, reflections on Hiroshima,

Open House and Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salaam (NS/WAS) were invited to an international conference in Japan by the Buddhist Japanese Organization "Miyochikai". This was done through its Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) , a foundation for the ethical development of children worldwide.

Together with Khader Al-Kalak, Vivian Rabia, and myself from the Open House staff were Bissan Salman, 16, and Gal Berkowits, 17, as representatives of a multicultural program, supported by the GNRC, that Open House , and the Spiritual Center at Neve-Shalom sponsored in the Summer of 2007. The conference was held in Hiroshima between the 24th and 26th of May, 2008.

Two hundred people representing organizations working for children from all over the world were invited. Many of the participants were familiar to us from previous conferences. After the Hiroshima conference, Gal, Bissan, Khader, Vivian and I from Open House and Dorit Shippin from NS/WAS were invited to address students at the University of Osaka.

I had been worried about coming to Hiroshima. I was afraid of feeling exposed to its past in ways that would overwhelm me. However, immediately on arrival, instead of the expected heaviness, I felt an unusual clarity of atmosphere. I walked to the Peace Park. Standing in front of the Cenotaph, a simple arch with a dark marble chest placed in it, I read this stone inscription:

" This monument was erected in the hope that Hiroshima, devastated by the world's first atomic bomb on 6 August 1945, would be rebuilt as a city of peace. The epitaph reads 'let all the souls here rest in peace; for we shall not repeat the evil.' It summons people everywhere to pray for the repose of the deceased A-bomb victims and to join in the pledge never to repeat the evil of war. It thus expresses the 'Heart of Hiroshima' which, enduring past grief and overcoming hatred, yearns for the realization of true world peace with the coexistence and prosperity of all mankind. This monument is also called the the 'A-bomb Cenotaph,' for the stone chest in the center contains the register of deceased A-bomb victims ."

What really stunned me was that this was written on the 6th of August 1952! How could people write such words so soon after, when the ashes were still smoking...? Are they sincere? Throughout my stay in Hiroshima this became for me a central question: Is the inscription on the stone also an inscription in the heart?

As the days passed, I realized that the Peace Park with the Cenotaph at the center was a place of pilgrimage and prayer for thousands who visit this place every day from all over Japan. Sometimes, one can see foreigners there, too. The two small museums

in the park, while telling what happened, are simple and low key. On visiting, one feels deeply moved but not overwhelmed. I was struck by the freedom from blame, both in the museum exhibits and the pervading atmosphere of the city. I could see the early determination of the people, after what must have been an overwhelming trauma, to rebuild both their city and themselves.

How could they manage to pull together their inner resources to work for their present and future when the pain and loss must have been so severe? On a small wall in the museum there were the many letters that mayors of Hiroshima had sent to the leaders of every country that had conducted a nuclear test. These poignant letters of protest were also a heartfelt plea against future tests.

For me, Hiroshima is no longer a symbol of destruction, but a symbol of transformation. I realized that what they had written on stone was in their hearts, too, that they have turned their well remembered, well recorded experience into a witness for humanity--a witness that such a thing should never again happen to anyone. But how, how have they overcome hatred? How have they turned their grief into an offering?

I was naturally reflecting on our situation back home...because we Israelis and Palestinians are held in bondage by the past and are not free to build ourselves in the present. We are prisoners of grief, blame and rejection. This is so understandable, yet so tragically counter-productive...

With the questions, I will carry the inspiration of Hiroshima with me.

Shalom, Salaam,
Dalia

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