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Olympics for peace

By Ariel Rubinsky

At the edge of Gan Hashlosa (Sahne), there is a hidden archaeology museum that houses rare items from Ancient Greece. But even there, people are not used to the past coming back to life as it did, in the symbolic sense, at the Peace Olympics held last Saturday on the museum lawn. Some 200 children, aged 11 to 12, all of them students at Waldorf schools (adopting anthroposophist education), attended. All of them were dressed in white robes, much like those worn in ancient Greece, and competed in the pentathlon, the five main sports of the ancient Olympics: the javelin, discus, wrestling, running and long jump. The children spent three days in the area, slept in tents and trained energetically. Yet the event did not emphasize competitive values and winning, but rather the beauty of movement and the harmony among contestants.

"We nurture the social issue, everyone's personal achievement contributes to the group," explains Amin Souad, a resident of the Bedouin village of Souad Hamira. Souad is a physical education teacher at the anthroposophist school in Kibbutz Harduf, next to his village. "The goal is to neutralize the whole issue of competitiveness. The children don't even deal with the results, what they focus on is the beauty, the quality of the performance. In so doing we turn the javelin-throw, for example, into an aesthetic act and separate it from its original function as a tool of war."

And indeed, no major sports records were set at the event and no one bothered to record the results - but the atmosphere was one of sportsmanship. The children, who came from six different schools in Israel, were divided up into groups named after ancient Greek cities. Very quickly they began to evince loyalty toward their new peers and soon cheers for "amazing Ithaca" filled the air.

The Peace Olympics not only highlight the ancient Olympic sporting event, but also the Ekecheiria - the sacred Olympic truce that prevailed among Greek cities for the three months before and after the Olympic games. In fifth grade, the students of anthroposophist schools learn about the polis in ancient Greece, the Ekecheiria, and how sometimes the victor of the games would return to his city, and the city walls would be destroyed because contemporaries believed

that no one would dare attack the city of the Olympic champion.

Destroying the city walls

"I think the story about destroying the walls is a legend, but myth can be taken as truth, regardless of its historical founding," says Dror Segal, the director of Sahne's Museum of Regional and Mediterranean Archaeology, where the events were held. "In Israel, for example, generations were raised on the myth that, 'It is good to die for our country.' And so it is of little importance whether [Joseph] Trumpeldor did indeed make this statement or whether he blurted out a Russian curse before his death. The same is true of the Ekecheiria; the idea is nice and it's important to nurture peace, tolerance and solidarity among children."

Building bridges

This is the guiding principle of the All in Peace organization, which in recent years has organized two children's festivals in Greece in the spirit of the Ekecheiria and is inaugurating a peace center at the Sahne museum this week. The festivals in Greece were attended by children from several conflict regions - from Kosovo to Bethlehem. They participated in a week of pentathlon games in the spirit of ancient Greece, based on a belief that the power of sportsmanship can bridge different cultures and communities.

The idea for All in Peace (a variation of the word "Olimpeace," which the International Olympic Committee forbade them to use) was born in 1999 at a conference on peace education at Kibbutz Ruhama in the Negev. This conference was attended by peace activists from all over the world, including Eyal Bloch, the principal of the anthroposophist Adam School in Jerusalem, and Amin Souad. Bloch and Souad suggested holding an international gathering of children in Greece to compete in the spirit of ancient Greece, much like the games held at Waldorf schools. The idea won the support of the Greek government and others, and in 2001, the first peace festival for children took place amid the ruins of Olympia in Delphi, Greece. Some 200 children from Kosovo, the Republic of Ireland, Greece, Egypt, Cyprus, the Palestinian Authority and Israel attended. The event was deemed a success and another festival was held in 2003.

Souad says that some of the ties established among the members of different communities after the events remain until today, including groups of Turks and Greeks in Cyprus, and children from Bethlehem and Jerusalem. In the years since, All in Peace has been working to spread the idea of Ekecheiria as a means for building a bridge

between communities from conflict regions.

The peace center in the spirit of the Ekecheiria, which is to be dedicated this week at Sahne, is intended to serve as a center for disseminating the idea and for holding seminars and workshops on the subject for teachers and other groups from Israel and abroad.

But Souad stresses that post-workshop implementation is up to the participants: "We spread the idea, but the real work has to be done by the conflicted communities themselves, each in their own city or country."

The age of the children participating in the Peace Olympics was set at between 11 and 12 based on the Waldorf method, according to which children start to turn into teenagers at this age but are still at the point before their muscles start to develop. "At this age, the children's movements are marked by unique beauty and harmony. That is why we believe they're in the 'Greek period,'" says Souad. "We believe that once the competitiveness is neutralized and the focus is on harmony and nonviolent communication between people, you create an experience that changes the participants. This change slowly spreads and will eventually impact the entire community."

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