

Reprinted from—



Seeing the Feelings of Other People as Real: An Urgent Necessity

By Ruth Oron, Rose Levy, Zvia Ratz, Avi Gvili, Harriet Bernstein

Like many Israelis, we were shocked to learn of the recent attack by Israeli teenagers on Palestinian youths in Jerusalem. There has been huge enmity and cruelty on both sides for decades, but the idea that we, the Jews, who endured the Holocaust could be brutal in this way is unbearable to us.

People all over Israel are tremendously worried and are asking: How have we, a people who pride ourselves on our moral values, come to this? What have we been teaching our children?

In a recent article in the New York Times, Nimrod Aloni, the head of the Institute for Educational Thought at Tel Aviv's Teachers College, likens this attack to other instances of cruelty in history and now. He writes:

“This is directly tied to national fundamentalism that is the same as the rhetoric of neo-nazis, taliban and KKK. This comes from an entire culture that has been escalating towards an open and blunt language based on us being the chosen people who are allowed to do whatever we like.”

As Israelis who dearly love our country, we have learned from Aesthetic Realism, the education

founded by Eli Siegel, that what Mr. Aloni describes is contempt: “the addition to self through the lessening of something else.”

Contempt is ordinary. People build up themselves by lessening others through gossip, not listening when someone is talking, feeling smugly that we have better taste, that we are superior to someone else. But ordinary contempt taken far enough leads to horrors.

We deeply regret the contempt we once had for the Arab people – how we thought of and spoke about them, scorning their culture and seeing them as ethically inferior. We unjustly used the fact that the Jews had met enormous cruelty, to be unfeeling ourselves, to justify this contempt.

We know now that there is an answer to the crisis in the Middle East, one that is practical and just. It is in the study of contempt and also in the study of good will, as Aesthetic Realism explains it: “The desire to have something else stronger and more beautiful, for this desire makes oneself stronger and more beautiful.” Good will, we have seen, is the only thing strong enough to combat contempt in a person and a nation.

Our lives changed when, in 1990, Ellen Reiss, Aesthetic Realism Chairman of Education, suggested

that Israeli students of Aesthetic Realism write a 500-word soliloquy of a Palestinian person, describing his or her hopes and fears as deeply and honestly as we could. Each of us wrote about one human being: a mother, for instance, terrified her husband might be killed in a raid by the Israelis; a teenage girl in Lebanon hoping for love; a college student studying agriculture, learning to cultivate the land he grew up on and dearly loves. For the first time, we saw the feelings of those we had seen only as enemies, as real. And we were amazed and moved to find how much their feelings were like our own.

When you see the feelings of a person as real, it is impossible to be cruel to them. This is a fact. We have lived it. We are proud to say that our ignorance and hatred of once has changed into a passion that justice come to the Palestinian people.

For peace to be in our homeland, both Israelis and Palestinians need to write these soliloquies. All government representatives do. What happened to us can happen to every person. Let this recent brutality in Jerusalem be the impetus to begin now.

To learn more, visit the website: www.AestheticRealism.org, the not-for-profit educational foundation.