

Oseh Shalom at Camp Tawonga

During Labor Day weekend, Ida (Class of '06) and I came to Camp Tawonga to practice “compassionate listening” at the 4th annual Peacemakers family camp where the motto “an enemy is someone whose story you haven’t heard” was the primary theme of the weekend. Jewish-Americans, Palestinian-Americans, Israeli Arabs, Palestinian Muslims and Christians, Palestinian Catholics, and Israeli Jews brought a wide variety of perspectives and spent hours talking, listening, hiking, laughing, and crying with each other. Regardless of political opinion, the bravery of individuals was evident when they spoke about the pain of war and conflict. There was absolutely no evidence of stereotypical Israelis or Arabs. Instead there were many people sharing their real-life, personal experiences with one another. No, it wasn’t easy to hear a young Israeli tell her life story that included the loss of a friend just last month in the war. But as Elias Botto, a Palestinian co-founder of the “living room dialogue” group that created this camp, stated: “How can I expect you to hear my story if I don’t listen to yours?”

A group of teenagers asked to address the group at the end of the weekend. An Arab girl expressed gratitude to the group for entrusting the continuing peace-making to their generation. She went on to say that despite the extremely painful experiences she shared with others, she would gladly shoulder all of them if it would advance the cause of peace. An Israeli mother reported that her son, currently serving in the IDF, wanted his mother to tell everyone that this

sort of interaction is the only hope for peace. A fellow Brandeis parent, Julie Dorf, who attended the weekend shared a powerful moment with an eighteen year-old Palestinian woman from Bethlehem who had never before spoken to a Jew. There was palpable frustration among the attendees that we could not use this opportunity to politically advance the cause of peace. But I came to understand that overcoming fear and misunderstanding by the act of listening is an important first step. As a Jewish-American father, I was thrilled that my daughter had the chance to participate and learn about others’—as well as her own people’s—experience. I sat next to her for lunch in the dining hall and was moved when another girl came over and said that Rami, the teenager from Iraq, had invited Ida and her to join him. I am proud of being a member of the Brandeis-Hillel community that consistently strives to promote kindness, peace, and social justice. I was very happy to tell the participants at Peacemaker Camp that Brandeis-Hillel will contribute money specifically for Arabs in addition to Jews, and I look forward to more opportunities to advance this type of learning and breaking down the fear of “the other” together with our children in our Brandeis community. Len Traubman, a Jewish retired dentist who organized much of the weekend, reminded us that our work is holy by recalling the commandment of the “Shma”: Listen!

Shana tova,

Sasha Cuttler
(Parent of Ida, '06 and Harriet, 7th grade)