

Democracy Now

By Shaqued Morag

I didn't know we'd made peace with the Arabs, said an Israeli 7th grader to his teacher after watching a video that *Peace Now* produced to mark 40 years since the peace treaty was signed with Egypt. In the clip, local star Lior Ashkenazi relates the story of the landmark agreement achieved with one of Israel's worst enemies. The video received some 1.5 million views and is part of Peace Now's efforts to bring peace back into Israeli discourse. The historical anniversary of the treaty was officially ignored, including by the Ministry of Education. Peace Now stepped into the void and worked with teachers and parents to create a website providing educational materials such as lesson plans, archive footage and this video. Activists connected thousands of teachers, curriculum planners and school principals to the site, who used to teach students about the story of peace with Egypt and show that conflicts can be politically resolved.

["Why am I still alive"](#) – Source: Peace Now

Peace Now was founded on this very idea: that Israel can achieve peace with its neighbors, and that it should give up the territories captured in 1967 to do so. The movement was established on the hopeful wings of Egyptian president Sadat's historic visit to Israel in 1977, which was followed by a predictable crisis in negotiations in 1978. That year, a group of ex-army veterans sent Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin what came to be known as 'the officers' letter', demanding that he make every effort to reach peace and prevent the unnecessary killing of thousands more soldiers and civilians. Many Israelis joined in the call for peace, laying the foundations for Peace Now as a Zionist movement that supports political agreements between Israel and its neighbors. The movement believes that Israel must end its military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and sign a peace deal based on two nation-states, one Jewish and the other Palestinian – the only solution that will allow Israel to remain both Jewish and democratic.

To remain loyal to Zionism, we must forgo the dream of Greater Israel and promote the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza

The existence of a Jewish and democratic state in Israel would fulfill the three basic tenets of Zionism. Yet reality has shown that all three principles cannot be realized together. Almost as many Jews as Palestinians now live between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. As long as Israel controls the 1967 territories and the millions of Palestinians living in them, it cannot be a full democracy. Yet annexing this land and making the inhabitants Israeli citizens would compromise the Jewish character of the state. So, to remain loyal to Zionism, we must forgo the dream of Greater Israel and promote the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, where some 5 million Palestinians currently live without full civil rights. Israel cannot, and should not, continue to suppress the national aspirations of the Palestinians; inasmuch as they are willing to accept a two-state solution, this must be our goal. Anything else will jeopardize either the Jewish or the democratic nature of the state, and thus fall short of the Zionist vision.

Effective protest, then and now

As noted, Peace Now was formed in the wake of the 1978 'officers' letter', which called on the prime minister to do everything in his power to attain peace with Egypt. Thanks to press coverage, many Israelis voiced support for the letter, creating a broad movement that developed sophisticated means of protest. The formal style of the letter was complemented by a creative way of sending it: the letter was passed from hand to hand, in a sort of relay race from Tel Aviv to the prime minister's residence in Jerusalem. Activists

picketed and set up stands for people to add their signatures. The mass rallies that followed forced the government to consider the national priorities promoted by this pressure group.

In the 40 years since, Peace Now has shifted to spearheading the fight for peace with the Palestinians and for the two-state solution. The settler movement also developed during this time, calling for Israelis to settle in the West Bank and Gaza. As the settlements cement control over these territories and obstruct a future Palestinian state, Peace Now devotes significant efforts to fighting the government's pro-settlement policy. In the 1990s, the movement set up a special department to collect and analyze data on the development of settlements. The department's reports and maps are considered an authoritative source by politicians, journalists ambassadors and researchers.

By collecting and publishing information, Peace Now continues to lead the call for peace and territorial compromise instead of the settler vision of Greater Israel, which involves annexing the Occupied Territories. The movement reports on the changing reality in these territories and on the government's largely undeclared policies implemented there. While geopolitical circumstances have changed, the movement still largely relies on its traditional methods of protest. Nevertheless, several recent trends have made it harder to enlist new activists.

One notable change is the growing political influence of social networks over the last decade – as exemplified, for instance, by the major role Facebook played in the Arab Spring. Mainstream media is also increasingly being shaped by new media. In the last 10 years, Peace Now has invested in developing targeted material for social media and in managing social media pages that respond to current events and lead political debate. This means that we no longer depend on the cooperation of traditional media to generate discussion about key issues. Social networks are an effective way of sharing information, organizing, and coordinating activism. In a sense, activism has shifted from the town square to the virtual soapbox. For better or worse, Peace Now's target audience can now largely be found online. Staying involved in the virtual debate sometimes comes at the expense of classic activism. Taking action together used to be the best way to connect and brainstorm. Now, most of these needs are met online. That may be one reason why it is more difficult to motivate action on the ground today.

Of all the issues that matter to the Israeli left, fighting the occupation is the least rewarding for the average activist

Whether in the town hall or on Facebook, Israeli civil society is vibrant. Thanks to the information revolution, many struggles can be fought at the same time. Israelis who identify with the peace camp have been active on several such fronts in recent years, such as the separation of religion and state, animal rights, LGBT rights and the war on corruption. While progress with the Palestinians has stalled under successive rightwing governments, activists have raised awareness or achieved specific policy changes in other areas. Of all the issues that matter to the Israeli left, fighting the occupation is the least rewarding for the average activist. Many involved citizens prefer to devote their efforts to targeted popular struggles that stand higher chances of success, such as the struggle over natural gas reservoirs, than to the resolution of a longstanding conflict that often feels Sisyphean, as every step forward (such as the evacuation of the illegal outpost Amona) is countered by a step back (such as the establishment of a settlement for the Amona evacuees).

Another change is evident among young Israelis who have completed their military service and are embarking on adult life. This generation grew up under right-wing governments that worked to make the settlements an integral part of Israel. School materials were rewritten to blur the boundary between sovereign Israel and the Occupied Territories, and students were taught that the right of the Jewish people to the land is more important than equality. Media discourse changed regarding settlements and became less engaged with daily reality in the Occupied Territories, while Palestinian citizens of Israel were framed as a fifth column and their national aspirations disparaged.

Ironically, it is the success of the Oslo Accords and the security cooperation with the Palestinian Authority which allows most Israelis to ignore the need to resolve the conflict.

The vast majority of Israeli teens, other than some aficionados, are barely even aware that there is a military regime in the West Bank. Most have no opinion about the occupation. How could they, if they have no idea it exists? Few will encounter Palestinians in their military service, and even they will not necessarily know the difference between the Palestinian towns of Tulkarm (in the West Bank) and Umm al-Fahm (within Israel).

Ignorance and misinformation have driven the entire subject to the margins of the young Israeli consciousness. Ironically, the success of Israel's joint counter terrorist efforts with the Palestinian Authority, a cooperation that began after the Oslo Accords, allows most Israelis to ignore the need to resolve the conflict. This is yet another explanation for the dwindling number of steady Peace Now volunteers. The movement is now facing a challenge not only to mobilize the "peace camp", but also to cultivate a future generation.

Civil society organizations in the eye of the storm

The peace process has basically ground to a halt in the last decade. The government's policy is to "manage the conflict" while keeping short-term harm to citizens to a minimum. Thus, the "Status-Quo" leaves nonprofits with the job of not only fighting against the occupation and for an agreement, but also protecting the human rights of Palestinians under occupation.

As Israel's present government does not seek to resolve the conflict but rather to perpetuate the occupation, and as there is no effective opposition in parliament, the onus to keep the struggle up is on civil society. Peace Now has long been synonymous with the "peace camp" in Israeli parlance. The camp has expanded over time to include new organizations and movements that offer other ways to fight the occupation, such as legal measures, international advocacy and Israeli-Palestinian dialogue groups. Our collective power is evident precisely because the right has launched a smear campaign to silence us, disrupt the operations of various nonprofits, and undermine the very legitimacy of the peace camp.

Right-wing ministers and members of the Knesset personally rail against activists and nonprofits that fight the occupation, labeling them traitors. This borderline incitement is often accompanied by demands to stop left-wing persons or groups from appearing in public and to cut their funding. The legal battles that ensue use up precious resources and divert attention away from the issue itself, turning public debate to issues of free speech and the boundaries of legitimate criticism. As part of the onslaught on civil society in Israel, Netanyahu's coalition introduced targeted legislative measures, such as the amendment to the Nonprofit Law, which purportedly aims to increase transparency but in fact undermines the public legitimacy of left-wing organizations. Interestingly, transparent funding is apparently no longer important when it comes to right-wing NGOs, which are mostly financed by private shadow donors who back Israel's right-wing government's ideology and stymie pro-peace and anti-occupation efforts.

The media often refers to peace and anti-occupation activists as "radical leftists", creating a twisted symmetry with extremist right-wing elements

The results of this delegitimization campaign are clear. Media language has changed, and politicians in the

opposition are reframing their positions and even the very terms they use to describe reality. The mainstream media tend to equate government policies with ostensible state interests and do not address left-wing opposition as a legitimate ideological alternative. Instead, the media often refers to peace and anti-occupation activists as “radical leftists”, creating a twisted symmetry with extremist right-wing elements, whose criticism of the government sometimes relies on racist reasoning and even violence. The claim that there are “extremists on both sides” undermines legitimate criticism of the regime and excludes left-wing ideas from the sphere of acceptable politics.

So, what now?

Israel’s right-wing governments of the past decade have been challenging the very foundations of democracy and of the rule of law. The binary division introduced between “good guys” and “bad guys” is flattening civil debate, replacing it with fear mongering, violence and superficial ideas. This makes it difficult for Peace Now to advance its goals. Therefore, opening up space for conversation about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is now one of our biggest challenges.

To generate a meaningful conversation, Peace Now goes beyond online discussions. We lead tours in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, inviting Israelis to see the daily routine of the conflict and occupation for themselves. Participants are exposed, often for the first time ever, to the separation between Jews and Palestinians, both declared and covert; the span of the settlement and illegal outposts project, which reaches deep inside the West Bank and into the heart of the Palestinian population; and the personal stories of Palestinians who live under occupation. Many participants say “their eyes have been opened” and that they realize the policy of “managing the conflict” is untenable and absurd in reality.

For Israeli young adults who grew up under right-wing rule, the idea of peace seems distant and even preposterous

Peace Now also holds conferences, informational activities and seminars to constantly examine the struggle against the occupation and to mobilize partners. Yet the loyal core of activists from the 1990s has not cultivated a strong group of successors. For Israeli young adults who grew up under right-wing rule, the idea of peace seems distant and even preposterous, and they often dismiss any reference to the subject. Exposing future leaders to the ideology and activities of Peace Now is a formidable challenge. What can engage young Israelis? How do we battle stereotypes and entrenched ways of thinking, after years of incitement against the peace camp? How can the dominant narrative of “managing the conflict” be changed?



Peace Now” demonstration in Hebron. A prominent Hebrew slogan is “hemshekh hahitnakhlut sakana leyisrael”(The continuation of settlements is a danger to Israel)- Source: Wikipedia

Two years ago, Peace Now established the “**Hazon**” (**Vision**) **Peace Academy**, bringing together young Israelis who are interested in pursuing a career in public life, to teach them about the conflict and provide them with skills necessary to become effective spokespeople in support of peace. After several months of intensive workshops, lectures and tours, graduates move on to lecture in youth movements, premilitary academies and high-schools about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the two-state solution, the price of the occupation and its implications for Zionism.

To date, some 80 future leaders have graduated from four classes and moved on to lecture before some 5,000 teens throughout Israel. They aim to arouse curiosity, provide information, challenge assumptions, battle fake news and incitement, and mobilize their audiences. Often, it is the very teens who identify as right-wing and even extremist who are surprised to learn that their peers “on the other side” also have Israel’s best interests at heart – as opposed to what they have been led to believe.

We are also building up the next generation of political activists on campuses. Over the last year, Peace Now formed campus groups at three universities to mobilize activists, enlist members and generate debate about solving the conflict. Students who sign up are especially interested in touring the West Bank and meeting Palestinians – experiences not usually offered by the universities, even among relevant departments. The campus groups also connect with local struggles. For example, Hebrew University students joined demonstrations against the eviction of Palestinian families from East Jerusalem following settler takeovers, and activists at Ben Gurion University in the Negev protested the Student Union’s collaboration with a company that offers students cheap accommodation in a nearby settlement.

The two-state solution: preventing annexation and safeguarding

Israeli democracy

Peace Now issued a special report in December 2018 on various legal measures taken by the Justice Ministry under then-minister Ayelet Shaked and Attorney General Avihay Mandelblit to lay the legal groundwork for annexing the Occupied Territories while de facto supporting settlement activity.

The two-state solution is not only the moral choice, it is also the only way to safeguard Israeli democracy

In the past year, the settler movement has become increasingly vocal in its demand to “apply sovereignty in Judea and Samaria”, i.e. to officially annex parts of the West Bank. In an interview prior to the first round of elections in April 2019, Prime Minister Netanyahu stated he would support steps to apply sovereignty to these areas, in light of President Trump’s recognition a month earlier of the annexation of the Golan Heights. This was shortly after Trump had transferred the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem – a symbolic move that could be construed as a potential shift in the international status quo regarding the future division of Jerusalem as part of a two-state solution. Annexing the West Bank is clearly no longer a goal of the settler movement alone. It is not a hypothetical notion or a covert process, but a meaningful election promise that involves denying citizenship to the residents of these territories. The settler movement used to demand that we forgo the dream of peace in order to keep the Occupied Territories. Now, we also have to be willing to give up on democracy.

This real threat to Israeli democracy means that it is time for the peace camp to expand its paradigm. The two-state solution is not only the moral choice, or the best option in terms of security and economics – it is also the only way to save our democracy. Together with fighting institutionalized corruption, the challenge to the rule of law, the assault on the judiciary, the Nation-State Law and the shrinking of civil debate – it is clear that fighting for the two-state solution and against annexation of the West Bank is part of the larger struggle over Israel’s democracy.