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Hakol Chai creates humane education program for Arab sector

• By DANIELLE ZIRI

The NGO, **Hakol Chai**, which works to prevent and relieve animal suffering in Israel, has developed a full humane education curriculum to be implemented this fall in 60 northern Arab schools.

Hakol Chai, the Israeli sister charity of the US-based Concern for Helping Animals in Israel, began the initiative last October as an 11-lesson pilot program, supported by the Education Ministry, in 13 Arab schools. The project's aim is to prevent children's violent behavior toward animals.

"Four months into the pilot, the ministry said it was working," the organization's founder, Nina Natelson, told *The Jerusalem Post* recently. "Teachers said that children who had been harming animals were self-reporting and said they wanted to stop."

Natelson, who lives in the United States, founded **Hakol Chai** after a visit to Israel in 1983, when she saw "tremendous animal suffering."

"I remember being on the beach in Eilat, and there was a dog there. I started feeding him," she recalled. "People on the beach asked me why I'm feeding this dog, he looks sick. That was exactly why I was feeding him."

In addition to sending equipment to shelters in Israel, the NGO always believed in education as a key tool to prevent animal abuse. One of the first initiatives the group undertook was a creative project for children nationwide, involving animals.

Approaching Arab children on the subject of animals, Natelson said, requires a unique teaching method.

"Arab kids don't have a lot of experience with animals as in-home companions," she explained. "There is a difference between the knowledge and familiarity level that Israelis and Arabs have [with] animals."

Because of this characteristic, **Hakol Chai's** lesson plan



A BOY gives his dog water from the Ein Lavan spring near Jerusalem. (Ronen Zvulun/Reuters)

focuses not only on animals, but on the idea of compassion in general.

"We know there is a connection between violence toward people and violence toward animals," the group's founder stated. "Studies have proven there is a link between these two things, so in the program, we'd rather talk about the kid's relationship with other people."

The lesson plan involves having pupils draw "circles of compassion." First, they are asked to determine whom and what they care most about and feel closest to. Then, the children discuss things they don't care about – who or what does not fall into in any of the circles of compassion.

In addition, they ponder the question, "How does it feel to be treated well by someone in your closest circle, and how does it feel to be treated badly?"

They are also taught to "exercise the muscle of putting yourself in someone else's shoes." The children are encouraged to share their feelings about animals who live in their communities, and learn "not to take out their own painful feelings on those smaller and weaker."

The program is entirely conducted by the classes' regular teachers, who receive training

from **Hakol Chai** during annual conferences.

After discussions on the issues and class projects focusing on humane animal treatment, the pupils re-draw their circles of compassion.

"We want to empower children to create a world they feel safe and happy to live in," Natelson said. "We want to teach them that their daily choices make a difference – they affect people and animals worldwide."

Her colleague Rae Sikora, who developed the curriculum, told the *Post* that cultural and religious beliefs influence the topic of animal treatment and constitute a significant challenge when putting together a lesson plan.

"You can't have a cookie-cutter program that works everywhere. It depends on the culture and on what that culture is ready for," Sikora explained. "But there is a commonality in the process of opening our hearts, which is the same in every culture, every person."

She added, "We all have the ability to open our hearts and minds. The program, in a nutshell, is about who or what we care about and how we want it to look in our lives."

Sometimes, she continued, due to cultural backgrounds, a conflict exists between "what

a child has in his heart and what goes on in his home."

"I grew up with that," she added. "I wanted to live a life caring for animals. My family had trouble with it."

She said she had never planned to work in animal welfare. Growing up, she was afraid of animals and would panic at the sight of a dog in the street. One day, in an attempt to help her conquer her fear, her father gave her a puppy he had picked up from a shelter.

"I was terrified," Sikora recalled. "But one day I looked in his eyes, and I saw that the dog was as scared as I was, he was scared of me. So then we became friends."

In her 25 years of experience in humane education, she said, she has seen "much pain and suffering in the darkest corners of planet."

"What keeps me doing the work is the knowledge that people's hearts are really good," she said. "When I see people open to it and starting to care, it's like the fuel that keeps me going. It is such a gift."

She has had "to re-define wealth to deal with this work," she added.

"The biggest currency of all is to see a program like this working," she said. "That is worth more than any money."