

Learning from my students: Egyptian executives

DANNY WARSHAY
Special to the CJN

“Now the time that the children of Israel dwelt in Egypt was 430 years. And it came to pass at the end of 430 years, even the selfsame day it came to pass, that all the host of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt.”

On the same week last year when my fellow Jews around the world were reading about our ancestors' departure from Egypt, I caught a flight for Cairo. I spent the next ten days teaching an intensive version of my Brown University entrepreneurship course for a group of 35 Egyptian executives, heads of NGOs and entrepreneurs. As a Jew re-entering Egypt, teaching this course was one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life.

The students were terrific. An elite group of senior executives, they came to each session prepared and eager to learn. And although learning through

Harvard Business School case studies was new to them, they caught on to this Socratic Method as well as any students I have ever taught. (They were certainly better than many of my Israeli students in the Tel Aviv University Executive MBA program, who approached me aggressively after their first session a couple of summers ago to inform me that they didn't like this whole case discussion approach and preferred that I simply tell them the right answers.)

My Egyptian students knew that in these discussions, as in real business, there were no black-and-white right answers. They reveled in this ambiguity that they recognized from their



Danny Warshay



Egyptian executives, entrepreneurs and heads of NGOs attended Danny Warshay's 10-day entrepreneurship course in Cairo.

own businesses and that was now new to them in the classroom. Hassan – founder of the first Arabic music site on the Internet and of an Egyptian social networking service with more than 1.3 million subscribers – told me that because this pedagogy was so different and so energizing, this course was the most extraordinary educational experience of his life.

In many ways, it was for me, too. While the case studies for this course have been part of my regular curriculum, the discussions surrounding the cases took many different turns. When I chose to teach the Cel-Tel case about Dr. Mo Ibrahim's founding of a sub-Saharan cellular telephone company, for example, I could not have predicted that my stu-

dent Angie – the investment banker who managed the IPO for Egypt's equivalent of Cel-Tel (Orascom) – would be in our class; he was able to share nuances of World Bank funding.

Or that Gamal, an Orascom executive, would shed light on the technical challenges of building a network of cell towers – and on the economies of scale that large providers enjoyed. Or that Moataz, a Shell Oil executive, would share

how Shell measured risk in building infrastructure in Nigeria as deaths per total number of employees.

Entrepreneurial risk, I learned, was fundamentally different for Egyptian entrepreneurs than for Bob Reiss, the protagonist in our first case

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about an American trivia game innovator. While most of my Brown students routinely comment on Bob's reputational risk, Abdel and Jawad contrasted Egyptian risk when they described the consequences of not paying back a lender as time in jail – sometimes for the rest of your life.

Nagib Saweeris, CEO of Orascom, whom I heard speak, gushed about endless low-hanging Egyptian entrepreneurial fruit. I wonder whether for this wealthiest Egyptian (20th wealthiest person in the world), this lack of modern bankruptcy laws was one of the reasons so much of this fruit fails to get picked.

My religion and my experience in Israel came up only twice and briefly. During the first night's post-class banquet, a group of my students insisted on escorting me through the buffet line to make sure I did not accidentally eat anything non-kosher.

Another time, Ramy, a Bard College grad and founder of a Cairo-based marketing firm, asked me about my teaching in both Egypt and Israel. He had been a member of "Seeds of Peace" ([peace.org\) for years and was now its ambassador in Egypt. He told me proudly, through Seeds of Peace he had traveled to Israel and met teenagers from countries considered his country's enemy and represented Egypt in the White House. He gave speeches selling coexistence and peaceful projects, including one in Carnegie Hall in front of 3,000 people, among whom was Bill Clinton. "I got charged and energized, feeling that anything is possible," he said. "I even discussed inviting Israeli and Egyptian students for a combined class in Sharm El Sheikh."](http://www.seedsof</p>
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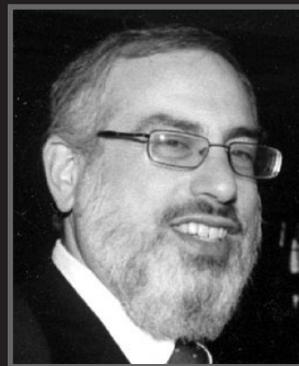
Chaim Potok describes his novels as "core-core culture confrontations" – a good way to describe my expectations for Egypt before I went. By welcoming me so warmly and bonding with me so meaningfully, my Egyptian students delivered a collaborative learning experience that taught us both – from worlds apart – more than we might ever have imagined.

Brown University adjunct professor Danny Warshay is a native Cleveland. His parents are Ieda and Marvin Warshay of Shaker Heights.



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