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Oasis of Peace:

An experiment in Middle East peace-making

SEPTEMBER 1997

CHILDREN ARE BORN WITHOUT prejudices. In a place such as this, littered with its testaments to grief and enmity, they acquire them soon enough. Their parents and their education system and the conflict that swirls around them daily make sure of it. The Jewish child learns to hate and fear the Arab. In his mind, the Arab is primitive, calculating and violent. He draws knives, throws stones, plants bombs in buses and cafés. Even at night-time, in the depth of Jewish dreams, he is lurking. He gives the Jew no rest. The Arab is bred with a similar bigotry. The Jew cannot be trusted. He is the all-conquering outsider, the alien with money in his pockets and blood on his hands. He is the soldier who tortures and maims and kicks down Arab doors at night. He is the enemy without a face.

Nearly everywhere you travel in this accursed and revered land, you confront these vulgar stereotypes. To be sure, there are elements of truth in the images, but such is the nature of this conflict that they are almost always embellished, twisted to a point where dialogue becomes impossible.

That's why Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam stands as a unique experiment in reconciliation. Meaning literally (in Hebrew and

Somebody Save Me

Arabic respectively) oasis of peace, it is a Jewish–Arab village constructed around the ideal of co-existence.

There are plenty of towns throughout Israel where Arabs and Jews live near each other. There are hospitals where Arabs and Jews lie side by side. But in almost all cases they are there by chance, not by choice. Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam is the only place in the Middle East, possibly the world, where two people, engaged in a titanic struggle for the same piece of land, have actually made a conscious decision to live and work with each other in a spirit of mutual tolerance and respect.

Despite the opprobrium of families and friends, they have decided to break bread with the ‘enemy’. Cynics, of whom there are many, dismiss the idea as a romantic indulgence. Others, the ones who think that even in the Middle East you can find shreds of human decency, believe that here, high up in the rolling hills of olive groves and Jerusalem pines, the answers to not only the Arab–Israeli conflict but possibly all human conflicts can be addressed.

Not for a moment does anyone believe this is utopia. There are schisms here that reflect all too clearly the political realities outside. There are wounds that still chafe, memories that refuse to fade, conflicts that surface again and again.

IF YOU EVER WANTED to see the Arab–Israeli conflict up close, you could do far worse than observe a group of Israeli and Palestinian students meeting in the grounds of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam. They have come to the School for Peace, a facility set up in 1979 to promote encounter groups between adversaries. There they sit facing each other in a room, 25 people born into a conflict not of their making. They are among the 20,000 Palestinian and Israeli teachers, lawyers and students who have come through these doors in an attempt to work through their fear and loathing.

Oasis of Peace

In this case, the very fact that boy and girl, Jew and Moslem, occupier and occupied, are together for four days and nights is a major social, cultural and political achievement. Where will they sleep? How will they mix? What will they accomplish by being together?

For the Palestinian teenagers from the West Bank, it is the first time they have travelled across the Green Line into Israel, the only occasion they have seen Jews who are not carrying guns, the only time they have actually talked to the enemy. For the Palestinians from inside Israel (nearly 20 per cent of Israel's population is Arab, an increasing number of whom refer to themselves as Palestinian), this is their first meeting with Palestinians from the territories.

For the Israelis, not only have many of them never met Arabs before, they have never been in a group where they are a minority. They have certainly never been in a situation before where they were forced to listen to stories of humiliation and pain caused by their occupation of another people.

In December 1987, the indignity of this occupation unleashed a spontaneous civil uprising involving Palestinians of all ages, classes and political inclinations. Boys as young as six and seven, armed only with slingshots and stones, took on the might of the Israeli Army. Women, traditionally confined to the home, defied their husbands to take to the streets. Some attacked soldiers with pots and pans. Refugee and shop merchant, the infirm and the healthy, combined in an eruption of fury the likes of which had never been seen in Palestinian history.

What became known as the intifada (meaning literally in Arabic, the shivering that accompanies someone in the grip of fever or the shaking of a dog riddled with fleas) was to see as many as 1900 Palestinians killed—268 of them under the age of 15—25,000 wounded, and the same number again interrogated, many of them tortured. During that time, entire villages were placed under curfew, homes demolished, schools and

Somebody Save Me

universities closed, collective economic punishment imposed, women harassed and, in some cases, sexually abused.

While the peace process which began in 1993 gave hope to many in the territories, it did not end the violence. In early 1994, a Jewish settler, Baruch Goldstein, massacred 29 Moslems in Hebron's Cave of the Patriarchs while they were at prayer. In September last year, 80 Palestinian protesters died in clashes with Israeli troops in East Jerusalem. Today, the peace process, under Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is at a virtual standstill. So it is little wonder there is hostility in this room when the Palestinian students finally look into the eyes of their enemy.

'We live in a prison,' one Palestinian boy tells the Israelis through an interpreter. 'We don't have any rights; we don't have any peace.'

'It is not our fault,' one Israeli left-winger, a young woman, fires back. 'We're looking for peace, we want you to feel good, but we're victims too. Why are you blaming us?'

'Because you're Jews,' he says.

On the Israeli side, the sense of grievance is just as strong. Still recovering from the assassination of their prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, in November 1995 (by a right-wing Jew), the country has been rocked by a spate of suicide bombings.

February 25, 1996: 22 killed and 55 injured when a bomb exploded on the number 18 bus in Jerusalem. February 25 (a few hours later): three killed and 29 injured by another suicide bomber at a hitch-hiking station near the town of Ashkelon. March 3: the number 18 bus in Jerusalem again—18 dead and seven injured. March 4: a bomb is detonated in a Tel Aviv shopping centre, killing 13 and wounding 65. The war had entered the streets of Israel. Terror and suspicion could be read on every face. Throughout the country you could see a flow of mourners and hear the wailing of the bereaved.

Twelve months later, in a crowded Tel Aviv restaurant, three Israeli women were killed and more than 40 injured by

Oasis of Peace

another Hamas bomber detonating his explosives on the crowded porch. Many Israelis will never forget the sight of a six-month-old infant crying, amid the rubble, from internal injuries. Her mother died on the way to hospital.

Then, on July 30, two suicide bombs ripped through a crowd in the Jerusalem market, leaving 15 dead and 170 injured.

In the workshops at Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, the trauma of these incidents and the dark shadow that lurks behind nearly every Jewish experience—the Holocaust—are given voice.

‘What about this terrorism?’ one Israeli cries. ‘What about our rights to live in peace?’ ‘What about ours?’ comes the Palestinian response.

‘There is a tendency to compete with who is more of a victim,’ says Nava Soneshein, one of those running the School for Peace. ‘The Palestinians bring their issues of occupation and the Israelis usually say, “Yes, you are victims, but so are we. We had the Holocaust.” If the talks are conducted on this level then they miss the point. So we tell them what they are doing—that they are competing—and we try to take them beyond that level.’

For four days, with the help of Palestinian and Israeli facilitators, these students tested the slogans and stereotypes they had come to associate with the other side. They challenged and fought each other’s history, language and culture. They traded wound for wound, memory for memory, loss for loss. They shouted and wept and dug their heels in and, when they’d had enough, they began, slowly, to share stories about their lives, their interests, their families and friends.

And, without even realising it, they started to confront the dark images they had formed of each other, and began to see each other not as demons but as human beings.

‘At the end, when they were leaving, they were kissing, hugging and crying,’ says Ruthi Shuster, one of the Israeli facilitators. ‘Some even exchanged phone numbers.’

Somebody Save Me

NEVE SHALOM/WAHAT AL-SALAM is situated in no-man's-land between Israel and the West Bank, part of what became a demilitarised zone after the 1948 Arab–Israeli war.

Owned by the nearby Latrun monastery, where a group of Trappist monks lives wrapped in its vows of silence, the village is built into a hillside crawling with thistles and vipers, overlooking a valley that has witnessed the blood of centuries.

Today, there are 30 families in the village, 15 of them Israeli, the other 15 Palestinian. Another 200 families remain on a waiting list, hoping against hope that the Israeli government will grant the community permission to expand.

However, plans are now under way for two new settlements on each side of the village, each of which will spell disaster. The first is a housing complex for the families of 350 former crack Israeli anti-terrorist police; the second, a private development proposal for 440 Jewish apartments.

If either is to succeed—and the village is naturally opposing both—the Palestinians will be overwhelmed. The Israeli government could, of course, step in to ensure that nothing is done to imperil a community that has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize four times. But this government is loaded with men who were never schooled in a place like Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam.

Rafi Eitan, for example, the Minister for Agriculture, once referred to Arabs as no better than ‘drugged cockroaches in bottles’. His views have barely changed. Ariel Sharon, former defence minister and now Minister for Infrastructure, presided over the 1982 massacre of Palestinians by Christian Lebanese forces in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps of Lebanon. His views haven’t changed either.

Their prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, remains wedded to the belief that Israel is an embattled, isolated nation, one that can stand up to its multitude of enemies only by being strong. Perhaps that’s why, during an election rally last year in Tel Aviv’s

Oasis of Peace

Zion Square he said nothing about the banners that his supporters had draped around his rostrum calling for 'Death to Arabs'.

Mind you, Netanyahu and his supporters could quote equally inflammatory slogans that have poured out of Palestinian mouths, including those proclaimed during the intifada when the Islamic Resistance Movement in Gaza described Jews as 'brothers of apes, murderers of prophets'.

In any event, the idea that Arabs and Jews might choose to live together, to try to reconcile their vast differences, is a concept foreign to Israel's political and religious establishment, as well as to the growing number of Palestinians attracted to Hamas's brand of Islamic fundamentalism.

In 1984, Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam's primary school opened, the first bilingual school in the country. No-one from the Israeli government bothered to show up to mark the occasion. Abdel Salam Najjar, the school's founder, tells me that to this day, both major political parties in Israel are reluctant to embrace the ideas enshrined in the village because co-existence is not part of the government's agenda.

'The Israeli government does not accept the idea of Neve Shalom,' he says. 'That's why Palestinians are not treated as equals. That's why we've never had proper support for this place.'

Najjar says he established the school because he wanted to learn something of the Jewish experience. 'Even though I was born an Arab in Israel, I didn't know anything about the Jews, and they certainly didn't know anything about us [Palestinians]. I wanted the new generation to learn about each other.'

Two years after the school opened, a kindergarten was established around the same principles of mutual respect. Najjar's wife, Ayshe, became one of the kindergarten teachers. When she was pregnant with her eldest daughter, Shireen, two other Jewish women were also pregnant. They needed somewhere for their children to go during the day. The result was the country's first truly bi-national/bilingual nursery and the kindergarten grew logically from this.

Somebody Save Me

'I spoke with the children only in Arabic and Rachel [one of the Jewish mothers] spoke only in Hebrew,' says Ayshe now. 'The children saw they had an Arab teacher and a Jewish teacher. They sang songs in two languages; all the feasts were explained in two languages.'

Today, Shireen's best friend is the Jewish boy she virtually shared her crib with. Her younger sister Layla's best friend, Noam Shuster, is also Jewish. They see nothing threatening in these bonds.

Layla and Noam were the first people I met when I arrived. They were walking together in a pink dusk—two giant migratory storks soaring above them—discussing the things that occupy most children—friends, school, movies.

'Arabs are not monsters or something different to us,' 10-year-old Noam says in her Israeli-accented English. 'They are human, just like we are. I have a lot of Arab friends and I really love them.'

'I love the Jewish people here,' Layla, 13, chimes in, 'and I tell people that many Jews are like us. They want peace.'

Three years ago, Noam arrived here from Tel Aviv with her parents and brother, Omer. Omer was born in 1991 on the night six Iraqi Scud missiles fell on the city. Their parents, Hezi and Ruthi Shuster, came to Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam because they wanted to be able to prove, to themselves as much as to their fellow citizens, that they could live side by side with Arabs.

On the far Left of the Israeli political spectrum, the Shusters had often challenged prevailing orthodoxies. Hezi Shuster went to jail three times for refusing to serve in the army in either Lebanon or the West Bank. His wife, Ruthi, supported his actions even though on two of these occasions she was pregnant or giving birth. She is convinced that only through an enlightened education system can the old reflexes of hatred and fear be addressed.

'I look at my children and see what they study—they are not brainwashed like we were,' says Ruthi. 'It is natural for

Oasis of Peace

them to grow up with Arabs as equal partners, without making a big issue out of it. For Omer it is not a big deal that his best friend is Said [a five-year-old Arab boy] or that Noam and Layla are friends. They are friends because they like each other. This is the main reason I am here—because no other education system [in the country] can achieve this kind of open mind. You cannot find Jewish people anywhere else in Israel in a situation like this.’

And, not surprisingly, even those who do place themselves in such a situation sometimes find the reality too difficult to bear. One Jewish university professor came to Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam mouthing all the right slogans about living with Arabs, but simply couldn’t cope with the prospect of an Arab woman—in this case, Ayshe Najjar—looking after her child. She and her family left after a year.

Daphna Karta-Schwartz, an Israeli actor who has lived in the village for 10 years, explains the ambivalence.

‘When I came here, I had many conflicts within myself: I had a son who was three-and-a-half and there was Ayshe—she was Arab and she was Moslem and she was the only teacher. This was just before the intifada. I thought, Oh my God, I have to send my children to *that* kindergarten.’

‘One evening, Ayshe had invited all the parents to a Ramadan [the Moslem month of fasting during the day] party in the kindergarten. She was singing in Arabic and all the children were singing for Ramadan and my heart was in my mouth. I couldn’t breathe. I felt terrible conflict. I heard in my head the voice of my own kindergarten teacher telling me in Hebrew that I wasn’t a good Jew—like I had really crossed the border. And that started the journey for me about what was important. Did I want a mixed society [of Arabs marrying Jews] or did I want to keep my identity while at the same time respecting theirs? I realised there was a point in between marrying each other and killing each other, and now I actually feel more Jewish than I did before.’

Somebody Save Me

The idea, she says, that people coming to Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam would somehow forget the political realities outside is misplaced. 'Do you think we don't feel aggression, anger, fear and hate here? Of course we do. The big question is what we do about these feelings. Do we take a gun and shoot? No . . . we try to create relations of dialogue and trust.'

ON A COOL FEBRUARY evening this year, an Israeli helicopter crashed on its way to Lebanon with 73 soldiers on board. Among the dead was Tom Kitain, the first male soldier in the Israeli Army from Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam.

Not surprisingly, his death attracted enormous media attention. Here was a soldier from a mixed Arab-Jewish village whose parents had educated him in the ways of peace. Why had he chosen to be in a combat unit? Why couldn't he have sought an exemption from military duty like so many religious Jews? Would Arab members of the village mourn his, an Israeli soldier's, passing?

There is nothing neat about the answers to these questions. Tom Kitain chose a combat unit because, like most other young Israeli men, he felt it was expected of him, partly as proof of his manhood, partly out of loyalty to country.

Kitain did everything to avoid serving on the West Bank or in Gaza. With Lebanon, it was different. Northern Israeli settlements were constant targets for pro-Iranian Hezbollah fighters and he felt it was his duty to defend Israel's border. Besides, Kitain was the only one in his unit who spoke Arabic and this led him to believe he might be able to set an example as to how best to treat the Lebanese villagers.

At his funeral, both Jewish and Arab tears flowed. Ayshe Najjar can scarcely bring herself even now to talk of his death. 'When Tom died, it was like a boy from our own family had died,' she says. Three months later, at a Remembrance Day

Oasis of Peace

service to commemorate the soldiers who have fallen in Israel's numerous battles, only the Jews from the village attended Kitain's grave-site ceremony. It was one thing to grieve for his death, another to take part in a ceremony attended by soldiers from his unit.

You don't have to look far, therefore, to find sharp divisions here. People mutter about appropriate lines of authority, status and influence, levels of disposable income, contributions made or not made—the kind of petty jealousies that attends any small community. And this is before the deeper layers of cultural identity are explored.

Many of the Jews here are from Western cultures. They come together with Arabs who are often defined by their village, clan or religion. Finding ways of talking to each other is sometimes fraught, given that language often reveals a wider landscape of friction.

'In any gathering between adults here,' says Rayek Rizek, an Arab resident of the village, 'the discussion will be in Hebrew. Even if there are three or four Arabs talking together and one Jew joins them, they will start talking Hebrew. That's because the Jew has a majority mentality.'

Not surprisingly, then, these divisions are compounded when there is political trouble. Each time there is bloodletting in the outside world—during the intifada, the Gulf War, the wave of suicide bombings or one-off massacres as in Hebron—the Jews and Arabs of this village respond to different impulses.

During the Gulf War, for example, when Israeli cities became the target for Saddam Hussein's Scud missiles, Haifa's Arabs poured out on to rooftops to celebrate, video cameras in hand. In the bomb shelter at Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, where Jewish and Palestinian families camped for nights at a time, tensions were also mounting.

Shai Karta-Schwartz, an Israeli actor, found himself in a fierce argument with a Palestinian who made no secret of her support for the Iraqi attacks.

Somebody Save Me

‘I was flabbergasted to hear that some people identified with the Iraqis and not the Americans,’ he says. ‘I said, “Do you really want these Scuds to fall on Tel Aviv?”’

For Rizek, the issue is about balance. ‘During the intifada, when Palestinians were being shot every day, one of the arguments we had was that the Israelis had explanations for what was happening. There were few who dared condemn the policies when it was taking place. Then, when the bombings took place, they wanted us to stand up and condemn them. We should condemn all violence, no matter who is committing it. Identifying with each other’s pain and suffering is mutual. If you don’t recognise my suffering and pain, I can’t recognise yours.’

As it turned out, 12 families—six Israeli, six Palestinian—held a meeting to discuss the issue. Emotions were boiling, partly because many feared some families might leave the village in order to better identify with a nationalistic cause outside. It didn’t happen.

‘Person after person said Neve Shalom was more important than what happened outside,’ says Shai Karta-Schwartz. ‘We were saying we wouldn’t part ways if the clashes got worse, that this place was more important than the Jewish–Arab war.’

AMONG THE THISTLES AND boulders of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, you can smell the evidence of a community’s dogged persistence—rosebushes, lemon and carob trees, rosemary and hyssop, all competing for space in the thankless soil.

Today, the majority of the children who attend both the kindergarten and the school come from outside the village, from Arab towns and Jewish farms. The School for Peace is also internationally recognised for its contribution to conflict resolution. Word has travelled that there is another way to educate the next generation.

Oasis of Peace

At the same time, the peace process that began in 1993 with a group of Palestinians and Israelis meeting in safe houses in Norway appears moribund, if not dead. The mutual trust built between Israel's then chief negotiator, Uri Savir, and his Palestinian counterpart, Ahmad Qurei (Abu Ala'a), has completely broken down.

Today, just getting the two sides to meet is an agonising process. As a matter of routine, the Israeli negotiators keep the Palestinians waiting sometimes up to two hours at a time and, when they do show, it is rarely with an explanation or apology. Israel's chief negotiator, Yitzhak Molcho, and his Palestinian opposite, Saeb Erikat, can barely conceal their mutual contempt.

The view inside the ruling Likud government seems clear: 'We didn't create this partnership with the Palestinians, we inherited it from the former government. If we have to talk to them, we'll do so holding our noses.' And this despite the fact that, according to the latest polls, more than 50 per cent of the Israeli population support a Palestinian State.

Among Israelis and Palestinians, the mood is now as grim as it has been in many years. Israeli society is being ravaged by divisions between the religious and the secular, between European and non-European Jew, between right and left. An increasing number of Israelis talk of the need for war—to unite the fractious Jewish tribes.

On the Palestinian side, there is talk of a new intifada, if not against the Israelis, then against officials from Yasser Arafat's Palestinian National Authority, who stand accused of sanctioning torture, abductions and summary executions, as well as massive corruption and abuse of privilege. On both sides, religious fundamentalism burns with a renewed vigour.

Not many people talk seriously now about finding ways to co-exist, develop trust, understand each other's pain and suffering. Even fewer imagine being able to rewrite a history suffused with so much pious savagery.

Somebody Save Me

Truth is, the majority of people have still not heard of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam. Rarely have they seen two girls, one Israeli, the other Palestinian, holding hands in the late afternoon, sharing their common humanity, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Postscript 2002:

In the four and a half years since this story was written, the Palestinian/Israeli conflict has moved inexorably towards all-out war. A second intifada which began in September 2000 has been accompanied by dozens of suicide bombings, political assassinations, deadly missile attacks and bombardments, countless broken ceasefires, the re-occupation of Palestinian towns and villages and, at the time of writing, the death of more than 1100 people, most of them Palestinians.

For a brief moment it looked as though things might have been different. In the middle of 2000, Israel's Labor prime minister, Ehud Barak, offered the Palestinians a range of historic concessions which would have led inevitably to the creation of a Palestinian State in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. The negotiations—brokered by former United States President Bill Clinton—foundered largely on the unresolved status of Jerusalem, the disputed right of Palestinians to return to their homeland and the running sore of Jewish settlements.

Yasser Arafat's rejection of the peace plan contributed to the disintegration of Barak's coalition government and the election in February 2001 of the notoriously hawkish Ariel Sharon as Israeli prime minister.

By the end of that year, and in the wake of the September 11 attacks on the United States, Yasser Arafat himself was under ferocious attack from the Israelis as part of their 'war on terrorism'. Sharon had branded him both 'an irrelevance' and 'the greatest obstacle to peace and stability in the Middle East'. He said it

Oasis of Peace

would have been better to have killed Arafat 20 years ago in Lebanon when he had the chance.

Caught between the growing power and popularity of Muslim fundamentalist groups like Hamas, and unrelenting pressure from America and Israel, the PLO chief appeared, finally, after nearly 40 years in power, to have run out of options. Not only were the Israelis refusing to deal with him any longer, they were also laying siege to his headquarters.

At the same time, in the summer of 2001, and at the height of the new uprising, Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam was continuing to pursue the cause of peace. In August, a delegation of Palestinians and Israelis travelled to a Buddhist retreat in France known as Plum Village at the invitation of the Vietnamese Buddhist master, Thich Nhat Hahn. The purpose of the trip was to study the techniques of meditation, which involved learning the art of 'mindfulness', and how to listen to the 'enemy's' stories without judgment or commentary.

'Usually in the Middle East,' said one of the participants afterwards, 'we use so much anger to express our suffering, and that is why we cannot speak to or listen to each other. Here we were able to express suffering without anger and really listen. I was able to learn more about the suffering of my own people, and the suffering of the other side. It became clear that their suffering was also my suffering.'