

ISRAELI JEWS AND PALESTINIANS BUILD AN “OASIS OF PEACE”

Real Peace Has to be Made with Enemies

BY LORENZO PORTA

Can Jews and Palestinians live in peace? Neve Shalom~Wahat al-Salam (NS~WAS), which translates into “Oasis of Peace” in Hebrew and Arabic, shows that it’s not only possible, but it’s happening right now. NS~WAS is a co-operative village where Jews and Palestinian Arabs with Israeli citizenship live together. It has developed a community based on mutual acceptance and respect. Democratically governed and owned by its members, the community is not affiliated with any political party or movement.

Equidistant from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv/Jaffa in Israel, the village was founded in the early ‘70s by Bruno Hussar, a Jewish French man, who was born in Egypt and became a Catholic priest as an adult. He helped build a living bridge between different cultures and religions. Currently more than 50 families have settled in the village, balanced between Jewish and Palestinian ethnic backgrounds, and among people belonging to different religions (Jewish, Muslim, Christian) as well as atheists. The land is leased from the adjacent Latrun Monastery.

NS~WAS gives practical expression to its vision through various branches. The project of creating an educational framework that would express NS~WAS ideals of co-existence and equality was born together with the community’s first children. The idea took shape in the form of a bi-national nursery, quickly followed by a kindergarten and a primary school where the educational system is grounded in a complete Jewish/Palestinian bilingual program. Hebrew and Arabic languages are educational media for all the children. Both Jewish and Palestinian teachers speak exclusively in their mother tongue to all the children. Each child’s identity is nurtured by imparting knowledge of his/her culture and tradition while facilitating respect for the culture and tradition of the other people.

After several years of operation, the community’s educational institutions were opened to include children from outside the village. At present, the school and kindergarten have an enrollment of less than 200 children, 90% of which come from surrounding Arab and Jewish communities. Since 1997 the primary school obtained the status of “experimental school” and in 2000 it was fully incorporated into the national school system, as an official extra-regional school, while maintaining all the qualities that make it a unique institution.

The Junior high school, opened since September 2003, remains independent from the state educational system. Although successful as an educational alternative for Arab students, this Junior high school has not yet attracted significant numbers of Jewish children. This perhaps demonstrates the inequalities existing in secondary education for Arab and Jewish children

in the area, but it is also important evidence of the challenging educational project exposed to the pressures of a socially and politically strained situation.

NS~WAS is not a paradise without conflicts – no place is! (Conflict can be viewed not as an obstacle to a fulfilling life, but an opportunity to grow and change.) What is special about the residents of NS~WAS is that they work to cultivate the consciousness and skills to deal with a long-term conflict and they try to manage, transform, and humanize it. Through training and practice, conflict skills become a life-long peaceful commitment. The members of the community talk about peace in a way that helps any observer empathically understand the conflict in which they live. Israeli Jews and Palestinians have suffered through many wars and the most recent war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon has been a hard acid test for the members of the village. There has been a very frank debate among the villagers and the supporters. It is amazing that the members of the sides in



Art by Suleiman Mansour



6th graders at the Rainbow Gate in Neve Shalom~Wahat al-Salam

the conflict could achieve a very high standard of reciprocal comprehension and recognition.

Rayek Rizek, the Palestinian mayor of the village, refused to take a one-sided position and Abdessalam Najjar, a longterm Palestinian resident, criticized the legitimacy of the use of Katyusha and Kassam missiles, as well as the use of warplanes and tanks in the struggle to free prisoners and hostages. The members of the village joined a demonstration in Tel Aviv during the last days of July demanding an end to the war. Zel Lurie, a prominent member of the American friends of NS~WAS, emphasized the real danger stemming from fundamentalist organizations and States (Hezbollah, Iran, Syria, Hamas) which are opposed to any recognition of Israel and support suicide bombing as a supposedly legitimate means of struggle. When confronted by the aforementioned dangers, many find it hard to conceive of any response other than a military one. Howard Shippin, a member of the NS~WAS public relations staff, replied to Lurie's concerns by emphasizing how vital is to negotiate and strengthen relations between civil society organizations in order to stop Islamic fundamentalism.

During the war crisis, the NS~WAS School for Peace (SFP) got invigorated after a period of inactivity. In the past, thousands of young people - Jews, Arabs and other people from many parts of the world - have received training in conflict management skills. They organized a week of summer holidays for refugee camp children from Tulkarem, Jenin and Yaabad in the West Bank of Palestine. The NS~WAS guest house was full of people who had escaped from the northern area of Israel targeted by Hezbollah's missiles during the war.

NS~WAS has also played host to many peacebuilding events, camps, trainings, and even a major rock concert featuring Roger Waters of Pink Floyd fame in June of 2006 before the war. Waters declared to the overflowing crowd,

www.calpeacepower.org

"Thank you so much for coming to Neve Shalom~Wahat al-Salam, the village of peace.... I may be speaking out of turn, but I believe we need this generation of Israelis to TEAR DOWN THE WALLS and make peace with their neighbours." Waters' statement referred to the wall/fence/barrier Israel recently built in the West Bank that has confiscated large tracts of Palestinian farmland in order to expand Israel's numerous illegal settlements, as well as the psychological walls and barriers that drive the conflict. (See *PeacePower*, Winter 2006 and Summer 2006, for articles on nonviolent resistance to the wall, available at www.calpeacepower.org.)

While the mainstream media usually trumpets the worst aspects of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, there is probably some reason for hope. The daily practice of coexistence and mutual recognition at

NS~WAS is both a valuable approach to grassroots education and a concrete example of peacebuilding. It could have ripple effects on the official decision makers in the Holy Land and all over the Middle East. Many other organizations have

followed this path in different ways, such as Open House in Ramle, organized by Mr. and Mrs. Landau, Hand in Hand, a network of bilingual schools for Palestinians and Jews, and the Parents Circle/Families Forum, composed of Jewish and Palestinian families who have lost loved ones in the conflict.

Are these experiences isolated exceptions or do they foreshadow a brighter future? The answer depends

in part on our support to enlarge the space for bottom-up peacebuilding. Let us unify our efforts to build a network of European and North American organizations that seek to implement the goal of effective mutual recognition. May more "oases of peace" sprout up throughout the Holy Land and all over the Middle East.

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A School for Peace youth encounter

Resources:

Neve Shalom~Wahat al-Salam: www.nswas.org

School for Peace: www.nswas.sfpeace.org

Hand in hand Organization: www.handinhand12.org

Open House: www.openhouse.org.il

Parents Circle Forum: www.parentscircle.israel.net