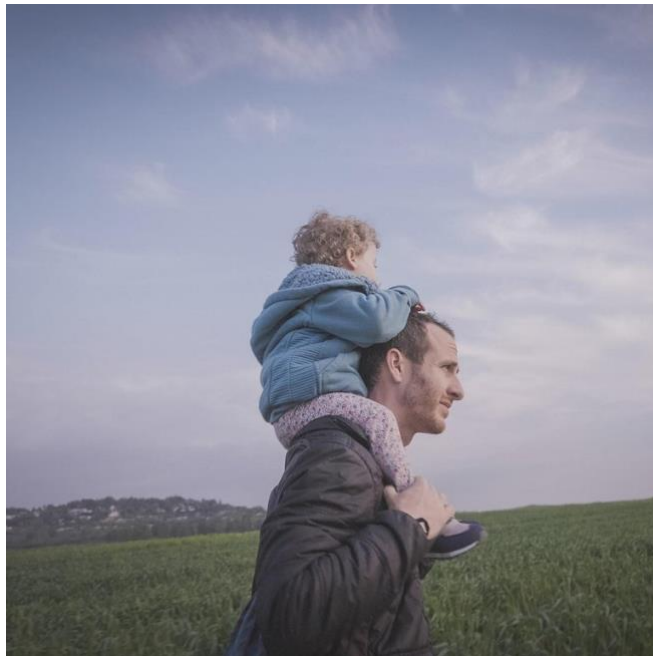


# An Insider Turns His Lens on Israel's Jewish-Arab 'Oasis of Peace'

A new documentary, 'Children of Peace,' explores Neve Shalom (Wahat-as-Salam), a unique Israeli social experiment that for the past 50-plus years has seen Jews and Arabs coexisting in one village

By Judy Maltz



"Children of Peace" director Maayan Schwartz with his son. Credit: Einav Livneh Schwartz

It is perhaps the only place in Israel where Arab and Jewish children could grow up together completely oblivious to the conflict around them.

So much so that Omer, a Jewish child raised in this cooperative village, says he never saw any difference between his Jewish and Arab friends until he was much older. "The cool thing about it was that we were totally unaware," he tells his interlocutor.

Very much like the kibbutz movement, though on a much smaller scale, Neve Shalom is widely regarded as a unique Israeli social

experiment. Situated halfway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, on a hill overlooking the Ayalon Valley, it is the only community in Israel where Jews and Arabs come because they genuinely want to live together – and not for lack of somewhere better to go.

The original idea was for Neve Shalom – also known as Wahat as-Salam (Oasis of Peace) – to serve as a role model for other mixed Jewish-Arab cities in Israel where life is not always as harmonious.

Established in 1970, Neve Shalom is home to about 70 families – equally divided between Arabs and Jews, as a matter of principle – who are dedicated to promoting peace and equality. Children in the village study together in a mixed elementary school, the first of its kind in Israel, where they take classes in both Hebrew and Arabic and have both Jewish and Arab teachers.

It is only natural that Neve Shalom would become a popular pilgrimage site for dignitaries visiting Israel, drawing the likes of rock star Roger Waters (who held a concert in the village about 15 years ago, before emerging as a leading voice in the international movement to boycott Israel), the late Stephen Hawking, the Dalai Lama and Hillary Clinton.

The children born into this little utopia and raised on the values of mutual respect and Jewish-Arab partnership have long been a source of interest to outside observers, who often wonder how growing up in such a climate affects their identity, their connection to Israel, their views on the conflict and the paths they choose as adults

In “Children of Peace,” which just premiered at Tel Aviv’s annual DocAviv documentary film festival, director Maayan Schwartz sets out to find answers to these questions through a series of interviews with Jews and Arabs raised on Neve Shalom. Having grown up there himself, this hour-long movie – Schwartz’s first full-length documentary film – is also a very personal project for him.

Schwartz and his friends came of age at a time that Israel experienced two monumental events: the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a far-right Jew in November 1995, and the second

Palestinian intifada which, for all intents and purpose, put an end to the peace process. These events would teach them that as much as they might want to shield themselves from the conflict outside, it would inevitably penetrate their little world.

But it was not only the big developments in the region that would prove challenging. As soon as they were old enough to attend after-school activities outside their village, the children of Neve Shalom would be in for a rude awakening, finding out that not everybody in Israel shared their values.

“It was the first time we encountered such racism against Arabs,” recounts Shireen, now a mother of three boys.

To make matters worse, she was also attacked by Arabs she met outside Neve Shalom. “They’d ask how could I go live with Jews who had stolen our land.”

Not that the Jewish children had it much better. For the first time in their lives, several would recall, they would find themselves personally attacked for the values they held dear.

“Suddenly, coming from Neve Shalom was no longer a big deal, [nobody cared about] the children of peace, the TV interviews and all that – suddenly we were the representatives of the Arabs,” recounts Omer Schwartz, the filmmaker’s brother.

“I even got called ‘Arafat,’” he adds, referring to the longtime leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization Yasser Arafat.

### **Drifting apart**

Neve Shalom was not big enough to sustain its own secondary school, so when the children graduated from elementary school, they were forced to start commuting: the Jewish children to Jewish regional schools; the Arab children to Arab regional schools. In their new schools, they would make new friends and naturally started drifting apart from one another.

What would eventually come between them – and prove an even greater threat to the ties that had been forged between them as children – would be the military. The Jewish children at Neve Shalom, like their cohorts elsewhere in the country, were required to serve in the army (though, as the film reveals, several of the interviewees would find ways of avoiding the draft); the Arab children were exempt.

For a community bent on the mission of promoting peace through personal example, the issue of military service would be a source of ongoing tensions at Neve Shalom, reaching a peak in the late 1990s when a resident of the community was killed while on duty. He had been on his way into Lebanon when two helicopters collided, in the worst military disaster in Israeli history. The question of whether and how to memorialize this local boy would eventually pit residents of Neve Shalom against one another and become a national story.

One of the most telling scenes in “Children of Peace” was filmed in a classroom on the morning of Memorial Day, when Israel pays tribute to its fallen soldiers. The Jewish children are instructed to go outside and attend the service in their honor, while the Arab children are asked to remain in the classroom. As the teacher tries to explain to the Arab children why the Jews are sad today but will be happy starting tonight when their Independence Day festivities begins, and why the Arabs will remain sad on this day of the Nakba (catastrophe), as it is known, the challenges this community faces seem almost insurmountable. She proceeds to explain how one event can create two different narratives, using a 10-shekel coin to drive home her point.

“This is one coin, but on each side there’s something different,” she notes as she picks it up. “On one side you have a number 10, and on the other side the symbol of a tree.”

Ultimately, has this social experiment been a success or a failure? If the benchmark for success is whether it has fulfilled its mission of bringing peace and equality to Jews and Arabs living in Israeli, then clearly it has failed dismally. The Arabs and Jews behind this unique

venture, despite all their attempts, have never managed to infect broader swaths of Israeli society with their idealism.

But if the benchmark is whether those who grew up in this village still want to live there and raise their own children there – and thereby signal their continued identification with what it represents – then the experiment may have succeeded.

Quite a few of Schwartz's childhood friends left Neve Shalom, the film reveals, only to return years later after reaching the understanding that there was nowhere else in the country they felt at home.

This holds true for the filmmaker as well. After spending many years in Tel Aviv, Schwartz finally goes back to Neve Shalom with his wife and son. What appears to have prompted his return were the violent clashes that broke out last year in mixed Jewish-Arab cities across the country during the mini-war between Israel and Hamas.

It was as if to say that if there were any hope left for this divided country, it was in this little oasis.

*“Children of Peace” is screening at Tel Aviv Cinematheque on Saturday at 12:30 P.M. (with English subtitles), and is also available to view on the DocAviv website until Sunday.*