

In an Israeli Oasis, a Model for Peace, if Messy and Imperfect

In a small village, Jews and Arabs have chosen to live side by side, share power and imagine a more hopeful future. But even here, the agonies of the conflict can't be escaped entirely.



The Oasis of Peace, a small village in Israel where an evenly split number of Arab and Jewish families live side by side. Credit... Avishag Shaar-Yashuv for The New York Times

By [Hiba Yazbek](#)

Reporting from Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, Israel

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From a distance, the cemetery looks much like any other in Israel, but examine the tombs closely and a startling fact is revealed: Here are buried Jews, Muslims and Christians.

The graveyard lies in the Oasis of Peace, a small village off the main highway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and home to some 70 Arab and Jewish families — all citizens of Israel — who have moved here from across the country with the intention of creating a shared life, side by side.

In this village, children learn both Arabic and Hebrew in school, and celebrate Hanukkah, Ramadan and Christmas.

“I had a beautiful childhood here,” said Nur Najjar, 34, who was born in the village to the community’s first Arab family. “I felt completely free, which is a rare thing as an Arab girl living in Israel.”

The school’s principal is a Palestinian citizen of Israel, as the village’s Arab residents prefer to be called. The manager of its spiritual center — a domed prayer and meditation room for all residents, regardless of faith — is Jewish. After a recent election, the head of the local council is Jewish; his predecessor was Palestinian.



Nur Najjar, center, at an end-of-summer pool party. “I had a beautiful childhood here,” she said. “I felt completely free, which is a rare thing as an Arab girl living in Israel.” Credit...Avishag Shaar-Yashuv for The New York Times

This balance of powers stands out at a time when Israel is [more divided than ever](#) and the prospects for resolving the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians seem to be fading.

Although the village’s population is a minuscule fraction of Israel’s total — and is composed only of people who have consciously sought out this level of coexistence — the residents here still hope it can model for a different kind of future.

“When you live here, being racist is unnatural,” said Amit Kitain, 40, whose family was among the village’s first Jewish residents. “The fact that you’re growing up together makes a huge difference.”

The village — known in Israel by its Hebrew-Arabic bilingual name, Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam — was founded by Bruno Hussar, a monk, born in Egypt to a

Jewish family, who later converted to Christianity. In 1972, he approached a monastery in a depopulated Palestinian village and pitched an idea he'd been mulling for years: building a place where Christians, Jews and Muslims could live together.



The village school, where the students learn in Arabic and Hebrew. Credit...Avishag Shaar-Yashuv for The New York Times

The monks leased him land on a nearby barren hill. Father Hussar then moved there alone, converting a bus into his new home, and set about promoting his vision.

During its founding years, the village lacked basic necessities, and pioneering residents had to walk to the nearest town to shower. Some of the first arrivals didn't last, but others were willing to swap comfortable homes for candlelit tin shacks and started families here.

In 1994, the village gained official governmental recognition, and with that came water and electricity.

Over time, the village garnered a reputation as a pit stop for leaders who wanted to burnish their credentials as global peacemakers — among them the Dalai Lama and Hillary Clinton — by having their pictures taken with the Palestinian and Jewish children at the school.

Since its early years, the village has been evenly split between Palestinian and Jewish families. Despite a recent expansion, and with a couple dozen new housing units being built, there's still a long waiting list of families eager to live here.

The village honors all three of the region's major monotheistic religions, but most residents practice a more secular approach to life, and there is no temple, mosque or church here, although many residents still identify as Jewish, Muslim or Christian.



The village's spiritual center, which offers a prayer and meditation room for all residents, regardless of their faith. Credit...Avishag Shaar-Yashuv for The New York Times

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In 1997, just as the first generation of children raised in the village were becoming adults, one of its sons, Tom Kitain, was killed in a plane crash on his way to Lebanon to serve as a combat soldier in the Israel Defense Forces.

“My dad always said Tom's funeral was the only time Palestinians wept walking behind the coffin of an Israeli soldier,” said Shireen Najjar, 43, Nur's older sister.

But his death also highlighted that even in a village dedicated to peace, tensions and heated disagreements are unavoidable.

His family suggested commemorating his life by naming after him the village's basketball court, where he had spent much of his time. Some other residents, mostly Palestinians, raised strenuous objections, seeing Tom as a soldier actively participating in the occupation and oppression of their own people.

The village held a vote and, after intense debate, came down in favor of the memorial. Today, a plaque hangs at the court's entrance that reads "In memory of our Tom Kitain, a child of peace who was killed in war."

Israel's Jewish citizens must join the military right after graduating high school. But unlike most who serve, the village's soldiers have to face a dual reality when coming home on weekends: walking past their Palestinian neighbors with rifles slung over their shoulders.



A parents meeting at the school, ahead of the new year. Credit...Avishag Shaar-Yashuv for The New York Times

Amit Kitain, Tom's brother, found it difficult to find his place in the army, switching units several times and avoiding being stationed in the West Bank. He also found it hard to return to the village after his military service.

"One of the things that the Palestinians here have difficulty with is the fact that some of us are going to the army," he said. "But for us, it was a question of loyalty."

Like others who grew up here, he wound up leaving. Though the village is made up of mostly of middle-class residents, with many doctors, lawyers and professors, less integrated areas of Israel offer more job opportunities for young people.

The Najjar sisters departed as well. Shireen moved to Jerusalem's Old City, where she said she endured regular interrogations by soldiers at checkpoints just to get to her house. The difference from where she was raised was troubling, she said, and she began to worry about her two oldest boys, who started talking about martyrdom as toddlers.

“I didn’t want my kids to grow up and resist the occupation because that was naturally where they were headed if we stayed in the Old City,” she said. “That’s why I came back.”

Amit Kitain and Nur Najjar also returned.



“When you live here being racist is unnatural. The fact that you’re growing up together makes a huge difference,” said Amit Kitain. Credit...Avishag Shaar-Yashuv for The New York Times

“I was part of an experiment, some of it worked and some didn’t, but we are continuing the experiment with our kids,” Mr. Kitain said. “It’s a statement against the status quo, saying that things can be different.”

While the village has obviously had a profound influence on the lives of its residents, have the five decades of coexistence delivered any concrete lessons for the broader conflict?

Isabela Dos Santos, who is writing her doctoral dissertation at the University of Toronto on her research of the village, said people’s idea of peace can be so sanitized, and so idealized, that “it becomes this thing that is really, really far-off the horizon.”

“The contribution that I think the village makes,” she continued, “is showing that this idea of peace is complicated and complex, and it goes through seasons of imperfection, but it’s not this far-off impossible goal.”

On a recent afternoon, the community gathered for an end-of-summer pool party. The children splashed around the pool while their parents chatted on the shaded grass. It was difficult to tell which family was Arab, which was Jewish — and why the distinction mattered.

“We can live together,” Mr. Kitain said. “It’s not a dream, it can really happen.”



Playing near the pool at an end-of-summer party. Credit...Avishag Shaar-Yashuv for The New York Times