

# Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam: The “Oasis of Peace”

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neve shalom/wahat al-salam was founded by Father Bruno Hussar who envisioned a village where Jews, Muslims, and Christians would live together and learn to listen, understand, respect, and trust one another. Born in Egypt in 1911 to secular Jewish Hungarian parents, young Bruno Hussar moved to France to study during his early 20s and converted to Catholicism. In 1950, he was ordained as a priest and began a lifetime commitment to bringing understanding between people of different faiths. Throughout the mid-1950s and 1960s, Father Bruno traveled and lived in Israel where he reconnected with his Jewish roots and worked to build better relationships between the Christian and Jewish communities. In 1972, he convinced the Latrun Trappist Monastery, a producer of wine in the land of Israel for more than 300 years, to lease him a portion of its domain. It was on this hillside, overlooking the Ayalon Valley, where Bruno was inspired by the phrase from the Bible: “My people shall dwell in an oasis of peace” (Isaiah 18:32). He had a vision of “a village where Jews and Arabs from the country will live together in harmony and peace and collaboration.—And the name of that village will be Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, the “Oasis of Peace,” to prove by its existence that cooperation is possible” (Oasis of Dreams 124).

Father Bruno camped on this hillside in a large shipping crate with no water or electricity waiting for others to join him. After six years of living in these conditions without convincing others to share his dream, Father Bruno was ready to give up, realizing that perhaps at 67 time was working against him. “I did something very rash that I wouldn’t advise anybody to do,” said Bruno. “I sent an ultimatum to God, and I gave Him one year to give me two signs” (Oasis of Dreams 126). The first sign would be the arrival of one family to live with him on the hill; the second sign would be raising enough money to begin building a school to teach peace to others. Two months later Bruno received his signs. It was 1979 when the first families arrived—one Jewish-Israeli, the other Arab-Israeli.

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Around the same time, Bruno met a German donor whose support led to the installation of electricity and water in time for the first peace workshops. This first gift led to a network of international friends organizations that have raised millions of dollars to support the programs of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam. At last, Father Bruno's "Oasis of Peace" was a reality.

Neve Shalom, in Hebrew, Wahat al-Salam, in Arabic, both translate to "Oasis of Peace." Located midway between Tel Aviv/Jaffa and Jerusalem, the community coalesced into an idea that would not just exist for itself but that would push beyond its borders to demonstrate to others that Israeli Jews and Arabs were capable of living side by side, democratically electing leaders, and settling neighborly disputes and differences through open dialogue. All shared an ideal that their children could grow up with children from other traditions, learning two languages and two cultures by playing and attending school together.

These first young couples knew that they did not grow up with such contact in their own schools and neighborhoods: "Some people thought we were crazy," said Nava Sonnenschein, a Jewish resident who moved with her husband to the village in 1980 while pregnant with the first of their three children. "I was hauling buckets of water for cooking, laundry, and showers," she laughed. "We needed to have a very big vision to live here."

Over the years, the residents of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam have continued to develop their own vision of the role of the village in the larger political discourse. The village has found renown as it has paved the way for Jews and Arabs to live together as equals. The point of the community in all of its programs is to be true to one's own identity while respecting others' equally. The residents hope that their day-to-day interaction and dialogue will provide a paradigm and inspiration to Jews and Arabs, whether Israelis or Palestinians—throughout both Israel and the Palestinian Authority—that peace is possible. Their main outreach projects are an internationally recognized conflict management program, the School for Peace, and a bilingual, bicultural Primary School/Junior High School.

#### The Primary School and Junior High School

In Israel, Jewish and Arab children are educated in separate schools. Most children learn all they know about "the other side" through the media. The educational system at Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam was founded on the premise that children would gain a balanced perspective by learning in a fully bilingual and bicultural atmosphere. The school started minimally with the children of the village residents, but always with a Jewish and an Arab teacher in every classroom.

"When we started this school, there were only eleven children and three of them were my own," said Ety Edlund, a Jewish resident and a co-founder of the school. "I have to say that we did not realize the impact of what we were doing at the time. We didn't sit back and think that we were the first. Instead, we were just trying to figure out a way to manage it." (need citation here) Early on, teachers came together with objectives in mind to provide a creative space for learning about the other side through immersing the children in each other's languages, cultural, and religious traditions, and cultures. They experimented with how to teach subjects bilingually and how to deal with the difficulties of the conflict that would inevitably surface, particularly on days when headlines reported suffering of either or both sides.

Soon, parents in other towns turned to this kind of educational experience for their children. Since opening enrollment to children in surrounding villages, the Primary School has grown to approximately 300 children in kindergarten through the sixth grade, half Jewish-Israeli and half Arab-Israeli. In 2003, the Primary School inaugurated a Junior High School with a seventh grade. In 2004, an eighth grade is being added. Ninety percent of the Primary School and Junior High School students are bused from over twenty-five surrounding communities and eight regional districts as far as forty kilometers away. Ety said, looking back, "Now, after all these years, my own children have finished the school, gone on to college. I've watched so many other children grow up here too, and I think about what a difficult and amazing thing that we are doing." (need citation here)

The Primary School and Junior High School continues to experiment with classroom structure and curriculum. The approach underscores the importance of maintaining one's cultural identity while being exposed to the language and viewpoints of the other side. (how is this done?) Language is an essential element in development and identity. Learning to speak and understand another language aids in understanding that other culture. As teachers instruct in their own language, they also present their own cultural perspective. (how is this different from Arabic instruction in secular Israeli schools?)

Giving time and attention to both sides' history and culture requires a lot of sensitivity. "Teaching historical markers in the Arab-Jewish conflict is a challenge," explains Diana Shalufi-Rizek, an Arab and former co-principal of the school. "For example, Independence Day for Israel is known as al-Nakba, or the "catastrophe," for Arabs. The teachers at the school prepare their students in the weeks leading up to the day to understand why Arabs and Jews might see the significance of this day differently. In this school, children are introduced to two perspectives on the country's history." (need citation here)

Over the years, the Primary School has been held up as a model for bicultural teaching, both colloquially and officially. The Ministry of Education designated the Primary School as an “experimental” school in 1997, recognizing its contribution to progressive bilingual curriculum. The school attained official status in 2000: the Ministry of Education deems the Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam Primary School and Junior High School qualified to educate Israeli citizens. These recognitions have come with additional responsibilities to provide assistance to other Israeli schools. Today, at least three schools are modeled after the Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam Primary School. Teachers and principals throughout Israel have turned to the Primary School/Junior High School to be an example for the creation of alternative educational experiences.

#### Building Spirituality: Living Together in Faith

Father Bruno believed that although the religions of the Middle East have often been a source of division between people these religions share a common seed that if nurtured can serve as a consensus-building influence and bridge existing cultural and political conflicts. The families of the community remain committed to the practice of their own religious and spiritual traditions while respecting and learning about their neighbors’ faiths and traditions. For those living in Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam that means being “wholly” Arab or “wholly” Jewish and not becoming part of a melting pot. The community does not encourage or discourage mixed marriages. There is one mixed (Jewish-Arab) couple who came to the “Oasis of Peace” at the very beginning. “We are aware of these issues and we deal with them, but we also understand the deep complexities and difficulties of inter-marriage. Our children understand these issues too,” says Abdessalam Najjar, an Arab resident. Are most of the Jews secular? Reform? conservative? Are any Orthodox? How about the Israeli Arabs?

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Father Bruno led small group discussions called the “Circle of Reflection,” which allowed participants to discuss the role of religious values in peacemaking. In 1987, the House of Silence—Beit Doumia in Hebrew, Beit as-Sakina in Arabic—was built in a beautiful secluded corner of the hillside in the village. This is a simple round domed structure intended to symbolize the unity at the heart of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and taking its inspiration from the words of Psalms 65, “For You, silence is praise.” Devoid of specific religious symbols, the House of Silence is a place where everyone from every faith and tradition can find inspiration and a space for meditation. Are there any Buddhists or Hindus?

The residents of the community celebrate holidays together, and the basic

cultural elements of major holidays are taught in the Primary School/Junior High School where the children learn about Hanukkah, Ramadan, Christmas, Purim, Easter, Eid Al-Fitr and other celebrations, although deeper spiritual explanations are left to the families. How is this different from secular Israeli schools? The community and the schools use the holidays as a way to bring people together. When a teen celebrates his Bar Mitzvah, he invites both Jewish and Arab families to celebrate. Likewise, on Ramadan the families in the community break the fast together.

Today, the Pluralistic Spiritual Center (first mention — say more) emerges as a program to reach out beyond the borders of the village. Activities at the Center bring together people from both Jewish and Arab communities in Israel to participate in dialogue and to explore how religious identity can reshape the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In study days, seminars, and courses, the Center helps people to explore their spiritual, ethnic, ideological, and cultural experiences and thus articulate an identity that connects people together without diminishing the importance of differences.

### The School for Peace

The School for Peace conducts workshops between Israelis, both Jewish and Arab, and Palestinians from the West Bank/Gaza. The School for Peace held its first encounter workshop between Jews and Palestinians in 1979, long before the 1993 Oslo Accords encouraged such projects. In its early days, the School for Peace consisted of a handful of the village's first residents who took Father Bruno's mandate to build an institute designed to teach peace to oppose the many schools for war. Father Bruno explained:

For years there have been academies in the various countries where the art of war has been taught. We wanted to found a school for peace, for peace too is an art. People come here from all over the country to meet those from whom they [are] estranged, wanting to break down the barriers of fear, mistrust, ignorance, misunderstanding, preconceived ideas—all things that separate us—and to build bridges of trust, respect, mutual understanding, and, if possible, friendship. (When the Cloud Lifted 103)

At the School for Peace, a process of trial and error led to a developing method. Many groups in Israel have tried to bridge the distance between Jews and Palestinians through “get-to-know-you” gatherings, hoping that putting a name and face to someone from the other side would create understanding through friendship. But it was often noted that this kind of interaction failed to address

stereotypes and misperceptions or underlying issues of inequality. What is the School for Peace method? What kind of encounter is it? What psychological school is used?

The School for Peace has reached thousands, and its influence has been powerful in shaping the lives of its participants. For example, Ahmad Hijazi participated in a School for Peace youth encounter in 1985 as a high school student. The experience affected him and he returned to the School for Peace to be trained as a facilitator. He now lives with his wife and children in the village and is a co-director of the School for Peace. Ahmad, with more than 10 years of experience facilitating workshops, said that the School for Peace provides tools for its participants:

The encounter has a power that no other activity related to this subject has. It is an experience that opens a variety of both possibilities and risk, but there is no substitute for it. The realities of Israel do not give the young people of both groups a chance to meet on equal terms. So the encounters that take place are usually accompanied by feelings of fear, humiliation, disappointment, and distrust. What we try to do is to provide a way to process and understand these feelings, helping our young people to be better able to cope with the Jewish-Palestinian conflict. (Oasis of Dreams 86)

Working on both sides of the Green Line, each workshop between Palestinian Arabs and Jews creates a dialogue facilitated always by one person from each side in order to create trust and balance. Discussions tackle topics such as land, right of return, equality, and political negotiations. Personal identity is emphasized at every turn (can you give an example?) so that participants may recognize their relationship in the context of the greater conflict and understand their role in it. Participants learn to take responsibility for their opinions and actions as they engage issues connected to Jewish-Arab relations.

For many, School for Peace workshops are the first opportunity to sit down face to face with someone from the other side and talk about the heart of the conflict. The effectiveness of the School for Peace method can be measured by how it affects its participants. A Jewish participant recounted his experience in the encounter:

The workshop offered us the framework and the time to confront difficult questions, and to reach a point at which we could listen to each other without feeling a need to compete over who suffers more. We saw that as Jews and Palestinians we shared a mutual need to have our pain recognized, or understood, by the other. (Oasis of Dreams 110)

A Palestinian participant offered his analysis:

In this workshop we talked about creating better relations between these two peoples who live on this land. I don't know whether we were successful. But I am persuaded more than ever that we have no choice but coexistence. I feel after this workshop that the conflict isn't just territorial or geographic, but very much more centered on the quality of our relations as two peoples who are bound to one another whether we like it or not—we have to find ways of understanding that. (Oasis of Dreams 110)

The School for Peace has seen this kind of understanding develop between thousands of Palestinian Arabs and Jews who have addressed their concerns, fears, and perceptions about the conflict. Every person who has this experience can make better choices about the conflict to exert a positive influence toward sharing responsibility to build a peaceful future. What's the further evidence of its impact under the 2 Intifadas?

The School for Peace initially focused on youth, usually sixteen and seventeen-year-olds, who would come to the village of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam for 3-day encounter workshops. Today the School for Peace has expanded its conflict management work to training programs for educators and community leaders, to university courses, and to adult courses, including women's projects. The underlying goal in each is to create possibilities for peace through dialogue.

#### Milestones and Watershed Events in the Organization's History

Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam has survived one intifada (1987-1993), the 1991 Gulf War, and several unsuccessful attempts to secure a political resolution to the Israeli-Arab conflict. Today it is very much affected by the current intifada which began in 2000. Despite this turmoil, the village continues to support dialogue and build relationships based on mutual trust between Arabs and Jews. What impact has it had on the Intifada? On suicide bombers?

Like anybody else living in conditions of conflict, the village residents have felt an enormous strain while still committed to their ideals of living together equally. "We are not living in a bubble. We are touched by the reality, but we are trying to create an alternative reality without violence," says Laila Najjar, a 20-year-old Arab resident who was born in the community. Disagreements about how to resolve the greater political conflict arise at times along with normal communal disputes about governance. While they speak in a unified voice for peace, village residents do not always agree on the steps to achieve peace. On

more than one occasion, the different positions of village residents have been a cause for difficult discussions and disagreement. "Everything is open for discussion in our community," says Dafna Karta Schwartz, a Jewish resident. "Everything is on the table." (need citation here)

For example, on one hand, the village wrestles with discussions of identity. In recent years, many Arab-Israelis are defining themselves as Palestinian citizens of Israel, thereby recognizing their cultural and traditional connections as Palestinians but also realizing their rights and opportunities as citizens of Israel. "We discuss these issues around identity, and what it means, in the schools, in the School for Peace and in the community," explains Dafna. (citation here) There are also issues "including how to deal with Israeli military service. In Israel, all Jewish citizens of Israel serve a compulsory military term and Druze citizens are also entitled to serve. Some residents of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam choose to serve in non-combat units. One or two residents have chosen to opt out of service by leaving the country to study abroad. Since the Israeli government offers incentives for military service, including retirement and social service benefits as well as the inherent honor of serving one's country, so it is not an easy decision, even for a young person growing up in the "Oasis of Peace." Is pacifism the dominant ideal for both Jews & Arabs in the village?

Ori Sonnenschein, an 18-year-old Jew, and Rami Mannaa, an 18-year-old Arab, have grown up together in the "Oasis of Peace." Their friendship began in the Primary School and continues today, though the country where they live requires different things of them. Their conversations are open and honest and illustrate the ways they use dialogue to confront issues that concern them:

Rami: One of the hardest things for me is seeing my friends deciding to serve their military service. It's important for me to explain to them why I wish that they did not do this.

Ori: And it's important to me to listen and try to explain why I am choosing to serve. We've spent a lot of time talking about it.

Rami: And we understand each other's viewpoints. We will not let this come between our friendship. (citation here)

One of the most difficult moments for the village occurred when a Jewish young man, who grew up beloved by his Arab and Jewish neighbors, was killed as an Israeli soldier while on a mission with a combat unit. In a military accident, two helicopters crashed into each other and took the lives of 73 Israeli soldiers. Tom Kita'in, a 21-year-old resident of the village, was among the young men killed. He was just two months away from finishing his third year of compulsory

military service.

“The village mourned collectively for our loss,” said Rayek Rizek, an Arab who was mayor of the community during that time, “but difficult discussions continued months after his death.” His family wanted to raise a memorial marker in the village; it took many months of painful discussions to find a way to do this so that all residents, Arab and Jewish, would find it acceptable. The residents compromised and placed a small plaque on a playground honoring and remembering one child of the “Oasis of Peace.”

Residents are, indeed, affected deeply by the surrounding conditions of violence and tense relationships between Jews and Arabs throughout Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Just days after the second intifada erupted in October 2000, the village moved forward with peace initiatives. The residents organized an immediate peace conference, participated in demonstrations across the region, began collecting money and supplies for humanitarian programs and, most importantly, kept their educational programs running. Recent years have been another test and trial for the stamina and commitment of the village. “But no one is leaving,” says long-time resident, Howard Shippin. “Conflict has always been a built-in part of life here.”

Given the intensity of the conflict and the fear engendered by both sides’ actions, it is notable that none of the 50 families who live there have left, that 16 more families are in the process of building new homes and 300 families remain on the waiting list to live in the village.

### The Future

Perhaps the future for peace between Jews and Palestinians will look like a model of dialogue and power-sharing (can you say more about this?) as created by Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam. There are no plans to replicate the village. Rather, the idea is that the example that these residents set, and the effect they have on others through their outreach programs, will prepare citizens of Israel and the Palestinian Authority to create ways to live together equally, peacefully and with respect for each other. Is there a similar village in other countries? in Europe? in the Middle East?

Evidence of future peacemakers—of young people willing to see beyond stereotypes and recognize the importance of another’s culture—can be found among the village’s own children. In January 2003, the residents of Neve Shalom Wahat al-Salam voted to admit two of its own children as members of the community. Sagi Frish became the first second-generation Jewish member and Suleiman Boulos, was the first Arab second-generation member admitted.

Members are entitled to vote in village elections, serve on committees, and apply for building privileges. Eleven more young people have recently been accepted for membership.

Boulos, 23 years old, is a third-year medical student in Freiburg, Germany. Frish, 22, was one of the first four children born in the village, and his family was among the first to arrive. He recently completed his military service and is currently working as an operational manager of the village's Guest House. Upon hearing that current members of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam had approved his request for membership, Frish explained that after experiencing other frameworks, he had come to see the ideology (explain & name it) of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam as his own. "I want to be a part of this place. I want to raise my children in such an environment," said Frish. His friend, Suliman, quickly adds, "Öand I want others to know that living together with respect for each other is possible. We can all do it. Neve Shalom/Wahat Al-Salam is just an example of what the future can look like." (citation here)

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