

Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam

A Three Part Interview
December 18th, 2008



Part 1 - Howard Shippin “I live as If the future is now”

Fifty-five families live in Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam situated along Israel’s infamous green line. The community keeps its population strictly split at 50-50—half Arab Palestinian, half Israeli Jew. The late Bruno Hussar, a Dominican monk, founded the village in the late 1960s, at first a few shacks on a hill, there are now 220 members. The community has an internationally renowned School For Peace, a bi-national primary school, a hotel, a spiritual center and several large meeting halls and administrative centers. The village’s sole purpose for existence, say many of its members, is simply to disprove the persistent modern myth that Arabs Palestinians and Israeli Jews cannot live together in harmony.

Of all the residents one finds at Wahat al-Salam, Howard Shippin is perhaps the most unexpected. He was born in Yorkshire, England and is neither Jewish nor Arab. He claims no religious affiliation but is married to a Jewish woman named Dorit, who heads the village’s Spiritual Center. Howard and Dorit have lived in the village for twenty-three years. Howard serves as the Communications and Development chief. He’s fifty-one years old and speaks Hebrew and English.



Jesse Nathan: Where does NSWAS’ confidence in co-existence come from? From what evidence does this insistence draw upon?

Howard Shippin: “Coexistence” is actually one of those words like “tolerance,” which don’t necessarily express what you want to say. It literally means that two entities exist together. And “tolerance” means that you are willing to “tolerate” the presence of the other party, although you may not enjoy doing so. So, using the word coexistence requires a mention of the kind of coexistence you are talking

about. In the context of NSWAS we are striving towards a quality of coexistence where there is a sharing of authority and responsibilities, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding. Any other form of coexistence perpetuates mutual antagonism and a power struggle, where each side will continue to fight for superiority rather than work for an integrative society that is enriched by its separate identities. Our model may not be perfect, but is sufficiently developed and durable enough to give us confidence that it has relevance to the macro-level conflict.

JN: This community has very humble beginnings. In the late 60s this spot was a barren hilltop where mostly itinerant, peace-minded souls gathered at the behest of a Jewish-born Dominican Monk. How did the village come into being?

HS: Bruno considered a true community to have gotten started when families took up residence here, in the late 1970s. Some of these were already involved in dialog work between Arabs and Jews. The number of families gradually increased from that time. In 1985, the village was recognized as such by the Ministry of the Interior, which means that it was on the map and the village was eligible for various services that were not there or supported by the authorities before that.

JN: Many villagers talk about NSWAS as a laboratory. What is daily life like?

HS: First, if members speak of a laboratory, perhaps they mean that the community is inhabited by two national groups who in the external reality coexist in a situation of conflict. Second, about 2/3 of the adult residents work outside of the village. Those who do work in the village, and those commute to jobs in the village, work in a binational, multi-cultural work environment. Those who do not work in the village have the opportunity to take part in village committees or volunteer their time for activities, such as in the youth center. In general, NSWAS villagers probably have greater community involvement than do residents of ordinary towns. There is a level of intensity about the place caused by the multiple roles that members find themselves in. One difference between NSWAS and other small communities is its heterogeneity. Communities have traditionally been founded upon aspects of ethnicity, culture, religion, politics or ideology that serve as unifying factors. Such aspects are absent or less prevalent here.

JN: The community's self-governance seems to have worked well, considering that the community is already a few decades old. Are there issues or topics that are especially difficult for the community to process, things that seem more sensitive than most?

HS: One issue is Arabic. It has been very difficult to get Jewish residents to obtain a suitable level of Arabic so that meetings can be conducted in the two languages. Another issue is military service. Young Jewish residents receive mixed messages from the community and don't get much support for their decision to serve or not to serve in the army. Formally, of course, this isn't really a decision, since it is almost impossible for male Jewish citizens to be exempted for reasons of conscience in Israel.

JN: Are there certain moments when circumstances or current events cause folks around the country to fix more hostile or, as the case may be, more appreciative attention on the community?

HS: Last year we had the Roger Waters concert. The artist originally planned the concert for Tel Aviv, but changed the venue to NSWAS partly due to efforts by The Palestinian Campaign for the Cultural and Academic Boycott of Israel, though NSWAS had also been discussed as a venue prior to the tour. It brought 60,000 people and caused three - to - five hour traffic jams on the Tel Aviv - Jerusalem highway. So naturally that brought a lot of attention to the village, so that today it would be hard to find an Israeli who hasn't heard of it. The community has symbolic value as a place where Arabs and Jews live in peace together, whether or not the concept of the village is fully understood. Ways in which we reach the news are unpredictable. For instance, last week, after a spate of recent incidences of sports violence and incitements to racism, representatives of supporters of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem basketball teams came to the village to discuss ways to calm fans of the two teams. They came because the village is midway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and is seen as a symbol of tolerance and coexistence. Once, at about 1 AM just after the start of the second Intifada I was having trouble getting to sleep with all that was happening. The radio station I had on played a song by Peter Gabriel and Kate Bush called "Don't Give Up" and then the DJ came on and said that despite all that was happening, there was at least one village where Jews and Arabs were still living together in peace. I don't know what made her think of us.

JN: How does NSWAS' educational approach—in the primary school, in the peace school, in general—grapple with the way the two sides see and articulate the conflict to and among themselves?

HS: On this side of the Green Line, there is the problem of the Palestinian narrative having been suppressed in Arab schools. This year [2007], in a controversial move, the Israeli Education Ministry finally permitted the use of the term "Nakba" in a school textbook - though only for Arab students. Children of primary school age do not learn the history of modern Israel. However, in the framework of learning about national holidays, our children here learn that there are two historical narratives that coexist side by side. It is desirable that the children will grow up strong and confident in their own identity without feelings of guilt or impotence. However, we want them also to develop an understanding of and sensitivity for the viewpoint and historical narrative of the other people. This is not a matter of textbook learning. The children bring stories from home, and visit ruined villages within walking distance of NSWAS.

JN: I just read in The San Francisco Chronicle about a recent archaeological discovery on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, site of the Al Aqsa mosque, one of Islam's holiest sites. Israeli archaeologists made the find and some Israelis are seizing this as further proof that Israel's claim to the land is the most legitimate.

HS: I often wonder whether the true Jews aren't really the Palestinians. Two thousand years ago, some of the Jews went into exile. Others remained, changed their religion and,

with a certain amount of intermingling, became the Palestinians of today. South of Mt. Hebron there are even people who retain certain Jewish customs, although outwardly they are Muslims. The Jews who, a couple of thousand years ago, left to Europe or the Arab countries, mingled and acquired the genes of the nations to which they departed. So about half of today's Israelis are ethnically and culturally Arab. When you look at the situation in this way, historical proofs such as you mention fade into insignificance.

JN: Does it ever feel artificial, living in a community that so carefully maintains a 50-50 balance between Arabs and Israeli Jews?

HS: The numerical ratio is just a loose framework that is quickly forgotten in everyday life.

JN: I read early village newsletters that talked about olive crops and raising goats. These days, there's no real business or industry happening in the community. Economically, how does the village stay afloat?

HS: Olives were planted both to greenify the hillside and because olives require little irrigation. However, the land upon which the olives were planted has reverted to the neighboring Latrun Abbey now. In the 1980s, there was an experiment at sheep farming which did not succeed very well. We do not have land for agriculture and do not have any real plans to get into industry. There is a small hotel and swimming pool. The community is not a communal settlement and is therefore not dependent upon the development of communal enterprises, as in a kibbutz. About two thirds of the residents commute to jobs in nearby cities or are independently employed. The rest work in the educational institutions, the hotel or the municipal offices. The educational institutions are financed largely by foundations, private donations, the state, or participant fees. A network of friends' associations in Europe and North America help to raise funds for their programs and sometimes for development projects.

JN: Has any sort of long-term goal been articulated amongst villagers to be financially independent as a community someday?

HS: As the village grows, it becomes less dependent upon outside help for its municipal needs. The planned new neighborhoods will be financed largely by those who build houses. The educational institutions will probably never be self-supporting and will continue to require support from foundations and friends associations.

JN: Meanwhile, NSWAS is growing. How does the village handle expansion logistically? What is the process there—and what are the hopes?

HS: We have reached the limits of the original master plan, which included about 55 homes. Future building will be according to an expansion plan with 92 homes, for which we are currently completing the bureaucratic process. New families will lease their lot from the village, and pay development and infrastructure costs. They will plan a home, have the plan approved, and then build. As in the past, families desiring to join the

community will be screened and approved by an application committee elected by the community. The current fifty-fifty ratio of Arab and Jewish families will be preserved.

JN: The younger generations—the kids who grew up in the village—are returning to live in NSWAS, right?

HS: Many of the young people see their future in the village, and some are in the process of setting up home here. Unfortunately, we probably won't have room for all of them, if we want new people to join, too.

JN: So do you have a cap in terms of the number of people you'd ultimately like in the village?

HS: No. However the expansion plan will add another 92 homes and this is all the land available to us at present.

JN: What is the your long-term hope for the village?

HS: Responses to such a question would always be personal. I would like Israel to become an integrated multicultural nation that extends equality and justice to all of its citizens, acts to redress historical injustices, and works to resolve the conflict with its neighbors. Whether or not these things happen, I hope that NSWAS will remain relevant and creative as a force for social change and education for peace.

Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam

December 22nd, 2008

A Three Part Interview Roundtable

Part 2 - Michal Zak

Michal Zak is a forty-nine year old Jewish resident of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, a village with a population mandated at exactly 50% Palestinian Arab/Israeli Jew. She's been living at Neve Shalom for twenty-two years. For twenty-one of those years she's held a facilitator position at the School For Peace.

JN: Do you see the conflict in Israel/Palestine as a clash of religions or nationalist identities? Or both?

MZ: I see religion as yet another means to an end in the conflict, not as the source of it. I think the source is deeper. It's cultural. One group, the Israeli Jews, with the military and economic power have also the power to persuade everyone that we Jews are better, more moral, better human beings, superior, humane, developed, and so on. That gives us the justification to occupy and control and not give equal rights.

JN: Why did you join NSWAS?

MZ: I thought it was a good idea to build a model based on equality. Also I liked the idea of doing something deeper than going to demonstrations, I liked to work in education and I was offered a job at the School For Peace.

JN: So what exactly does the School for Peace do?



a building in Gaza destroyed during the war with Lebanon

MZ: The SFP is a center for political education with the goal of creating a more humane, equal, and just society. Raising awareness of the nature of majority – minority group power relations remains an important goal for us. But we’ve begun to regard this awareness as an elementary first stage towards higher aims that must be laid out more explicitly. After all, we cannot end our workshops satisfied only by knowing that the Jewish participants have become more aware of the existence of discrimination and that the Palestinian participants have been made aware of just how extreme the mainstream Jewish positions in Israel are. The workshop must lead participants to an understanding of what it is that constructs the racist positions that we confront.

For years we regarded the political discussion as the principle subject. We insisted on putting the most difficult issues on the table. We still insist on this. However it is the dialogue on fundamental feelings of superiority and inferiority behind the political positions that we now identify as the difficult issue to be addressed. In working towards liberation from oppression each group confronts a different task. It is up to us to create a space in which Jewish participants can identify and struggle against the racism in their society and in themselves while the Palestinian participants work towards making their voices heard. Racism is a difficult subject to confront, especially when we define racism by tying it to power. There is plenty of racism of stronger groups towards weaker groups within Palestinian society, however in the Jewish – Palestinian context our work must be on racism in Jewish society. Post-colonialist literature teaches us that the work of the minority group is to make its presence known - or in other words to resist. Even within the relatively protected environment of the workshop when Palestinians say what is on their mind they risk being accused of sabotaging the dialogue or of being labeled by Jewish participants as extreme or even violent. How often does one want to deal with such attacks? The choice to remain silent or “nice” is often the easier path. The very effort required of the Palestinians to make their voices heard exposes a painful level of internalized oppression against which they must struggle. As each group overcomes its own side of the struggle they build the grounds for true dialogue and cooperation towards a more equal society.

JN: How many students have gone through the School For Peace?

MZ: About 40,000.

JN: Relate for me, if you will, a favorite anecdote illustrating the power of the encounter method, in which you bring together Israeli Jews and Arab Palestinians for intense, confrontational workshop sessions.

MZ: I'll share with you one particularly interesting meeting that took place in the last Tel-Aviv University group. One male participant from the Jewish group and one male participant from the Arab group were very dominating in the dialogue and they pulled the discussion towards a historical and political debate. Usually we would see such a discussion as a deviation from the "here and now," and we would try and bring the group to talk about the inter-group relations as they are manifested in the workshop setting. This time we decided to give these two participants the space to lead the discussion away from the kind of subject matter that we usually focus on. They conducted an intellectual duel over historical accounts and political analyses which were at times exhausting, but their insistence on examining every detail and concept led to some new channels of dialogue. Naturally, this was not the first time that participants argued with each other over history, but this time we allowed the group to deepen their historical debate and the results were fascinating.

At one point, a Jewish student turned to an Arab student from Kufer Qassem asking her how they deal with the infamous massacre at her town. The Arab student briefly told the story of the men and women from Kfar Kassem who were on their way home from work in 1956, unaware of a curfew that had been imposed by the Israeli Army, when 49 of them were shot and killed by Israeli soldiers. We asked her to expand on the story because some of the Jewish students might not be aware of the details. The Jewish group immediately responded, offended by the suggestion that they did not know the story of Kufer Kassem. They said that the story is taught both in high school and in the army. We suggested that the Arab student continue since the Jews had never heard it in the Arab's voice. She continued the story. Occasionally one of the Jewish students supplemented the story with a detail or two and when she finished the Jewish group confirmed that that was exactly how they learned the story. Jewish students went on to explain that the story is taught in the army as an example of an illegal order. It was a case in which it was illegal to follow the commander's order to open fire.

Having easily reached agreement on the facts of the Kufer Kassem event, the students then turned to the question of how they interpret it. The Jews refer to the massacre as a horrible exception to the norms of the Israeli army. The soldiers were tried and punished and the lesson is taught to future generations of Israeli soldiers thereby upholding their higher moral standards. The Arabs regard Kufer Kassem as one link in a chain of atrocities, from Dir Yasin and Tantur to Sabra and Shatila. In addition, the soldiers were tried and received 17 years in jail, and were released after three years. Even if it is not Israel's declared policy, the students said, as far as they are concerned the results on the ground demonstrate a systematic attack on the Palestinian people.

Everyone was surprised by the other's interpretation of a story that they had all learned. It deepened their understanding that this conflict is supported by a web of images and assumptions that give meaning to the facts of history, even when these facts are not contested.

JN: How hard is it for people to adjust their way of looking at the conflict to include another group's narrative?

MZ: Hard, if you were brought up and manipulated by your own group to be centered in your own group. Otherwise I think it's easy, but to fight the truths you were taught all your life, and that are the invisible base of your society, this is very hard and threatening.

JN: In an earlier conversation you told me that, "Palestinian resistance is also a factor to the change." Does that include suicide bombs?

MZ: Resistance is always more morally justified than attack by a conqueror. So it cannot be judged in the same way. The strength of the Israeli army, and the fact that we are a state, which signed international treaties and accords makes a difference as well. Now specifically about the Palestinian resistance and violence: I don't think one should talk about suicide bombers separately from other things. I don't think it is any different than for example leaving a bomb somewhere in Israel and driving away before it explodes. That for me is the same, it's in the category of violence against civilians—as opposed to violence against soldiers which is the most legitimate, and violence against settlers, which is second on my list. But I don't think that if they decided to attack in the cities in Israel that it matters how, it just makes me see how desperate they are to use this kind of human bomb, and that is depressing and scary. I know it seems like the ultimate evil and inhumane thing, I know it makes one think suicide bombers represent all Arabs or Moslems and that therefore all Arabs and Moslems have no value to life, even their own. But I don't see it this way. I can imagine one becoming so desperate that blowing yourself up for the cause could be an option. It is very hard to keep hope alive in some situations.

On the other hand, the Israeli army does war crimes against the Palestinian civilians, but it is more sophisticated, in airplanes, and tanks, so it seems more legitimate. It's within the game of warfare. I used to think that killing with a knife, with your bare hands was more barbaric than using a gun or other weapon and I think we are taught to think that, but I don't think that's true any more.



*a street closed in Jerusalem
after a bomb scare*

JN: So to you, what the IDF does to the Palestinians is essentially just a more sophisticated form of terrorism than that which the Palestinians conduct?

MZ: First, I don't use the term IDF anymore; I call it the Israeli army. Second, it is not terrorism because the official definition of terrorism is when the violence is not authorized by the State, so everything the Palestinians do is terrorism because they don't have an army—but that doesn't make it unjustifiable. On the other hand, the Israeli army is doing things that are so far from defense these days. It is doing things that are definitely war crimes, no doubt about it, it's just that we are on the side of the "good guys" in the world, so we are not being persecuted or even reprimanded for what the army is doing. I can tell you that I know first hand of things that are blatantly war crimes,

like bombing into resident areas, and pressuring sick people to become collaborators, in exchange for medical treatment, and dropping cluster bombs into Lebanon. Don't get me started.

Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam - Part 3, "I live as if the future is now."

December 24th, 2008

A Three Part Interview Roundtable **Part 3 – Rayek Rizek**



Jesse Nathan and Rayek Rizek

Rayek Rizek came to Neve Shalom (a village on the green line mandated 50 percent Israeli Jew and 50 percent Palestinian Arab) with his wife Dyana in May 1984 and has served as mayor twice. These days, Rizek runs a Café and a shop with his wife, located near the community's guesthouse.

JN: What has changed about the community as it has expanded? Is expansion good for the village?

Rayek Rizek: With the growth of the Alwaha, it has changed from a community to a village. This means that people here are less in contact with each other. Fewer and fewer people come to the General meeting or are willing to take the responsibilities of being members in the different committees. A majority of inhabitants now work outside of the Village and many of the internal issues are not of interest to them.

So it seems that the more the Community grows the lesser the contact between the people as a whole group. But also people group around different issues. For example, those who still have kids in the school are more interested in what is taking place in this institution than those who do not have kids there. Those who are working in the village and are paid by it are more present in the budget meetings than those who do not work in the Village. Also, people are socializing in small groups that are mostly mixed between Jews and Palestinians and not anymore in the whole group as when it was a community of twenty families.



This is not to say that what has been happening is a failure. The community is still growing and I believe it is more legitimate as an idea than it has been ever been in the country. This is a general and short answer for a complex question.

JN: Where does NSWAS's confidence in co-existence come from?

RR: Since the idea of NSWAS required its members to also live together in the same place the experience has been different. The community became the home of its members and therefore it made it more difficult to quit. But every single person here has thought many times about leaving as a result of different disappointments and contradicting expectations. But when the moment to make that final decision comes close, it appears to be more difficult to consider such a step since it was not about quitting your membership in an organization but more about physically loading your belongings and yourself to go to some other place.

I always say that we were stuck together here like a group of people on a boat at the middle of the sea where you do not have any other choice except to continue the journey. You cannot make a hole in your part of the boat since you will drown everybody else with you and you have to work together with the rest if you are to face the storm. I believe that peace between our two peoples will be more possible when they both develop this awareness of being on the same boat for good or bad.

JN: When I first came to Wahat al-Salam I carried with me this sense that I'd found the perfect peaceful utopia. All of the members I talked to quickly relieved me of this myth, pointing out that life in an intentional community is as messy and intense as life anywhere else. Maybe more so. Eventually my disillusionment evolved into a sense of respect for the work the community does. One of the hardest examples of Neve Shalom "living the conflict" was in regards to the death of native son Tom Kita'in.

RR: Tom was killed in an accident between two Israeli Defense Forces Helicopters along with another 75 soldiers who were in their way to Lebanon. The death of Tom was a big shock for the whole village. All of us, Jews and Palestinians, joined the family in their pain and took part in the funeral. This funeral was for most if not all the Palestinians the first funeral to be attended for an Israeli soldier. But in this case it was the funeral of a young man from the village who was also the son and the brother of a family that had been among us for more than ten years.



The sad situation was when the Israeli journalists were obsessed with trying to find out about the feelings of the Palestinian members. They wanted to be sure we really were also in pain for the death of the soldier. What those journalists were looking for and hoping for was proof that the whole idea of NSWAS is a fake.

Anyway, some months passed by and an idea came up

with the suggestion of erecting a monument for Tom at the entrance of the newly finished basketball field in the village. The idea was not accepted by most of the Arab members (joined by some Jewish members) who still saw Tom as a soldier who was involved in fighting against the Lebanese and maybe the Palestinian resistance in Lebanon. We carried many meetings and we could not reach an agreement. After months of discussions I suggested hanging a plaque near the entrance of the field with a tree to be planted under it. The content of words on the plaque would be left for the family to decide. And then it was over. I cannot say that every body agreed with my idea but that was a solution that everybody could live with.

JN: In 1999 a Mr. Shlomo Mark argued in the Jerusalem Post that the divisions surrounding the death of Kita'in proved that NSWAS had been "tried in tragedy" and "found wanting." You wrote a letter published in the Post on March 26, 1999.

RR: In spite of our resolution with the plaque, the Israeli press still insisted on talking about the unneeded compromise which was made by the Jews and about the so-called insensitivity of the Palestinian families. But this was not true since we made a difficult and challenging choice of living together while still being part of the conflict. I said before that the encounter here was with no preconditions and therefore everything is expected and every argument and disagreement is legitimate. After all we are the only group in all of the Jews and Palestinians who took this challenge and who are dealing with the most difficult questions that nobody else is dealing with. And you have to remember that we are not a group of professionals in conflict resolution but we are ordinary people who made a choice to live a very real challenge.

JN: What is it like in the community on May 14, the day that Israeli Jews view as Independence Day and Palestinian Arabs view as "the catastrophe"?

RR: The relation to this issue has changed with the times. It was only during 1984 when the demographic balance between Jews and Palestinians reached equality as a result of the absorption of three Palestinian families including myself and Dyana. So the first Independence/Nakba occasion that raised a serious discussion was that spring, in 1984. I would say that the presence of almost an equal number of Jews and Palestinians brought many serious discussions about the identity of the community. It was also in September 1984 when the primary school was opened which was another important issue to be discussed, regarding the question of bilingual, bi-national and multi cultural education, since there were Jewish, Moslem Arab, and Christian Arab kids in the school. I still remember that during those early discussions regarding the issue of Independence/Nakba things were not easy. From one side the Jews felt that it would be okay to celebrate the independence and believed that there was no contradiction between their choice to live in NSWAS and also to celebrate. It became clear for most of them and maybe for the first time that the Palestinians will not feel easy with this celebration since the occasion has a totally different meaning to us.

This was one of those issues that was not possible to solve with a vote at the end of a meeting. But what became clear for everybody was that this day was an occasion that we

cannot be together around. Those intensive meetings helped us to understand the complexity of our choices without necessarily reaching agreements. It was common to see members from the same national group arguing with each other since they had different opinions or different levels of tolerance towards what a certain member from the other group could express of feelings and needs. With time we got so used to this situation. During the occasion of Independence some Jewish families would get together on that evening to fry some food on a fire and to sing as they were used to doing outside. Some of them would raise the flag on the Balcony of their house. Today nothing happens here. No gatherings or celebrations or flags. It seems that most of the Jews have made a certain compromise regarding the celebration of this day in the village.

JN: Are you optimistic about the prospects for peace in, say, your lifetime?

RR: I don't want to put a time frame on it. I chose to live in a bi-national ideological community like NSWAS because I didn't want to wait around for the leaders to make peace. I live as if the future is now.