

Copyright 2006 Newspaper Publishing PLC  
All Rights Reserved  
The Independent (London)

July 27, 2006 Thursday  
First Edition

## **An Oasis of Peace Surrounded by Hatred**

CAROLE CAPLIN

In a unique village in Israel, halfway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, a class of six-year-olds is talking about peace and war. There are two teachers' one speaks Hebrew, the other Arabic. A group of visitors from around the world looks on in admiring silence. The teachers ask the children if they think peace is something that can be turned on, "like a tap for instance?"

The six-year-olds laugh. They say, "No - peace means being friends with one's neighbours, talking and listening to one another and caring about other people's feelings." They then talk about sharing, and how, "it's better to share a seat with another person than not have a seat to sit on at all".

I am in a village with two names. In Hebrew, the village is called Neve Shalom' in Arabic Wahat al-Salam. In English both mean Oasis of Peace.

In this place, founded by a Dominican priest in 1972, live some 50 Israeli families. Almost equally divided between Jews and Arabs, the latter from Christian and Muslim backgrounds, the families live and work together to promote their ideals in a state as close to complete harmony as is possible. Democratically governed and collectively owned by its members, the village is the one and only place in Israel where Jewish and Arab families have voluntarily chosen to live side-by-side.

At the village school, Jewish and Arab children are taught in the same classroom, to help replace conflict with reconciliation. They play and swim together and learn each other's language, cultural background and history.

My own upbringing was pretty unconventional where religion was concerned. My mother Sylvia and her mother, Stella firmly inculcated the values of tolerance, acceptance and generosity in both me and my older sister Nikki. And although our family is Jewish, we weren't brought up in the religion. Nikki and I were offered the opportunity to explore Judaism and other faiths, rather than judge prematurely or believe blindly. Prejudice was simply not allowed in our family, nor snobbery. Anything that looked like discrimination on any level - class, money, religion or whatever - was stamped out of us.

I have an enormous amount of respect for Judaism. But the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict is for me, particularly in its current phase of outright warfare in Lebanon and siege conditions in Gaza, a source of continuing sadness and anxiety.

At Tel Aviv airport, a man helping us with our luggage asked why we were visiting and when

we told him, he became quite heated, insisting: "It says in the Bible that the Jews and the Arabs will never make peace." You have a choice, I responded, for it to be different. "But it says it in the Bible." he replied stubbornly. Perched on a rocky hillside, Israel's Oasis of Peace is very green, lush and beautiful, with sweeping views over the Valley of Ayalon. An area where ancient Biblical battles were fought and the scene of many bitter struggles during the first Arab-Israeli War in 1948. Beginning as nothing more than a few straggly shacks, the village now has a bilingual kindergarten, primary school and junior high school, with around two-thirds of the students bussed in from surrounding Arab and Jewish villages.

A new, joint village was only possible here, residents explained to me, because the area had not been farmed since the Byzantine era, five centuries earlier, and so there had never been any Israeli-Palestinian dispute about the land's ownership.

On the day we arrived, visitors from America, France, Britain and other countries were first taken into a big tent where the democratically elected mayor of the village - an Arab man, Rayek Rizak - explained its history and ideals. He was very honest, and told us repeatedly how hard it had been over the years to put the community's ideals into practice. Not all the families who moved there had stayed on.

"The families who live here have one objective in common -to prove that Jews and Arabs who dare to challenge the status quo of mutual fear can live together in peace' to show that bridges of understanding can be built between the different ethnic and religious groups in this conflict-riven land".

In a country where intermarriage between Jews and Arabs is culturally forbidden - under penalty of death among some ultra religious groups - what would happen, I wondered, if a Jewish girl or Arab boy, or vice versa, met in the village and fell in love? Rayek replied: "We haven't reached that point yet. We'll have to work it out if and when it happens."

If there are any grounds for hope and optimism, it surely resides in the determined peace, harmony and idealism of the Oasis of Peace. The village is supported by friends' organizations all over the world and relies on donations and fund-raising to help pay for a vast range of facilities and services ranging from buildings to teachers' salaries, places at the three-day workshops, art materials, books and gardening tools.

Since my visit to this remarkable community I have tentatively suggested they join with other like-minded groups to organize a yearly National Day of Peace, where people all around the UK can be invited to demonstrate their support for cross-cultural understanding and tolerance, on one great walk for peace. I'm sure thousands would turn out.

These families have one objective - to prove that Jews and Arabs can live together in peace.

For more information about Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Shalom, e-mail  
afnswas@oasisofpeace.org