

# In Israel, an oasis of peace

**Half Jewish, half Arab, Neve Shalom tries to overcome mutual mistrust. Divisive pressures test the community's resolve.**

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NEVE SHALOM, ISRAEL -- The music blared in Arabic as a knot of women twirled slowly around the bride-to-be. Well-dressed onlookers, some in traditional Muslim head scarves, clapped and swayed.

On this evening of celebration, the fireworks sizzled, sweets beckoned and jubilant guests congratulated the Arab bride's parents with a double kiss and hearty "*Mazel tov!*"



*Mazel tov?*

"It's very normal," said Nava Sonnenschein, one of the Jews clapping at the edge of the dance circle. "For here."

The usual rules of the Middle East often don't apply in Neve Shalom, founded in the 1970s as a utopian village on a hilltop in Israel's midsection. For nearly three decades, its inhabitants have sought to defy the polarizing tugs of politics and nationalism.

Though most Jews and Arabs in Israel are kept apart by segregated communities and long years of mutual mistrust, Neve Shalom and its 250 residents -- half Jews, half Arab citizens of Israel -- represent a living experiment in integration.

The tree-shaded hamlet, whose name means "Oasis of Peace," is defiantly mixed, its bougainvillea-splashed lanes a mishmash of stone Arab-style houses and boxy, modern Jewish homes.

Schoolchildren learn Hebrew and Arabic together, a rarity in Israel, and play at one another's homes. Residents enjoy an equal say in running affairs and have elected Jews and Arabs as mayor. They also share management of the 120-pupil elementary school, which draws many students from outside the village, and a separate School for Peace, a well-known training center for activists.

The community's name is in both languages. In Arabic, it is Wahat al Salam (though the Israeli government has never recognized that part).

"We don't go out and protest in the classic way," said Ahmad Hijazi, a 40-year-old Arab who moved from northern Israel with his wife in 1992 and is now Neve Shalom's development director. "We live, and put into practice, what we want to see."

A half-hour's drive from Jerusalem, Neve Shalom is both a functioning community and a peace movement showcase. It has a website -- <http://nswas.org> -- and a parking lot for buses.

But this is no theme park. The affections and hurts are real, the gains and setbacks intimately felt. Alongside its taboo-breaking, the community has shown how hard it can be for Jews and Arabs to fully understand each other, even when they are trying.

Few know better than Abdessalam Najjar, a 55-year-old village leader with a balding head and pencil-thin beard tracing his jawline. Najjar, the father of the bride, moved to Neve Shalom in 1979 with a new wife, Ayshe, and a heart full of hope.

He was 27 and willing to take a chance, she 19 and in need of some persuading. Najjar, a devout Muslim, had been involved in discussion groups with Jews while studying at a branch of Hebrew University in nearby Rehovot. Clashes between Arab demonstrators and Israeli authorities a few years earlier that left six Arabs dead had generated new urgency over trying to improve relations.

The Najjars were the first Arab family to join Neve Shalom. Almost 30 years later, they are mainstays, well-liked and respected across the community. Najjar has been mayor and is working with a Jewish colleague in developing the community's new spiritual center for interfaith conferences, lectures on peace topics and prayer.

The couple built a life and home in Neve Shalom, "slowly, brick after brick," Najjar said. After the arrival a year later of the first of their four children, Ayshe watched over the village's growing crop of babies -- Jews and Arabs -- and he turned his efforts to helping start the village's bilingual school. He was one of two teachers.

He says residents have succeeded in creating an environment for raising tolerant children. For the grown-ups too there have been learning opportunities and innumerable debates, important and petty. Najjar, for example, has argued with his mostly secular Jewish neighbors over his right to pray at work and over whether he could keep a few sheep at home, as many rural Palestinians do. (He lost that one.)

Najjar said he once believed that conflicts break out only "between bad people." No more.

"This conflict can be between two good guys," he said.

Neve Shalom's residents, mostly left-leaning professionals and academics, have been tested by two Palestinian uprisings, war in Lebanon and a steep deterioration in relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel. At times, the two groups here triumphed over those divisive pressures. At others, they fell prey.

To much of the rest of Israel, Neve Shalom is a harmless if worthy novelty. But Jewish extremists once declared the Jews here traitors and sprinkled nails on the road to pop tires. The village's Arab residents, who refer to themselves as Palestinian citizens of Israel, often are asked by fellow Arabs if they really believe that Jews can accept them as equals.

The village today carries tempered aspirations and scars from past political fights. Not all of these are over yet.

Jewish and Arab residents spar over whether Neve Shalom Jews should perform compulsory service in the Israeli army. Arabs in Israel are not summoned to serve, and many object to residents of a "peace village" enlisting in the army.

They disagree too on some of the issues at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such as what to do about Palestinian refugees who fled homes in present-day Israel during the 1948 war and their descendants.

Arab residents are resentful that, despite the talk of equality, Hebrew is the village's lingua franca. While the Arabs learned Hebrew by attending Israeli schools, few grown Jews in Neve Shalom have mastered Arabic.

Some residents from both groups, now in middle age, fear that the village has lost some of its political daring. It is perhaps telling that the burning issue these days is not potential peace talks but whether Neve Shalom residents can formalize their hold on the plots where they built homes years ago on land that was shared without private ownership.

"There are so many things we don't talk about," said Ayelet Ophir-Auron, 51, a Jewish special-education consultant who moved to the village with her family four years ago.

But residents say it may be success enough that Neve Shalom has managed to sustain its vision of mutual tolerance in a society with deep inequities between Jews and minority Arabs, who make up a fifth of Israel's population.

They assert that the project still has drawing power, even if it is from the fringe of Israeli society, and point to a waiting list of potential newcomers. The village is full but hopes to begin adding 90 families in the next year or so by turning some of the vacant land surrounding it into housing lots.

"It is enough that we are here," said Rayek Rizek, 52, an Arab former mayor who with his wife runs a cafe and gift shop at the entrance to the village. "It will never maybe bring the solution to the conflict. But there is still a small idea that maybe it is a candle in the midst of a big darkness."

Neve Shalom, a short drive off the main highway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, looks from its hilltop over a panorama of rural tranquillity -- a sloping, rock-strewn plain turned paper-dry by late summer, and groves of almond and olive trees. The village is arrayed around an oval drive, shaded by evergreen trees and other plantings that have swaddled a once-barren hilltop.

Village business takes place in the two-story administration building. Two resident committees run the village and, separately, the elementary school, School for Peace and spiritual center. Key decisions, such

as passing the budget and picking new residents, are voted upon by village members in the style of a town meeting.

Neve Shalom has no stores other than the cafe-gift shop, though it sports a 39-room guest house. Its swimming pool is frequented by visitors from as far away as Jerusalem. Most of the community's middle-class residents commute to jobs in Tel Aviv and elsewhere.

The village is a far cry from the rough encampment that Rizek and his wife, Dyana Shaloufe-Rizek, encountered when they arrived in 1984.

Neve Shalom had been founded a decade earlier by a Dominican priest, Bruno Hussar, on a thistle-covered hill leased from a nearby Roman Catholic monastery. Father Bruno, who was born to Jewish parents, envisioned a place where people of different faiths could live together, though without a fixed political ideology.

Neve Shalom's first young couples arrived in 1978, motivated by the chance to craft an egalitarian way of life between Jews and Arabs. The village looks out over the site of a key battle in the 1948 war that broke out with Israel's independence.

Shaloufe-Rizek, who had been a student activist at Haifa University, was invited to teach at Neve Shalom's peace school, which she had attended after its establishment in 1979. Newly married, she brought her husband.

"There was nothing. No paved roads. A lot of flies and mosquitoes," Rayek Rizek recalled.

But it was an exhilarating place for Jews and Arabs to confront their yawning ignorance about one another.

Dorit Shippin, a Jew, arrived with her husband, Howard, the same year as the Rizeks after searching for a community that was, she said, "pluralistic enough and open-minded." She recalled being stunned to learn that Israel's Independence Day was treated as a historical catastrophe by her new Arab neighbors.

"My father participated in the 1948 war, and especially for this generation, the stories that they have are not stories of destruction and deportation of Palestinians, but they are stories of conquering, freeing, friendships and survival," Shippin said. "It was quite shocking to hear the other side of the picture."

For their part, Arab residents began to assume the burden of shared leadership and to confront a fuller portrait of Jews than the unflattering images many had grown up with.

The community's discussions were earnest, often heated. But the outbreak of the first intifada in 1987 drove home for many residents the fundamental gap that remained in how each side viewed the world.

"The Palestinians saw it mostly as a kind of legitimate struggle of the people under occupation, and the Israelis saw it as an unnecessary kind of uprising that threatens their life, and their existence here," Rizek said.

Some residents wonder, though, whether the community too often has steered around explosive issues to preserve neighborly harmony.

"As the years went by, it became more and more challenging to talk about the difficult issues," said Boaz Kitain, a Jew who has been mayor and run the elementary school and School for Peace. "We stopped talking about the difficult things."

The community was thrown into turmoil when Kitain's 20-year-old son, Tom, an Israeli soldier, died in a helicopter collision en route to Lebanon in 1997.

The Kitain family asked to put up a memorial. But some Arab residents found it unthinkable that a community dedicated to peace would commemorate a soldier on a military mission, even one who had grown up in their midst. The debate grew bitter. To the Kitains, it only aggravated their grief.

Despite an eventual compromise -- a plaque on the village basketball court saluting a "son of peace, killed in war" -- the episode proved damaging. Kitain's wife, Daniella, once active as fundraiser for the village, withdrew from community affairs. She has never rejoined.

Community relations have fared better since then, despite the buffeting effects of the second intifada, which further worsened Jewish-Arab relations in Israel, and the nation's war against the Shiite Muslim militia Hezbollah in Lebanon last year.

Both times, Neve Shalom's residents threw themselves into common action. After the second intifada broke out in 2000, they formed a motorcade to show support for families of 13 Arabs killed during rioting and delivered medical aid to Palestinians in the West Bank, a big swath of which sits within a 30-minute drive.

"This is when residents felt even more that we have to come together and try to do something for the outside," said Hijazi, the development director.

There is also much thinking here about the future.

The community plans to keep up its education efforts, mainly through the School for Peace, which over the years has provided training workshops for 40,000 peace and human rights activists and others. Supported heavily by foreign donations, it has served as an incubator for the Israeli and Palestinian peace movements, with alumni sprinkled among important activist groups on both sides.

A planned residential expansion, which would nearly triple the number of families to almost 150, could lend the project more symbolic clout by increasing its size.

Some residents are urging a more activist role for the community in Israeli politics at a moment when polls show abysmal relations between Jews and Arabs.

"It's time for us to go out more, even if they don't want to hear us," Dorit Shippin said. "We have to stop apologizing, really, and be relevant."

The community claims a tangible accomplishment in rearing a generation of children to have friends across lines of religion and ethnic origin. Those young people have at times been unnerved by how much the egalitarian ideals of Neve Shalom clash with the stark realities of wider Israeli society.

"It's like a dream," said Sama Daoud, a 19-year-old Arab who lives with her parents in Neve Shalom. "It's

different from the outside."

Tali Sonnenschein, 15, said she and her friends were well aware of the tensions and stereotypes that cleave the world outside Neve Shalom.

She sees no reason, though, why that should stop her little community from seeking some way out of the mess.

"I get to live in this place and have a different opinion -- that everybody can learn to live together," she said. "It's a little cheesy, maybe. But that's what I learned."

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