

Neighbors, not enemies



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NEVE SHALOM, Israel – The voting station looked like hundreds of other polling places, from the Galilee hills to the Negev desert. There was an Israeli flag, a blue ballot box and a team of election officials.

But Election Day in this tiny Israeli town midway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv was significantly different from what it was in the rest of the nation: Jews and Arabs voted together.

There were many places in Israel to measure the emotional significance of Tuesday's pivotal Knesset elections. But one of the most unusual was this model community on a lush hillside where the coastal plain rises into the Jerusalem hills.

Here, Jews and Arab citizens of Israel not only live in the same town, they are allowed to move in only if they promise to participate in programs aimed at finding common ground and working out their differences.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Neve Shalom -- Hebrew for "Oasis of Peace" -- did not support the victorious Kadima Party, which is trumpeting a plan to set up a security border to separate the Palestinian-dominated West Bank from the Jewish homeland.

"We tend to go for liberals, even communists," Rita Boulos, a Palestinian Christian, said after dropping her ballot into a box at the town's community center.

"We are trying to live together," she added. "We don't always succeed. You don't have to be in love with everyone here. You just have to understand and respect them."

There is a Sixties, utopian-commune feel to Neve Shalom. As voters trickled to the community center, they walked past a rack of pamphlets that advertised such things as holistic therapy. Later, the day's gossip was not about politics, but about a possible concert this summer by Roger Waters of Pink Floyd fame.

The laid-back style is deceiving, though. The town takes great pride in not only organizing programs for residents but in reaching out to others to spread its message. One of its chapters is in Mount Laurel, in Burlington County.

"We are doing something unusual," said Elan Frish, 58, one of the town's original Jewish residents. "We are pioneers. This is a model for the country. Arabs and Jews can live together."

"We chose a different way of life," Frish's 23-year-old daughter, Adi, said. "There is a lot of prejudice in Israel from both sides. The rest of the country doesn't think like us."

Founded in the 1970s by a Roman Catholic Dominican brother, the town's charter calls for equal numbers of Jewish and Arab residents. It now has about 25 families from each group, with Arab families almost evenly divided between Christian and Muslim. In keeping with the inclusive attitude, many residents not only recite the town's Hebrew name when saying where they live, but go out of their way to include an Arabic translation as well -- Wahat al-Salam.

On road signs, however, Israel's government just sticks with the Hebrew name. Indeed, the town's mayor said no Israeli prime minister as ever visited his community, even though it has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and praised by such luminaries as Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel.

Indeed, at times, Israel's government has been a bit befuddled by Neve Shalom.

The town's elementary school has both Jewish and Arab students. Even in Israeli towns with substantial Arab populations, most Jewish and Arab students attend separate public schools.

And when Neve Shalom applied for government agricultural funds to help pay for its sheep farm, the town ran into a not-so-small bureaucratic wall: Was this an

Arab farm or a Jewish farm? Israel's Agriculture Ministry maintained separate funding for farms run by Jewish and Arab citizens.

Neve Shalom residents often chuckle in recounting such moments in their town's history. But those moments underscore a fact of life: The town is so different from the rest of Israel that citizens on the outside have a difficult time understanding it.

Here, Arab and Jewish children not only study in the same classrooms, they play on the same soccer field and swim in the same community pool.

"Our country is for Jews and Arabs, and both peoples have to live together," said Ahmed Hijazi, a 39-year-old Muslim. "The diversity enriches us."

If there is a dividing line, it's dating among singles. Residents say that while Arab and Jewish young people may attend dances together, few go on dates and none have married outside their ethnic group.

Residents say town meetings are a mix of the political and the pedantic. Sometimes, they exchange views about such hot-button topics as how the Israel government is building fences and walls in the West Bank to separate Jewish settlements from Palestinian villages. At other times, though, discussions focus on how loud residents are playing their stereos.

"What we have is a community of good intentions," Mayor Rayek Rizek said.

Rizek, 53, a Palestinian Christian, runs a cafe and gift shop just across the parking lot from the town's community center. As residents stopped by to vote, he played a CD of sitar music over outdoor speakers.

For years, Rizek said, the town was so focused on balance and ensuring no group dominated that Arab and Jewish candidates alternated running for the one-year mayor's term: only Jewish candidates one year and only Arabs the next.

But eventually, such balancing seemed forced. Rizek said all residents now can run for mayor.

"We try to open up all the questions," Rizek said. "We cannot avoid the difficult questions."

Perhaps one of the thorniest, however, does not involve Neve Shalom but Israel in general: Should the town's residents, many of whom are peaceniks, serve in the Israeli military -- a national obligation for most citizens.

Ori Sonnenschein, 22 and Jewish, was living in Princeton only a few years ago while his father, a physicist, worked at a research lab. When he returned to Neve Shalom, the army called.

Sonnenschein, an industrial design student, enlisted, but opted for a non-combat unit. Looking back, he said his army experience helped him focus on Neve Shalom and why the community's way of life is so valuable in prompting its residents to think about how they get along with others who are different.

"Most people don't know people on the other side," Sonnenschein said. "They might see them in the market, but they never meet."

As he stood outside the voting center, Shay Saar, 25, said it's rare that Arabs and Jews in Israel find any common ground.

"Maybe they are afraid to connect," Saar said.

As he spoke, an army helicopter flew overhead -- a reminder of the high counterterror alert throughout Israel on Election Day and how the problems of Arabs and Jews are not small. But after the helicopter passed, a rooster's crowing filled the silence.

Saar looked across the parking lot outside the town's community center. In the center of the lot was a garden with an olive tree.

"We need more of these places," Saar said.