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'To seek Middle East peace, seek equality'

BY KRESTIA DEGEORGE

Halfway between the cities of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem lies the tiny village of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam. Just 50 families call it home. But despite its size, the village has attracted international attention, including Nobel Prize nominations.

The Hebrew and Arabic phrases *Neve Shalom* and *Wahat al-Salam* translate into English as "oasis of peace." The village was founded by Bruno Hussar, an Egyptian Jew who converted to Catholicism, and it takes its name from a passage in the book of the prophet Isaiah, which can be translated, in part: "My people shall dwell in an oasis of peace."

It's no accident that the phrase comes from a text recognized as scripture by the three Abrahamic faiths --- Judaism, Christianity, and Islam --- each of which is represented in the village. But religious identities are just one part of the diversity that villagers try to bridge in their daily life: Although all of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam's residents are Israeli citizens, half are Palestinians and the other half are Jewish.

Last week, two of the village's residents were in Rochester as part of a whirlwind tour of the United States. Abdessalam Najjar, a Palestinian, is the village's secretary general (the equivalent of a mayor). His was also one of the first four families to move to the village at its inception in 1978, after meeting Hussar as a university student a few years earlier.

Michal Zak, who is Jewish, discovered the village as a student when she went there to take a course. She moved there after college.

"I wanted to do something for this cause of Jewish-Arab relations," she says, "and I wasn't satisfied with what I was doing just as a student going to demonstrations and dialogue groups in the university. I wanted to do something deeper, and also that it would be more my life, not that I have a life and then once a week I go to the demonstration."

She has filled that goal and more, working as the deputy director and adult department coordinator for the village's School for Peace.

The tour that brought the pair through Rochester was organized by American Friends of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam.

"We do this a couple of times a year," says executive Director Deanna Armbruster. "It's an opportunity to let people know there are possibilities for peaceful cooperation between Jews and Arabs."

It's also an opportunity to keep US public attention focused on the Middle East.

"The role that Americans play in supporting efforts of peace isn't to be underestimated," Armbruster says. "We all have a role to play."

What follows is an edited transcript of a conversation with Najjar and Zak:

City Newspaper: *Is the model of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam something that you see the wider region being able to replicate?*

Michal Zak: I think that's the model, that there should be equality between all the citizens of the region. That would be my political solution, to change the model of dominance and dominated and to have a model based on equality. But if you mean do I think there should be other Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, other communities, I don't think so. If they are established, that's fine, but we don't see ourselves as duplicating it in any way.

What's more important for me is to try to train people in our approach to looking at power relations, and to try to implement some of these things wherever they are. For me, that's more effective than to have another community.

City Newspaper:*How does a political idea like a two-state solution relate to what you're saying?*

Abdessalam Najjar: A two-state solution or a one-state solution is a position. You can achieve equality by this kind of solution or that kind of solution. You can also create unequal relations with both kinds of solutions. The most important thing in our approach is the equality, not the kind of solution. Any solution should be achieved by the agreement of both sides. If they agree that equality is one of the principles, then how they perform it --- two states, one state --- is not so [important].

If you will ask me as a Palestinian, I don't want to see a Palestinian state with no future or with no possibility of economic development, freedom, cultural development, prosperity, and all of these things.

Zak: A solution of two states doesn't solve the problem inside Israel between the minority and the majority.

Najjar: If we have a one-state solution, the same.

City:*I assume you've been following the events recently with Prime Minister Sharon's visit to Texas....*

Najjar: I knew it would not go anywhere. It's not a peace process. Both sides didn't once come to agree on the principle that it should be equal on both sides.

Zak: It's a peace process between Sharon and the United States.

Najjar: How can you call it a peace process and at the same time keep the right of legitimacy for occupation? That's not a peace process. The peace process is a way of accepting the other side as legitimate to exist like you and to work with him on an equal basis. Not to dominate, not to dictate the solution.

Peace will not be "Now we have two states, and close the borders between the two states." This will not work. If there are no active, constructive relations, it's not peace. We will wait until the coming clashes; they will come.

I know this is not easy. But if we will have some kind of creativity --- to imagine it how it should be 20 years from now, 60 years from now, that Jewish people from Haifa can travel to Damascus, and then after that go to Amman, sleep there, and then go to Baghdad, and a Palestinian living in Baghdad can take the airplane, land in Tel Aviv or in Jaffa or in Haifa and visit and do things --- this is the way that we should imagine it. The people can't imagine it --- not Palestinians, not Israelis.

City:*Do you see hope in what's taking place in the Palestinian leadership?*

Najjar: No. I think the problem was not in the Palestinian leadership. I'm not sure, but I think that if there were a need for brave and tough decisions, Mahmoud Abbas is not able to do it. Arafat was able to do it, because Arafat had more support from his people than Mahmoud Abbas. I don't agree with all of the western media, mainly the Americans and the Israelis, that Arafat was the problem in not going ahead in the peace process.

City:*You said earlier that one reason there's not peace is that the problem lies with the people themselves. You said they can't imagine peace. Do you feel the work that you're doing at the village is helping to change that, to enable people to imagine peace?*

Zak: I think the main problem is not that they can't imagine peace; that's a result of the situation. The main issue has to do with power. It's the fact that Israel wants to dominate the whole area and the people. There has been a process of dehumanizing the Palestinians. This is the most dangerous process that has been going on, the dehumanization, because it's giving legitimacy to do almost anything in the name of security.

The fact that Israel [feels that it] can't trust its neighbors --- "If they had an army, they could not be trusted not to attack, so therefore they should not have an army, so therefore they should not be an independent state," and all these things --- is because Israelis don't see them as equal partners in the area.

City: *What have you learned about the peace process in your experiences in the village?*

Najjar: The peace process should start with changing our assumptions and our attitudes toward ourselves and toward the other side. Nobody can work for peace and oppression or occupation. We need first to liberate our selves from being oppressor and oppressed. It's not an easy process. We should empower ourselves by taking responsibility for what's going on.

What we are doing in Wahat al-Salam/NeveShalom is making [peacemaking part of] our daily life decisions. Of course, any relationship between us as Jews and Palestinians inside the community has meaning on the wide level. Small things, like what language we are using between ourselves --- it has a meaning, because it's a tool.

City: *What do you hope this trip to Rochester will accomplish?*

Najjar: We are not in a very isolated place. All that's happening in the Middle East has an impact everywhere in the world. We are in the global village. Nobody can close his eyes and say "this is there." What's happening there is influencing decisions here, life here and everywhere in the world.

If we are not taking care --- all the citizens of this world --- how to achieve and how to create peace, sooner or later everybody will suffer from the continuation of the active conflicts in the Middle East and somewhere else. And not Americans or anybody else can say, "We have been OK; the others, they haven't been OK."

To help peace in the Middle East means to prevent conflict in the United States.