

Two New Families Talk about Living in the “Oasis of Peace”

Over the last 10 years, Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, the “Oasis of Peace,” has grown from 35 families to a community with more than 50 families, equally balanced between Jews and Palestinians, all of whom are citizens of Israel. In the coming years, Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam will expand even further as it is about to release additional land lots for housing expansion. More new families will be able to join the village in the spirit of living, working and raising children together with mutual respect, equality and a genuine understanding for the other. With more than 300 families on a waiting list, the village will not only grow numerically, but also in diversity of opinions, ideas and experiences.

Even now, for the families who have moved to NSWAS in recent years, the experience of living at the “Oasis of Peace” is different than it was for the pioneering families who came to the village nearly 25 years ago. In the early days, there was no running water, electricity or other various modern conveniences. “I remember looking up at the village from the road below and seeing only one small light, and that was big because it was the *first* light,” says Rayek Rizek, a long-time Palestinian resident and present Mayor of NSWAS. “I was pregnant with my first child and I was hauling buckets of water to our little house,” adds Nava Sonnenschein, one of the first Jewish residents to move to NSWAS. “You really had to have a big vision to come to live here.”

Today, there are other differences, besides the infrastructure and buildings of the village. Two years ago, when Jewish residents Ayelet and Yair Ophir-Auron moved to NSWAS two of their three children were already teenagers, quite different from most families who join the community with small children. “Only our youngest child attended the Primary School in the village; this is different from most families who move here with young children,” said Ayelet. In fact, it was the Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam Primary School/Junior High School that introduced Ayelet and Yair to the community. After having lived in a few different cities in Israel, the family moved to a village near the “Oasis of Peace” so that their youngest child could attend the bilingual, bicultural Primary School even before officially coming to live in the village.

Shortly thereafter, the family decided to move to NSWAS. To move to NSWAS, Ayelet explains, “...there must be strong motivation, an ideological motivation.” But, like any big change in life, it hasn’t been easy for the family either. Families must make many adjustments in order to live in such a mixed community. “For one thing, I was always active and involved politically,” said Ayelet. “But when I got here, I stopped. I guess if you are really invested in living here, you don’t have so much energy to be involved in outside [political] activities.” New families to the village often find themselves not only learning more about the “other,” but also about themselves. “When I moved to NSWAS, I never saw myself so much as I do now, as a woman who is Ashkenazi,” said Ayelet. “My identity has been sharpened here. Living here is like a mirror. You have to understand yourself and others.”

Marwa Tibi, a new Palestinian resident, expressed similar feelings when talking about her identity. “Living here is a challenge. We wake up here with our identities, we go to sleep with our identities,” said Marwa. “We must always be aware of who we are.” Marwa and her husband Kamil also moved to NSWAS two years ago in order to be a part of a better educational system for their children. “I didn’t want my children to be in the typical Israeli educational system [where children attend segregated schools],” she said. “Here the system is supposed to be equal. My life could be easier if I lived [in an Arab village], but here my daughter understands there are Muslims, Christians and Jews. Here my daughter knows she is equal.”

New families who come to live in NSWAS often struggle with the conflicts they find ongoing and developing in the community. “Sometimes I feel like there is a lack of real talk. Small talk is OK, but I wanted more – I want to be able to talk deeply with my neighbors,” said Ayelet. “It took time for me to be able to open my mouth.”

“Sometimes it is difficult to open a political discussion, to hear what your friends and neighbors

think," said Marwa. "Sometimes we are afraid to discuss."

"But the fact that two residents [Jewish and Palestinian] can sit down and talk about an issue is unusual," adds Kamil. Kamil and Marwa describe the conflicts as "mature." While living in the "Oasis of Peace" may not be easy, the residents are dealing with the political climate of the region and recognize that it is a constant process of living together. Original families and new families agree it is not as simple as just coming to live together; it is the daily work of being together. "We need to always be doing more to create better understanding between us," said Marwa.

"I am optimistic," Ayelet says. "Living in NSWAS is an emotional challenge. You are living the conflict, living under a light shining on you. We need people who live here who are people who are able to think critically and to have open minds. I believe there can be changes—small changes, but these are revolutionary changes."

"Neve Shalom/Wahat Al-Salam is an ambassador for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and all groups living in conflict," said Kamil. "People choosing to live together brings a message that there is an alternative. We can get busy with the usual problems of a small community, and it is not easy for Jews and Palestinians to live together, but the mission is unchanging and this is the highest contribution that we can make for Israelis, Palestinians, Arabs, Jews and for all those living in conflict."