Renewed messages of peace after attack against the village

On June 7, in an apparent protest against the decision to evacuate an Israeli "outpost" settlement, Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam was attacked by thugs who crept into the village, slashed tires of many cars and spray-painted right-wing and anti-Arab slogans on cars and buildings, including the Primary School.

Graffitis read "Death to Arabs" or "Revenge;" a message on one of the 14 damaged cars said "Hi from Ulpana" (the outpost settlement that the government decided to evacuate).

Right after the attack happened, the community, along with parents of the school, organized the cleanup of the school building – so that the hateful graffitis would be erased before the children came back to school.

A few days later, the children and parents participated in a “Peace Brush” happening: together they created their own graffitis on the school’s walls, helped by caricaturists Ahmad and Mohammed Abu Num. Their graffitis focused on expression of feelings on the subject of peace and coexistence. On the school entrance, we can now read “We will live together” (picture). The activity was followed by a soccer game between the school team and a team of Arab and Jewish children from Jerusalem, under the auspices of the New Israel Fund.

Six Knesset members also tabled a motion in the Knesset on June 13 on the incident in Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam: Dov Hanin (Hadash); Nachman Shai (Kadema); Ghaleb Majadla (Labour); Ibrahim Sarsur (Islamic movement Raam Taal), Israel Eichler (Torah Judaism) Avraham Michaeli (Shas). All condemned the attack (despite differences in perspective) and most criticized policy laxity in this and similar attacks. Minister without portfolio Yossi Peled responded. It was decided unanimously to bring this up for further discussion in the Internal Affairs committee of the Knesset.

Honoring the memory of Abdessalam Najjar

On March 22, 2012, the community of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam lost one of its earliest and most influential members, Abdessalam Najjar. Over the years, Abdessalam had traveled many times to the United States and helped spread Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam’s message of peace in the country.

Abdessalam Najjar was born in 1952 in Nazareth, North Israel, and came from a family of devout Muslims. Abdessalam became involved in peace education while he was studying at the
Hebrew University, Jerusalem, where his first meaningful encounter with Jewish students took place.

Abdessalam first met Father Bruno Hussar, who envisioned the creation of a Jewish-Arab village, in 1976. Two years later Abdessalam became the first Arab to join the community of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, the “Oasis of Peace.” He and his wife Aisheh raised their four children in the “Oasis of Peace,” where Shirin, Leila, Nur and Mohammed could learn the art of peacemaking from birth. Once the village was founded, Abdessalam, worked with other village members to develop educational institutions which would exert influence beyond the village itself. Since then the village has become home to fifty-five families, half Jewish and half Arab. Homes are now being built for the second generation and the village has plans to expand to accommodate ninety-one more families.

In the recent period, Abdessalam headed the Pluralistic Spiritual Center in NSWAS. He focused his efforts on providing peace education to Jews and Arabs in the mixed Jewish Arab town of Acre in northern Israel. Acre has become the site of tensions and violent clashes between the two peoples. With great success, Abdessalam facilitated dialogue and mediation workshops for Jewish and Arab community leaders of the town, to meet each other and find ways to cooperate together.

Abdessalam dedicated his whole life to peace education through his commitment to improving Jewish-Arab relations in Israel and the region. The community honored him on April 29, the 40th day since his passing, in Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam.

Primary School

A new generation is graduating from the Oasis of Peace’s school

On June 28, the school year ended right after the children celebrated their year spent together and had a graduation ceremony.

This year, the school had 172 students in the Primary School, with an additional 35 in the kindergarten and nursery. Among the children, 45% were Arab and 55% Jewish; split between 45% girls and 55% boys. Only 35 children live in the village, the rest coming from surrounding villages and towns.

The school has a socio-economically diverse group of students, including children from 20 different towns including difficult neighborhoods of Lod and Ramle, as well as from affluent families. We need to provide extra support and reinforcement for pupils who come from neighborhoods that are characterized by high crime levels and violence.
Children from places like Lod are aware of racism and it is hard for them. We try to support them, and encourage them to speak out. Children from Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam have fewer inhibitions. They tend to be more assertive and confident. We find that children from the village tend to help to stabilize the system. For example, the Jewish children receive greater encouragement from their home environment to learn Arabic.

**Activities during the School Day**

**Students Council**
As every year, the students elect their representatives to the Students Council. This is encouraged also by the Education Ministry which has the ambition to involve every student in a committee. We take this seriously, and the student council helps to involve all the students, such as in planning and organizing activities for our "active school breaks", which feature talent shows, sports activities, etc.

**Thursday Electives**
This year we decided to turn the last two hours of each Thursday (i.e., the school week) over to informal subjects of the students’ choice. They work in multi-age groups and take part in classes such as music, basketball, drama, woodworking, beadwork, nutrition, environment, recycling, arts, ceramic making, etc. Every three months, they change subjects and do something new. The initiative worked well for the majority of the children.

**Mentors**
This project, in which the older children help the younger children, is still working, though we had a slight numerical problem in that there were 34 children in 6th grade and only 28 in first grade. So we chose the children who were best at mentoring.

"**Healthy School**"
The school participated in the "Healthy School" project of the Education Ministry, by integrating health education into the regular curriculum. Some teachers took part in specialized teacher training courses on subjects like nutrition and physical education. In the coming week the school will acquire a certificate that we are a "Healthy School".

**Summer Camps**
This year as in previous years, the school will host a summer camp provided by the Open House Ramle for Jewish and Arab children in the area. There will also be a summer camp for Palestinian children.

All summer camps will begin from July 1, in order to finish before Ramadan, which begins July 20.

**Stories / anecdotes**

**Conversion of a parent**
Two parents from a nearby community told the Principal that they were amazed to see a certain child from their community at the school. They said that the child's father had always shown antagonism towards other parents from the same community who had sent their children to our school. Espousing right-wing politics, he is known for his disparagement of Arabs. He even tried to prevent any parent from his community who sent their children to the WAS-NS school from entering his community's committees. But one day he sent his own child to the School and we
registered him without being aware of this history. The child has integrated well, and the father has apparently discovered that the School is not as bad as he first thought.

**Meeting with a writer**
We invited Nader Abu Tamer, the author of popular books for children in Arabic to visit the school. He himself once had children in the school. His visit was reported extensively in the Arab media in a positive manner. He said that the children asked different questions than in other schools, and observed that in the principal’s office, instead of the usual diplomas on the wall, there were instead drawings and paintings by the students. He said that this is the best kind of diploma for a school.

**School for Peace**

**Jerusalem-focused Program**

This program, focusing on Jerusalem issues, brings together Israeli and Palestinian community leaders to discuss and advance proposals for various initiatives for the city's Jewish and Arab communities.

So far there has been a one-day opening workshop with 14 participants from Jerusalem (10 Jews and four Arabs), and 10 Palestinians from the West Bank. All participants inhabit or are directly connected with Jerusalem. The participants represent a wide spectrum of interests: among both the Jewish and Palestinian participants there are religious and secular, young and old.

In the opening workshop, Moshe Amirav, a professor of political science who was involved in the Ehud Barak era Camp David negotiations on Jerusalem, gave a lecture. In June there will be a further 4-day workshop; the course will be completed in December.

**Targeting Young People**

**Youth Encounter Workshops:** This year there have been two youth encounter workshops: one in February and one in March. In addition, we conducted a uni-national workshop for Jewish students. The School for Peace is gradually shifting its activities from the classic youth encounter model to longer and more serious activities. This is only partly due to a lack of available funding for this kind of activity; another factor is that in the current political atmosphere, in which young people express widespread pessimism, rightward swing, growing racism and lack of interest in the other side, it becomes harder to conduct a substantive short-term encounter according to the classic format. The following two projects are examples of longer-term youth activities that we are now attempting to develop.
A Youth Environmental Leadership Project, funded by the United Nations Development Program, is continuing, with the most recent workshop taking place in May. The project engages six schools in Israel and the Palestinian authority.

A Human Rights Project for Youth is in preparation to take place at the beginning of the 2012/2013 school year – we are currently making contact with schools. The plan is to work with a group of about 20 Jewish and Arab students who will lead the project in 2 – 4 high schools.

Change Agents Program

The Change Agents Program, supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), continues to train 120 Jewish and Palestinian (from Israel and the West Bank) journalists, environmentalists and up-and-coming politicians. The groups are now focusing on project that aims to create change in their community and/or work environments.

The participants will complete the program in January 2013 but we are already witnessing major impact on them personally and on their professional approaches. The following are quotes by participants gathered during the ongoing independent evaluation of the program:

“This program has introduced me to a way to break barriers and change social and personal goals and targets in this conflict.”

“We have all tasted a bit of peace. We are hungry for a bigger bite!”

“This has changed my mind…there is a solution to the colonies and (a) two state solution inside the region.”

“This is a beginning. This has made me stronger. This is where change starts.”

“I am working on a project with a colleague across the border. We talk every week. I did not think that would even be possible.”

“I was so afraid at that first meeting. The Palestinian person was yelling, he was loud, and I did not want to hear what he had to say. When the facilitator translated what he was saying….he was saying he was passionate…and committed to peace and learning from us and working with us and making peace…it changed how I think every time I see a Palestinian speak.”

“People ask me…isn’t this normalization? I say, it is far from making normalization. This is a way for us to make our own new normal.”

“Now we can trust each other….now we can change the behaviors.”
World Peace College

For a decade, the “Oasis of Peace” has been carefully readying a program that would make its 35 years of skills and experience available to a global audience. Its new World Peace College realizes an extraordinary vision. A natural next step in the evolution of the work of the village, the World Peace College builds on its expertise to expand its impact internationally. Through courses and training programs for students and professionals from around the world, it connects individual values to civic consequences. It is a program whose mission is to deepen knowledge and build skills for a new generation of peacemakers.

Partnership with the University of Massachusetts-Boston

The World Peace College is partnering with the University of Massachusetts-Boston (UMB) to offer a dual Master of Arts degree in Peace & Conflict Studies. Opening in fall 2013, this academically rigorous and experimentally based program will train students in the field of conflict resolution to be prepared to work in civil society on a grassroots and political level. UMB was among the first universities in the country to offer graduate programs in international conflict, conflict management and dispute resolution.

The first course, “Experiential Dialogue and Inter-Group Conflict" opened at UMB in January and in June, international as well as Israeli and Palestinian students participated in a course at Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam focusing on "Scaling Up: From Grassroots Conflict Resolution Efforts to National and Policy Impacts."

Teacher Program

A teacher education and practicum certificate program for Israeli, Palestinian and international teachers is in development. Courses, along with time spent in the Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam Primary School with teachers experienced in working in binational, bilingual, multicultural classrooms, will train teachers and students in the field of education to integrate peace education practices, bilingual pedagogy, and strategies for using conflict as a source of learning into their professional skill set.

Research Institute

Efforts are underway to open a Research Institute as a worldwide center for study and experimentation. The institute will promote research on how to bridge the gap between dialogue and peace activism, gather important archival materials, and initiate conferences, workshops and lectures to further the study and practice of dialogue and peace activism.
The World Peace College is equipping the state-of-the-art Fred Segal Friendship Library. The facility now hosts “smart classrooms” for residential and online students to connect seamlessly with faculty in a virtual environment via sophisticated technology. Through the partnership with UMB students will have unobstructed access to the university library system.

**Pluralistic Spiritual Center**

Due to the passing of Abdessalam Najjar and the lack of substantial funds, most projects at the Pluralistic Spiritual Center are unfortunately on hold. The community is in the process of deciding how to handle the coming months.