



Photo by Yuval Chen

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A Kindergarten of Hope

Outside, the bleak reports of violence and shooting surround us. Inside, Arab and Jewish children are playing together, far removed from the hatred and suspicion outside. During one of the most turbulent weeks in Israel's history, we paid a visit to a kindergarten where parents from both communities are trying to create a different future for their children.

By Iris Lifshitz-Kliger | Photos by: Yuval Chen

It has been one of the most extreme weeks we have experienced in recent years. Even for a country plagued with turmoil like Israel, this week there was incident after incident at breakneck speed. There have been highs and lows. Moments of flowing, spontaneous joy followed by moments of overwhelming violence. Moments of embracing, supportive headlines from around the globe, to moments of harsh images and challenging accusations in the media. In the space of 48 hours, we experienced the U.S. Embassy's move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, Neta Barzilai's Eurovision victory, and the mass incursion of Palestinians from Gaza to the border of the Strip, among them terrorist cells that attempted to carry out attacks. These 48 hours were another reminder that we are living

on the edge of a bubbling volcano, where Arabs and Jews are spilling each other's blood, and it is unclear when it will all end. Is there any solution? Will there ever be another way?

It's afternoon in an Israeli kindergarten in the Sharon Region of Israel. Lessons are already over, and the children, some preschoolers and some school-age, are in afterschool care. Some sit around a table and paint. Others choose to play in the green playground. The extreme weather of the past few weeks has grown calm, replaced by springtime. In the sandbox are two good friends, a boy and a girl, Amos and Nai. Completely absorbed in their tasks, neither Amos nor Nai wear a label or carry cultural baggage. Here in the sandbox, they are simply friends, not Amos the Jew and Nai the Arab.

The yard, the sandbox, and the art table are in a kindergarten run by the Hand in Hand nonprofit organization in the Sharon and the Triangle. This is a mixed Jewish-Arab kindergarten, part of a group of parents from both sectors, who are trying—in spite of the difficulties and the complexity—to craft a little bit of hope for their children.

The principal of Amos and Nai's Sharon kindergarten is Adi Angert, a mother of two who lives close to the kindergarten in Beit Berl. Angert explains that she strongly believes the best way to raise children in Israel is only through education towards shared society, from early childhood. Amos and Nai's kindergarten has 39 children in two age groups, from ages three through five. When Adi wants to ask one of the children to go out of the building to the playground in the garden, she addresses him in fluent Arabic. "The kids in our kindergarten speak Hebrew and Arabic, this is a bilingual kindergarten," she explains. Four-and-a-half-year-old Amos is her son. His older sister, Gefen, also attended the kindergarten and is now in first grade.



Photo by Craig Stennett *

Lag B'Omer and Ramadan

"The kindergarten was established in 2015 by a group of parents from Tira, Kfar Saba and towns in the local area," says Adi. "We wanted to give our kids a different kind of education. An education for multiculturalism, an education for accepting difference, mutual respect, equality, and values that we feel are important our children receive. Half the children here are from the Arab sector, and half from the Jewish sector. These are children of young parents. And where there are families with more than one child, you'll find that the older siblings also attended the kindergarten. Each year, demand for the kindergarten increases."

The kindergarten operates like any other kindergarten in Israel. Children arrive at 7:30 in the morning, afterschool care runs through 16:30. But on Fridays—the Muslim Sabbath—the kindergarten is closed. The children also "earn" double vacations, on both Jewish and on Muslim holidays. Staff and parents take care to celebrate the various holidays together.

"It's no big deal for the parents that the kids from Tira and Taybeh came two weeks ago to our bonfire," says Adi.

“And we, the parents of the Jewish kids, will soon be hosted by the Arab kids when they celebrate Ramadan. This is what’s so beautiful here. Every year, we host Amos and Gefen’s friends from Tira in the sukkah. At the same time, it is important to us to maintain our own identity. So that Muhammad stays Muhammad and Roi stays Roi. Every child knows very well what his identity is and at the same time, they know how to communicate with the culture of the other children in the preschool.”

“Within the kindergarten routine, you will see that if an Arab child turns to his Arab friend during a game or an activity, he will speak to him in Arabic. But if he talks to my son Amos, he will speak to him in Hebrew. And this is exactly what would happen if it were the other way around. This is one of the aims of our schools: developing very high communication skills. And when this you learn and absorb this from a very young age, it stays with you for life. Here, the children all learn that everyone has equal rights, but that people are different. This is the strength of this place—having awareness of differences and knowing to respect those differences.”

Have the difficult events around us penetrated the protective bubble in which the children learn? And how do you deal with that?

“When they’re younger, children are less preoccupied with what’s happening in Gaza or Syria, but there are kids in the kindergarten with older siblings who already read newspapers and who are exposed to news in the various media. My daughter Gefen, for example, already asks me tough questions on this subject. My role, as a mother who has faithfully chosen the path on which I raise my children, is to explain it to her. I explain to her that what is happening in Gaza is distressing and sad, but at home and in the kindergarten, we do not act violently. I give her an example: when she argues with Rama, an Arab friend of hers from the kindergarten who she’s still in contact with, there’s no violence between them. I tell her: if something makes you angry, then you talk to her about it, you do not fight with violence.

“Our organization [Hand in Hand] has a dialogue team responsible for maintaining open and consistent dialogue, and this team meets with the kindergarten staff and the parents of kindergarten children throughout the year. It’s true that we don’t always find a middle ground, but what’s certain is that we’ll always listen to each other. So yes, my daughter can definitely come across a newspaper story about burning kites being sent from Gaza into Israel, and she’s going to ask questions. My job as a mom is to explain to her calmly that our way is different. We believe in dialogue and open conversation instead of violence, period. As the kids get older, the questions are going to get harder. We don’t have answers for all of them. It’s not easy, but it is possible.”

No explosions

For now, this special, protective framework is limited to preschoolers, and when they finish, the children continue their studies in the regular, segregated school system. But Adi is working to expand the system to school-age children as well.

“I hope that next year, we’ll receive recognition from the Kfar Saba municipality to open first and second grades. Then Gefen will return to this framework, and that will reduce the amount of questions and deal with what’s happening in the media.”



Photo by Craig Stennett *

As we talk, sitting with Adi in the kindergarten is Shada Idris Mansour from Taybeh, the mother of four-year-old Nai. Shada is a member of the kindergarten's dialogue team.

"Nai is friends with Amos, and she's also friends with Tuti and Noga," she says.

"We often meet in the afternoon for a joint activity, like a climbing wall or to play in the park. Nai has lots of Jewish friends in the kindergarten, as well as her Arab friends from Tira and Taybeh, like Nabil, Rali, and Basel. My husband and I firmly believe in this path. Our daughter is here because we want her to grow up with equality and exposure to others. We think this is the right way of life in a country like ours. It's important to create a shared space and not a segregated one. I'm sure that my daughter will grow up and meet Jews throughout her life, and this will come from a true recognition and respect for a different culture. She won't grow up with contempt and hatred, which is unfortunately how we parents were raised."

"We adults were raised in a different way, a way that only increased the gulf between the Arab and Jewish sectors. Change in our society starts right here in preschool and early childhood. Things don't blow up here, and there isn't a gap between us. And, by the way, this starts in the child's home. The families who register their kids here, at home they condemn what is happening to people in Gaza, and the phenomenon of attacks coming from Gaza and those who are burning kites. We understand and teach that there might be disagreements and there are quite a few difficult conversations, especially at a time of escalation, but none of the parents at the kindergarten are concerned about the safety of their kids."

The waiting list is getting longer

There are other groups like Hand in Hand, too. Samah Salaima is the director of the Wahat al-Salam—Neve Shalom educational organization.

"Together with 70 other Palestinian and Jewish families, we chose to move and live in a shared community," Salaima says.

"We decided to educate our children together and to invite other families to send their kids to our education system. It's a school that was founded in the 1980s with eight children and two teachers, an Arab and a Jew. Today, it has

270 children from Preschool through sixth grade. In fact, we were the first school in Israel to open a bilingual and binational education framework."

Salaima says she is from the "third generation of the Nakba." In her extended family, there many relatives who became refugees after 1948, and their descendants live in refugee camps or in Germany and Sweden.

"It's not easy or simple," she says of her life's work.

"But a shared society is like a muscle, you have to strengthen it all the time. Strengthening and guiding the teachers, mentors, tutors, and parents who are doing this work is very hard right now. We teach the difficult history of both peoples and we don't hide anything from the children. Our children and our adults know how to cope with complexity, difficulties and differences, and with pain too. Because that is the reality outside. We also understand and teach about balance of power—how you can really promote a shared life based on values like peace, equality and democracy, without one side being privileged at the expense of the other. Sadly, the current leadership is belligerent and aggressive, which makes our task harder day by day. At the same time, what encourages me greatly,



Samah Salaima. Photo by Yuvel Chen

is that the waiting list of children who want to be admitted to our framework is only getting longer. The very fact that there are quite a few families in Israel who are not afraid fills me with hope.”

How do bilingual schools deal with national days when the conflict is becoming more acute?

“We believe in open dialogue, including with the children,” says Mary Copti, Co-Director of the Center for Advancement of Shared Society at Beit Berl Academic College and a Pedagogic Counselor at Hand in Hand’s center in Jaffa.

“That said, it is very important to adapt the program to the children’s ages and stages of development. Learning, in terms of personal and group identity, and of course Jewish-Arab dialogue, will gradually develop over the years, with the development of the children and the continuation of their shared education.



Mary Copti.

“It’s important to note that education is a process, not what one does on a particular day. We teach love for the other, dialogue skills, listening to and sensitivity toward others, languages, and critical thinking through asking questions. From early childhood, we teach about human rights. The right to live in a secure home, the right to live in peace. In first grade, we expand the meaning of these rights. For example, we talk about the right of every person to live on his land, the right to build a shared home where there is space for everyone, the right to peace and not to war. That all human life is equal and we shouldn’t be racist. We believe that if you teach a person how to love fellow human beings, then they will strive for peace and the actualization of human rights.” ■



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