

**Neva Shalom/ Wahat Al- Salam**  
The Israeli/Arab Community that is Making the impossible- Possible  
By Dr. Frank Cardelle

„The age of nations is past, the task before us now,  
if we are to survive is to shake off  
our ancient prejudices and build the earth.”

*Teihard de Chardin*

In the Gaza Strip in March of 2006 an Israeli T5 Stinger missile slammed into the side of a car carrying five Palestinian militants and their leaders five year old daughter. All were killed instantly as the car was engulfed in a horrific ball of fire. Soon after a 15 year old female suicide bomber took revenge by stepping into a crowded street near Tel Aviv and blowing herself up taking six Israelis with her and wounding close to a dozen more.

These two events describe the everyday calamity that goes in the hub of the middle East conflict. One that has been going on since the War of 1948 when the Israelis fought and won their independence and declared the territory of Israel the Jewish Homeland.

Today, this bloody conflict still goes on as both sides bring much pain and suffering to one another. A conflict and crisis that mirrors all conflict and crisis the world over in one way or another, from country to country, community to community, family to family and brother to brother.

Will there ever be an end to this conflict? Can Jews and Arabs learn to share the same land, breathe the same air and learn to co-exist? Some believe 'Yes' and others believe that this can never be resolved as the conditions and causes are too deeply entrenched in the hearts, minds and souls of both Jewish and Arab camps. A few even believe that this is merely an impossible task.

Not long ago I traveled to Israel to see for myself what I had, like many others had only heard and read about for years. I wanted to find out what was not being talked about and what we do not hear much about but only through the evening news or the headlines in the daily press or not at all. During the month of my stay in Israel I came across a community in the country that few people really knew much about. Others did not know anything or chose not to even discuss the topic.

In this article I want to share my own experience of this community that I had the good fortune to locate and spend some time. While there I had the opportunity to talk to many people in this unique place and even got to watch them „live” their experience. I met teachers, parents and even talked with a few young people, both Arabs and Jew alike. I also was lucky enough to spend several hours in deep discussion with the democratically, elected mayor of the community. An Arab Palestinian and Christian. In a short time we became friends. He was a wise, thoughtful and intelligent man. I learned much from our shared encounters.

I hope by sharing my experience of what I learned there the reader audience will have at least another view of things that goes deeper and beyond the usual media report. Perhaps, then we can see upfront and know about important pieces of a story or event that is often overlooked and blocked through the sensationalism of the media.

I give you Neva Shalom/Wahat Al- Salam. The only community in Israel where Jews and Arabs

CHOOSE to live together, are building a better future for their children and have done so for over twenty-five years.

Building a Foundation for Dialogue, Cooperation and Peace.

As taken from the community brochure:

„Nestled on a hillside off the main highway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, the community of Neva Shalom/ Wahat Al- Salam stands as an alternative to regional violence and strife.

The „Oasis of Peace” as it is known in Hebrew and Arabic is made up of dedicated Jews and Palestinians, all Israeli citizens, who have established a model that they hope others will see as evidence that a new kind of society is possible. One where the state of Israel is sustained; where the Arab minority owns an equal share, has a legitimate voice; where traditions and culture are valued as an integral facet of the rich history of the middle East”

I have to confess that after I first read the words from the above I expected to see people with smiling faces and gestures of warmth towards the public. After all they represented something out of the ordinary as is often the case when people join together to become the pioneers of something new to the world. In this case certainly new for the conflicted region of Israel. While I did see some smiling faces and met people who were warm and friendly. I also met others who had frowns on their faces whether this was in the office, Hotel or small shops and markets. In short these people were just ordinary folks going about the business of living and like everyone else had stressful moments and bad days. Perhaps, this was because of a conflict in a family matter, or some important decision needed to be made to improve the lives of people in the community. They like anyone else had those moments when they raised their voice, or said something that hurt someone else etc.

The difference in this community is that they sit down and find the best way to resolve the dispute or improve the skills needed to bring about understanding and ease. They do not pick up guns and began shooting one another or finding other ways to bring about the abuse and humiliation of another person as well as themselves. It did not matter whether they were Arab or Jew or Christian or which family member of the 52 families they happened to come from. Like the rest of us humans who possess less than perfect traits and qualities. They too had struggles with their emotions and „Archaic mind-sets”, those that are simply part of any exchange between people but they found better and more healthier ways for doing this. At Neva Shalom/Wahat Al-Salam these have become some of the guiding principles for how they operate as a community. They take the time and make the effort to go where others often fear to tread. They go for a more lasting approach that infuses all aspects of their lives on a daily basis. They go towards dialogue and beyond the staid clothes of limitedness and opinion.

One thing that I found particularly interesting about the community is learning that the founder Bruno Hussar was a converted Jew to Catholicism. Perhaps, this symbolized something important and was a key for the communities birth and vision. This is to be able to understand others people beliefs, backgrounds and traditions more deeply it might be helpful to have lived this or at least the desire and effort to do so.

Another part of the community that drew my attention was the special way the children are educated. In the community they have a bilingual school K-8 teaching from both Hebrew and Arabic languages. Here the teachers both Jewish and Palestinian help the children to know more deeply their rich cultural heritage while respecting the others. This program has been so successful that the

school has received official endorsement from the office of the Ministry of Education of the state of Israel. Plus, several parents both Jews and Arabs outside of the community have sent their children to the school to be part of a more pioneering approach to learning about cultural differences.

The other program in the community that has attracted everyone's attention is what is called the School for Peace. Here one of the members of the Community, A Professor from Jerusalem has launched a unique encounter method in teaching both Arabs and Jews to really see and understand one another and the Conflict in their country. This program has been offered in several Universities in the country and many have been trained in the programs methods. People from around the world come to partake in the unusual method of conflict resolution.

After speaking with more people, (sometimes in their homes over dinner) I learned that while many people want to participate in this „pioneer venture” only a few are accepted. It would seem that it takes more than just a desire or even a dream to really be a part of the experiment going on in the Community. It takes a full commitment and a willingness to learn, grow and discover continuously how to really do what it takes to truly change. Although there are many people who say they can be successful in some experience like this. It is only a few that can go for the duration. This is what the members look for when a potential applicant stands before them to be voted into the community or not. This is what I was told when I asked about this.

As I come closer to the end of this article I'm wondering how I can bring its closure in the best way. I think probably, the best way to do this justice is to say the following:

I have no illusions that Neva Shalom/ Wahat Al- Salam is Utopia or even close to this. I say this because some people want to lay this label onto the heads of the people there. Something they do not need. Not at all.

They are real, honest, courageous human beings who have taken it on themselves to try to create and find „another more healthy way to respond to a crisis that has been going on for far too long. Where other solutions have failed and even caused a regressive shift in matters. This community and its people continue to take the sometimes difficult steps out of blindness, and limitedness, in thought, feeling and choice that has kept them and people around them prisoners of an unhealthy attitude and lifestyle. These people should be congratulated for not only being able to do what they have already, but to do this when many people from all around them, from both sides look at them and what they are trying to do with suspicion and disdain. But what is more important here than this is that in spite of this response, they still carry on. Instead of blaming and complaining as others do, and offering nothing useful in exchange they still attempt to find better and lasting ways to have peace in their country and among their people. I applaud them for this because it is not easy at all making the „impossible” even close to possible. For this they are a model to us all everywhere on the planet.

In closing, I will let the voice of one of Neva Shalom/Wahat Al-Salam' member's express the very simple message of what they are trying to do.

„In the day to day life and interaction of a small community, we are bridging the gap that leads others who live apart to fear, hate and resort to violence.”

Beyond this if people want to know more about this unique community in Israel. I encourage anyone to go there and see for themselves. Of course, people may come away with different views than mine in this article but this is fine and well. Because when we can have different views about how we see and understand something and this is just accepted. We are on our way to a more peaceful world. This I believe is the calling for Neva Shalom/ Wahat Al- Salam and other kinds of

communities who are seeking better way to live together on this earth.