

ISRAELI JEWS AND ARABS STAND UNITED AT THE JUNCTION.

Text & photographs: Lydia Aisenberg



“Salaam,” waves 5-year-old Ahmad from Tamra village in the Jezreel Valley and right: a message on a banana leaf encouraging love, tolerance and more understanding between Arabs and Jews.

In the shadow of ancient Tel Megiddo, hundreds of Israeli Jews and Arabs joined hands at the side of one of the busiest roads in the country, Route 65.

The 3-generational human chain held signs pointing to an off road dialogue tent that had been erected on a small hill between the main road and Tel Megiddo, a site where to date almost 30 layers of different civilizations have been uncovered and still more awaiting discovery.

The dialogue tent was hastily constructed by Jews and Arabs living in the Megiddo-Wadi Ara region under the auspices of the Givat Haviva Center for Shared Living, a campus promoting encounters between Arabs and Jews in the region and further afield for many years.

The anger, frustration and total bewilderment as to how the present wave of terror, including the running down and stabbing of 4 Israelis standing a few days before at a bus stop further along the highway at Gan Shmuel, had erupted was almost palpable among the older generation gathered at the roadside making a collective demand for reconciliation and a peaceful shared future.

The Hebrew and Arabic messages on the roadside banners called for partnership, equality and security for Jews and Arabs and others proclaimed that these Jews and Arabs “refuse to forgo a shared, peaceful life together.”

“Too little, too late,” was a comment heard from one of the Jewish middle aged banner wavers. “So why have you come today then?” asked an Arab twenty-something standing next to him. “Because I just couldn’t stay home and do nothing,” was the immediate answer.

The younger man gave an understanding nod, they then shook hands before turning back to face the road and energetically wave to the passing motorists and point to the dialogue tent on the hill, circles of white plastic chairs arranged neatly on a grassy verge in the shade, hoping some of the drivers would make a pit stop of support en-route to their destinations.

There were those that did. Every time the traffic light at the junction changed, scores of cars came roaring along the road and scores more passed by on the far side of the highway. The majority of those who chose to react to the people at the roadside and their signs and waves, honked horns, waved back and gave thumbs up signs. A handful made rude gestures and one relatively young driver in a black car slowed down almost to a crawl on the far side of the road and yelled abuse - most of which drowned out by the calls of Shalom or Salaam from the demonstrators.

“We are trying to present hope, faith and a joint responsibility in the face of the terrible fear, hatred and racism,” said Givat Haviva executive director Yaniv Sagee, a member of a nearby kibbutz. Standing next to him was his wife Dalia, a teacher at the Bridge Over the Wadi Jewish-Arab bilingual school founded by the Hand in Hand organization situated in the Wadi Ara Muslim village of Kfar Kara.

Passing between the people, a traditionally dressed Arab lady from the Wadi Ara village of Biyadah, held up an enormous banana leaf upon which she had inscribed, in Hebrew and Arabic, words of encouragement toward better understanding and tolerance between Jews and Arabs.

In the noon heat, the leaf began to curl hiding her important message. A number of Jewish children and their mother, asking her what she had written on the slowly closing up leaf, helped her unfurl the sides so that all could see, read and hopefully be strengthened by her words of encouragement.

The Megiddo Prison, built by the British Army during the British Mandate, is situated directly on the opposite side of the road to where the demonstration took place. Hundreds of Palestinians are imprisoned there.

It was here, directly under the watchtowers of the prison, just a few kilometers from the 1949 Armistice (Green) Line, that in June, 2002 a Palestinian terrorist driving a car packed with explosives slammed into the side of a green Egged public bus, killing 17 Israelis, seriously injuring many more.

A large memorial created in steel by the father of one of the victims sits a few meters from the roadside, a lazer printed image of each victim on the 17 yarzeit lanterns adorning the main structure.

The Israeli Jews and Arabs who stood this week together at Megiddo (Armageddon), sat together in the dialogue tent and discussion circles on the grass verge, eventually drifted off home whilst on the other side of the road, rays of sunshine glistened on the steel memorial to the dark days just a decade ago, fervent hopes in their hearts of better days ahead.



Peace in the balance.