



## Rooting for peace



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Who would fund an unlikely partnership of Jewish settlers and their Palestinian neighbors in the West Bank?

With the shootings and stabbings taking place on and off Route 60, the main thoroughfare here in the West Bank, this has been a particularly difficult moment to be raising funds for the **Roots Association**.

Perhaps the only not-for-profit group in existence of Israeli Jewish settlers and their Palestinian neighbors, Roots (*shorashim* in Hebrew, *judur* in Arabic) sits on a three-dunam, Palestinian-owned piece of land on Route 60, between the Gush Etzion bloc roundabout and Bethlehem.

On a shoestring budget, Roots is successfully organizing Arabic and Hebrew classes, plus a whole range of activities, from photography to religion to trauma-healing classes jointly attended by residents of Jewish settlements such as Tekoa, Efrat and Alon Shvuot, and the Palestinian towns of Beit Ummar, Al Khader and Husan. Coming together like this is a unique experience for the young people, who though they are neighbors, come from parallel universes that never cross

Co-director Shaul Judelman, from Tekoa, is categorical: "Roots is about re-examining and changing the discourse of peacemaking to achieve mutual recognition and respect," he says. "Are two separate states the answer? And what is the role of a partnership of religious Jewish settlers and Palestinians?"

Shaul continues, "We are addressing the national story: the Occupation. The conflict is about legitimacy. Do we accept that the other side belongs here as well? This goes beyond trust; it is about the land."

The three-dunam piece of land is owned by the family of Roots co-director Khaled Abu Awwad, all from Beit Ummar, a town further south on Route 60.

Shaul and partner Khaled worked on a paltry budget of \$310,000 in 2018. The business end of Roots is as difficult as the cultural and political aspects are improbable, to say the least.

Right-wing settler groups, some with strong ties to the Israeli government, receive millions of dollars in private funding from conservative American Jewish and Christian Evangelist organizations and individuals. Let's say most of those well-to-do funders have little love for Palestinians.

Left-leaning human rights activist groups and certain European governments fund Palestinian organizations and projects all over the West Bank, such as building schools, clinics, and solar power structures, and planting olive trees. A range of Islamic groups help build mosques and madrassas, religious schools. None of these people is particularly fond of settlers.

So who on earth will give to a partnership of settlers and Palestinians ?

"Conventional wisdom says we, Roots- Shorashim-Judur, should not exist," remarks Shaul, as he prepares strong black coffee in a long-stemmed "finjan" pot on the gas stove at the site.

He says that half of the budget comes from North American private individuals, mostly Jewish, through a 501-c (non-profit) Friends of Roots group with tax deductible status. The non-denominational GO Campaign, a Los-Angeles based funder of "high-impact grass roots organizations", also contributes.

A tax-deductible group also exists in Geneva called B8 of Hope, an association of four Jews and four Muslims that backs grass-roots work in Israeli and Palestinian societies.

"We have been gaining the confidence of local residents on both sides here in the West

Bank, but funding is still a major challenge," Shaul begins. "Do I think we are worth the millions of dollars the settler groups receive? Yes, I do. I believe we are doing God's work, bringing together young neighbors who would never meet otherwise."

What about the liberal Jewish American funding structures, often with millions at their disposal, such as the Abraham Fund, the New Israel Fund and philanthropist Michael Steinhardt, who funds Taglit, the Birthright program. "In line with the Oslo Accords, they are not allowed to give to any group based over the Green Line, but they are interested in the work we do," he continues. "That includes important behind the scenes work, such as Israelis working for Palestinian rights, and Palestinians responding after acts of violence. These are acts of solidarity that shatter the assumptions of Us versus Them."

Raised in the United States, Shaul is one of a minority of settlers who dislike intensely Donald Trump and everything he stands for. He is a disciple of the late radical Rabbi Menachem Froman, also from Tekoa, who met regularly with Palestinian religious figures. He penned the maxim "the land does not belong to Israelis and Palestinians, but rather, Israelis and Palestinians belong to the land." He was filmed praying with Palestinians.

After a long battle with cancer, Rabbi Froman died in 2013. His wife, Hadassah, an active member of Roots, founded the not for profit Beit Hateotron, an Israeli funding structure based in Jerusalem. Over the strong coffee and a cigarette, Shaul admits that Beit Hateotron does not see much action. Only a few local people give, and they do it anonymously. "Israelis have largely given up on peace," he comments.

His partner Khaled doesn't have to worry about drumming up funding. There isn't any from the West Bank or the Arab world. "Palestinians and Arabs in general give only to mosques and hospitals," he says, over coffee and cigarettes in the kitchen, "because they believe it brings them closer to God. I'm with them on the hospitals, of course, but I believe Roots-Judur should come before the mosques, and I am a religious man. This is because we work directly with our young people, our greatest asset."

Khaled faces a problem that Shaul does not. In Beit Ummar and in Bethlehem, he occasionally is accused of what might be the greatest, publicly-expressed evil in the West Bank: normalization with Israelis.

"I cannot say to them, no, this is not normalization," he begins. "That would be a lie. So I say, yes, it is. They stop talking and look at me. Then I say, your families have built the settlements. They work with Israelis. There is security cooperation between PA police and Israeli soldiers. This is all normalization. It is about accepting the system as it stands, and also the situation. But my normalization is to change the situation, so that Palestinians can live with dignity. And when I say all this, most people agree with me."

There is one fundraiser working with Roots. Based in Tel Aviv, Croatia-born Daniel Tukar

says the situation Roots faces is "surrealistic."

"Now it is mostly idealists, mostly Jewish individuals from North America, who give me funding for Roots, because they find here people acting on values they believe in," he notes. Tukar agrees that getting to mainstream funders is difficult because Roots is over the Green Line. "I was close to getting a grant from a major foundation," he says, "and then they realized that Bethlehem is not next to Tel Aviv. I think that Roots represents a revolution, but I am optimistic that things will change."

Roots hosts 15-20 groups of visitors a month, mostly from Europe and North America. How do these groups, from diverse callings - Reform and Conservative Jewish Associations, the Pacific Coast Council, Christian groups, peace camp activists, a journalists' syndicate from South America, a trade union from Australia - discover the unusual association?

"The tour operators know about us," Shaul explains over more coffee. "They want to give their clients, the visiting groups, an on the ground look at this conflict and a glimpse of local people taking responsibility for their future."

Roots charges each group about \$400 to visit the "Ard", the land, and hear Shaul and Khaled speak. Other speakers include former IDF soldiers and Fatah fighters, whose lives have changed since meeting and working with the other side. And they describe the kids who are neighbors meeting each other for the first time. Suspicion gives way to smiles and laughter when the kids share similar apprehensions. Hard to believe, but this really does amount to a revolution in Israeli-Palestinian relations.

Other groups are local, teenagers from all over Israel. "They come to hear a Palestinian voice on the situation," Shaul says, "before they do their army service."

"We must focus on the young people on both sides as a part of reconciliation," Khaled explains. "We want to give them the tools to deal with the situation in the future, with the fear and anger that are definitely going to be a part of their reality."

Meanwhile, two members of their team, Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger, a Roots founder from the Alon Shvut settlement, and Shadi Abu Awwad, a son of Khaled, have returned from a fund-raising tour in the western US. They managed to bring back about \$40,000. Compared with the funds other groups in the West Bank receive, it is not a great deal of money, is it?

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