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Shorashim facilitates meetings between Israelis and Palestinians

By *PATRICIA GOLAN* NOVEMBER 10, 2019 16:38

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For five years, Shorashim has facilitated meetings between Israeli settlers and Palestinians from nearby communities.



Palestinian and Israeli women who took part in the Roots women's photography workshop plant a tree

(photo credit: SASKIA KEELEY)

**The Jerusalem
Report**

For anyone who has lived in this country, whether Arab or Jew, the scene in the Gush Etzion region in the [West Bank](#) mid-September

would have seemed nearly surrealistic. A dozen young men from a nearby yeshiva were sitting in a circle together with young Palestinian men, drinking coffee and chatting. Leading the discussion were several adults – Jewish religious settlers and devout Muslim Palestinians from neighboring towns.

The site of the gathering was a well-hidden [Palestinian](#)-owned plot of land off the main Route 60 artery and the home of a remarkable grassroots organization called Roots – Shorashim in Hebrew, Judur in Arabic. Since 2014, the not-for-profit group has facilitated interactions between Israeli Jewish settlers and Palestinians from nearby towns. They may be neighbors, but they live in parallel universes that rarely if ever cross.

Roots, say the founders, was created to provide a safe space where Israelis and Palestinians could begin to understand each other's identity and daily struggles in the conflict, and "seek a path of partnership."

In addition to interreligious meetings for adults and youth, Roots organizes a range of activities for Israeli and Palestinian residents, including women's photography workshops, summer camps and break-fasts around religious holidays, and a summer camp for children.

Roots also carries out solidarity visits to victims of violence both Palestinian and Israeli, has worked with Palestinian farmers to gain access to their farmlands adjacent to Jewish settlements, and carried out joint charity initiatives including a blood drive.

The 19-year-old Jewish participants in the meeting this particular evening are students at the nearby Machanaim Hesder Yeshiva near the town of Efrat. Machanaim is a post high-school institution that combines religious studies with service in the Israel Defense Forces. A month earlier one of their classmates, Dvir Sorek, was stabbed to death as he was returning to the yeshiva from Jerusalem. [Two Palestinian suspects have been charged with the murder.]

Dvir had been a member of Roots. In the wake of his murder,

Palestinians in the interfaith dialogue group wrote an unprecedented condolence letter to Sorek's family and classmates expressing their shock and horror. "As a group we condemn such brutal actions; such violence hurts all of us," the letter stated. "We build bridges between the peoples on this land and we hope that this tragedy will be the last."

SINCE ITS founding, thousands of young Israelis have visited Roots' little oasis, many of them hearing for the first time Palestinians' views. None of Sorek's Yeshiva classmates who came to September's gathering had ever personally met any Palestinians before, and most had never heard of Roots until Sorek's death.

The "moderators" of the meeting were the Roots project co-directors, Rabbi Shaul Judelman, who lives in the settlement of Tekoa, and Khaled Abu Awwad from the Palestinian town of Beit Ummar. A small compound has been erected on the three-dunam plot of land serving as Roots' home base. What members call "The Field," the name of a 2017 documentary on the project, or "Ard" – "the land" – belongs to the Abu Awwad family, whose members are well-known Palestinian activists with status as genuine patriots and freedom fighters.

Their mother, Fatma, was jailed by Israel for her activities in the PLO. Khaled Abu Awwad's brother Ali spent time in jail during the First Intifada. Another brother was shot dead by Israeli soldiers under circumstances that are still contested.

Ali evolved into a champion of non-violence, and was one of the founders of Roots. Khaled, one of the heads of the Israeli Palestinian Bereaved Families Forum, was awarded a UNESCO prize in 2011 for "his efforts to promote tolerance, peace and non-violence through his work as a peace activist and leader in the reconciliation process between Palestinians and Israelis."

Roots co-director Judelman says he believes that the organization and other movements can point the way to a model for "more creative political solutions than just the one-state or two-state paradigm."

“Dvir was one of our children,” Abu Awwad said to the Yeshiva students at the September gathering. “The murder harmed all of us. I hope this is the beginning of a continuation between us in the name of all those who lost their lives because of the hatred and the fear here. We were born here and will continue to live here, and all the violence doesn’t give us anything, only pain and suffering.”

Mousa Sabateen, a tour guide from Bethlehem, told the visitors: “Once we started meeting at Roots I saw that we were all human beings. We don’t want a war; we want to be with you together.”

Sabateen, who had initiated the condolence letter, told them about another Palestinian member of Roots, 28-year-old Ahmed Benasra from the village of Wadi Fukin, who was shot to death by Israeli soldiers in March while trying to help a Palestinian family trapped in a car after an accident. Sabateen said it had been hard to convince Benasra to join the group because he was afraid of the settlers, but in the end found it a positive experience. “Till now no one has written about this, people only ask me about Dvir,” Sabateen added. None of the yeshiva students had heard about Benasra’s death.

The discussion continued in three smaller mixed groups of Palestinians and Israelis. “My group discussed the issue of fear,” recalls Nitzan Fensterheim, one of Dvir’s classmates. “Both sides said they were afraid, but there was a difference in the type of fears we experienced.”

Fensterheim, who grew up in Ra’anana, told The Jerusalem Report that this was the first time he had had any experience with Roots. He said the students compared notes after the meeting.

“We each took away something different,” said Fensterheim. “I saw the difference between what you hear on the news and what the Palestinians themselves actually go through. For example, for me it was interesting that a lot of the Palestinians there were more interested in day to day safety than grand ideas of nationalism or statehood or where the borders should be drawn.” Fensterheim said he found the conversation “eye-opening. It was actually a relief

from how relations between Israelis and Palestinians are portrayed in the media.”

These Yeshiva students will be going into the army in March, and it's entirely possible that the same Palestinians in the discussion group will be meeting them armed and in uniform at a checkpoint in the future. “This probably went through the minds of everyone there, but it went entirely unsaid,” Fensterheim admitted. “It was a fact no one cared to comment on.”

The Jewish members of Roots may face criticism or ridicule from their fellow Israelis, but Palestinians take a far greater risk in meeting with Israelis, especially with Jewish settlers. Many do not want to be identified because they could lose their jobs. Khaled is sometimes accused of “normalization,” considered a curse in Palestinian society. This has not deterred him or his family.

The Jewish activists in Roots/Shorashim/Judur include many disciples of the late Rabbi Menachem Froman from the settlement of Tekoa, a legendary activist in interfaith and peacemaking efforts. He penned the maxim “the land does not belong to Israelis and Palestinians, but rather, Israelis and Palestinians belong to the land.”

“I accompanied Menachem for 18 years,” related poet Eliaz Cohen from Kibbutz Kfar Etzion. “He was a bulldozer, but all of his efforts never penetrated the population. For many years we searched for a Palestinian group that shared our dream.”

THE INITIAL shidduch (match) between the Jewish and Palestinian peace activists was through John Moyle, an American pastor from the Washington area who'd been working in the West Bank as a peacemaker for years. “He was the first person to understand that there were Jewish settlers and Palestinians living in the same area that could be brought together,” explains Cohen.

“After several years of studying the Arab-Israeli conflict and more importantly, building real and trusting relationships with many Israelis and Palestinians living in the West Bank, I began to realize that the great separation that had been created over time between the two peoples in the land was a central cause of the violence and

conflict, and was doing literally nothing to reduce or prevent it,” Moyle told The Jerusalem Report. “It became clear to me that separating Israelis and Palestinians from each other – even though they might live in neighboring communities! – made it nearly impossible for them to build relationships with each other.”

Moyle began meeting with scores of Jews and Palestinians who might be interested in getting to know each other. “I was looking for the ‘jewels,’ those willing to take a risk and meet in person with those from the other side,” he relates.

The first meeting that would establish Roots took place in January 2014 on the Abu Awwad family property. In a symbolic act, Ali and Khaled Abu Awwad gave the Jewish visitors a key to the gate, stating “if you need a place to bring people together to work for peace – you are welcome here.” Nearly 80 Jews and Palestinians from the surrounding settlements and towns took part in the first general encounter later that month, which participants would describe as “transformative.”

Only six months later the group faced its first real crisis. Three Jewish teenagers from Gush Etzion were kidnapped and murdered, followed by the murder of a Palestinian teen by Jewish Israelis. “The entire area was on fire, everyone was so enraged,” recalls Cohen. “That’s when we realized the relationships we had developed through Roots were stronger than anything else – we found that we needed each other.”

ROOTS IS supported in part by a registered nonprofit association in Geneva called B8 of Hope that today backs a dozen grassroots efforts in Israeli and Palestinian societies. Roots was the first of these.

It all started with a personal trip Mehra Beit and her husband took to Israel with their children in the summer of 2014. Both Swiss citizens, her husband is Jewish while Mehra is Muslim. Their friend Jean-Marc Liling, a Swiss human rights attorney, took them to visit the Roots compound in Gush Etzion.

“This was the time of the kidnapping and murders, but we didn’t know this, though we could see he was nervous” Beit tells the Report via phone from Geneva. “We went there in the middle of this madness, and met the inspiring co-founders of Roots. We were blown away that this could exist – this dialogue between Palestinians who might have been prisoners, and these religious Jewish settlers. It seemed crazy.”

On returning to Switzerland they decided to invite representatives from Roots to talk to their friends and acquaintances about their organization.

“In Switzerland, Jews and Arabs are very friendly,” explains Beit. “They socialize, and golf together, but there is an elephant in the room and they never talk about the conflict so they won’t make each other uncomfortable. But we thought everyone would be at ease here because it’s not about the conflict, more about the solution.”

Demand to hear the speakers was so great that they organized six presentations in synagogues, schools and Muslim centers. It was so successful that six of the couple’s friends suggested setting up a nonprofit to help this “pro-solution” grassroots effort to pave a path for a solution. Thus the eight – a mixture of nationalities and faiths, including Muslims and Jews – founded B8 (for Beit/Bayit) of Hope.

After a series of workshops and lectures in Geneva, the founders decided to help other organizations.

“We thought, let’s give them visibility and opportunities, because all of us are from different professions and have lots of connections,” explains Beit. Little by little, B8 of Hope added other not-for-profits, and is currently supporting 11 organizations including Combatants for Peace, The Jerusalem Youth Chorus, The Parents Circle Families Forum, The Road to Recovery, and Women Wage Peace.

“What is interesting to us in all these groups is the humanization effect of their activities,” explains Beit. “We like movements that create unity within a society, breaking down stereotypes and bridge-

building. Roots does this really beautifully.”

Judelman says he believes that the organization and other movements can point the way to a model for “more creative political solutions than just the one-state or two-state paradigm.”

Raz Kones, a former career Israeli army officer, is coordinator of Roots’ youth division. Speaking at a Geneva gala dinner fund-raiser last spring, she conceded that both Israeli and Palestinian young people are pressured not to belong to the group. But, Kones insisted, “The value of our work has proven itself. We created a space where youth from both sides can get involved in their societies and show there is another way. We both have no other land, and that is exactly why we cannot stop until we find a solution to this conflict.”

Speaking at New York’s Fordham University last year, Roots international leader Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger from the settlement of Alon Shvut told the audience: “I see it again and again – Palestinians and Israelis coming to our center with hesitancy, with fear, like there’s a red line in the sand. But when the meeting takes place, I often see a sense of liberation on people’s faces as the fear dissipates, and the disease begins to be healed, and people become, in my mind, whole... and a little bit more human.”

Schlesinger and Roots Youth Leader Shadi Abu Awwad (Khaled Abu Awwad’s son) are on a speaking tour throughout the US until the end of November. Information and locations can be found at www.friendsofroots.net/live.

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