

Israel Through Other Eyes

In an Arab town, an Israeli Jew finds friendship—and its limits.

BY GALINA VROMEN

SOME JEWS THINK I'M BRAVE. SOME THINK I'M stupid. I am an Israeli Jew who lives in an Arab Israeli town because I want to get to know the 20 percent of my compatriots who are Arabs and learn their language. No one thinks this is normal. There must be another motive. Maybe I am married to an Arab? Maybe I want to make a political statement? Maybe my work brings me here? The answer on all counts is "no." Just curiosity? How crazy!

Once Israeli Jews get over the shock, they almost always ask: "How do people treat you? Are you accepted?" The assumption is that I am shunned at best, attacked at worst. Nothing could be further from the truth.

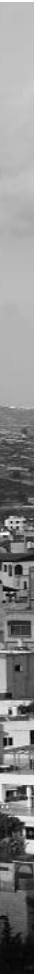
For almost two years I have lived with my husband, also an Israeli-born Jew, in the northern Israeli town known as Shfaram in Hebrew and Shafa 'Amr in Arabic, population 40,000—60 percent Muslims, 26 percent Arab Christians, 14 percent Druze, and a smattering of Bedouin. To the best of my knowledge, we are the only Jews. Located about 15 miles inland from the port city of Haifa, Shafa 'Amr is in the hilly Galilee region that has been part of the State of Israel since its creation in 1948. We hadn't planned to stay this long. We came for just a year, prompted by my husband's research on *sulha*, a traditional Arab mediation process, and our desire to learn Arabic. But it is a harder language to learn than we

thought and we enjoy life in the town and are in no rush to leave.

I have grown fond of my tiny herb garden—the one our friend Sayid helped me plant when my husband and I first arrived so I could make herbal tea. I love the view from our windows of the ruins of the Crusader fortress on the highest of the town's seven hills, the smell of coffee in the air that greets me when I hang my laundry off my porch, the tolling of the church bells that mingles on Sunday mornings with the *muezzins'* calls from the mosques. I love harvesting olives in autumn with the family that has adopted us.

It no longer strikes me as exotic when a pickup truck equipped with a megaphone winds its way through the narrow streets to announce a wedding. Funerals are also announced by megaphone. Among the first words I learned in Arabic were the ones for "wedding" and "funeral," in order to decipher whether the invitations, issued to one and all, were to share a joy or a sorrow. Most of the weddings take place outdoors in the summer, and I have come to expect summer months filled with fireworks bursting in the air in celebration. I no longer jump at the sound of sub-machinegun fire, tut-tut-tutting at the slightest excuse for joy among the Druze. (Followers of a secretive faith that separated from Islam in the 11th century, the Druze are the only Arabs who are conscripted into the Israel Defense Forces. This gives them access to army weapons, whose use to celebrate weddings and holidays is, of course, a patent

GALINA VROMEN, a former international news correspondent, directs a preschool reading and Jewish values program in northern Israel.





Shafa 'Amr is also called "Little Rome" because of its seven hills, the tallest of them capped by a fortress built on the ruins of a Crusader castle.

violation of military regulations.)

My biggest predicament in the first few months was that I could not venture out my door to dump my trash into the garbage bin without being invited for a friendly coffee I usually had no time to enjoy. Most of my neighbors have given up on me and assume I am unfriendly, when actually I am just busy directing a Hebrew-language parent-child reading program—a job that keeps me wedded to my computer for most of the day or away visiting nearby Jewish towns. However unintentionally, I am sure I have insulted many of my neighbors in Shafa 'Amr with my reluctance to interrupt my day for hours of socializing. But I have been treated with unrelenting warmth and respect, even though my behavior is freer than what is

acceptable for women in the Druze part of town where I live: I take business trips unescorted by relatives; I rarely cook, in a community where women take pride in providing delicious and abundant food constantly; I have only one (grown) child; I expect my husband to wash floors and do the laundry, chores thought of exclusively as women's work.

Above all, I have come to appreciate how enveloping, comforting, and binding extended-family ties are among my Arab friends, and to be grateful for their willingness to allow my husband and me into their orbit. Throughout their lives they spend evening after evening together, sitting amiably on rooftop patios in the summer, watching the moon rise over their twinkling town, and clustering indoors during the winter, talking and drinking endless cups of tea

and coffee as the flames lap the olive-wood logs in their stoves. They consider my life pitifully unentwined in the lives of others, devoid of substance and interest because I live far from my son, my parents, and my brother.

I suspect that it is this sense of family—its love, its power, its all-encompassing cushioning against the world—that helps them contend with Israeli society, that often hostile, sometimes-compelling, always-conflicting world in which they find themselves. Unlike Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which Israel captured in the Six-Day War of 1967, the Arabs of Shafa 'Amr and other areas inside Israel's pre-1967 borders—about 1.2 million people in all—are Israeli citizens with full voting rights. But though they may study with Jews at universities, work with them in

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offices and hospitals, service their cars, tend their gardens, and clean their homes, they rarely socialize with Jews.

Moreover, Arabs in Israel have a strong sense of being second-class citizens, a perception that is supported by the meagerness of the national resources dedicated to Arab schools and municipal infrastructure compared with those devoted to the Jewish sector. Arabs are underrepresented in the civil service and in universities; they cannot get the security clearances needed for jobs in Israel's large industrial security sector. I feel inadequate to speak about what Israel looks like through their eyes. I only know that living in an Arab town has meant acquiring a bifocal vision that is often uncomfortable. Above all, there is the feeling that a whole world exists that is simply ignored by the majority culture.

I remember walking around a big shopping mall in a Jewish town 10 minutes from Shafa 'Amr. I was shopping there one day with my neighbor Bediya, and wanted to go into the record store to buy a CD by Mira Awad, an Israeli Arab singer. The shop is part of Israel's largest record-store chain. "You won't find Mira Awad here.

These stores don't carry our music," Bediya said simply. Nonsense, I thought to myself. But she was right. Not only was there nothing by Awad (other than a recording she had done with an Israeli Jewish artist), there were no Arabic recordings to be had at all, despite the fact that the mall was frequented by many Arabs from surrounding towns.

Watching the news with my Arab friends, many of whom tune in daily to Israeli state television news in Hebrew, has become an experience in altered perception. Even the weather report can be annoying. For example, the weatherman may say, "We're expecting rain tomorrow. But it will be over before the holiday on Tuesday." That rainy tomorrow is actually a Muslim/Druze holiday, which goes totally unacknowledged. Only the Jewish holiday later in the week exists on Israeli television. It bothers me suddenly that the weatherman—and hence his listeners—does not know or does not acknowledge that a substantial portion of the population will care if it rains tomorrow and their feasts are ruined.

Then there was the report last year that Israel's transport minister, Israel Katz, had decided to gradually remove Arabic from road signs throughout Israel, despite the fact that Arabic is one of the country's official languages. This riles my neighbors. What is to be gained by such a policy? What will be its effect other than further disenfranchisement? Election after election, Arab voting rates go down—53 percent of Arab citizens went to the polls in the 2009 elections compared with 65 percent overall in the country, down dramatically from Arab voting rates of about 80 percent some 50 years ago. (Most give their votes to three small Arab parties, but about a third vote for mainstream Israeli parties.)

Katz's attitude is reflective of sentiment across a great swath of the Jewish population. In a 2008 poll by the Washington-based Center Against Racism, 75 percent of Israeli Jewish respondents said they would not agree to live in a building with Arab residents, about 40 percent believed that Arabs should be stripped of the right to vote, and more than 50 percent agreed that Israel should encourage the emigration of its Arab citizens. In a 2007 study by Haifa University sociologist Sami Smooha, 60 percent of surveyed Arab citizens of Israel expressed concern about a possible



Weddings and funerals loom large in the intense communal life of Shafa 'Amr's Druze community, with its close-knit and deeply rooted families.

mass expulsion, 76 percent considered Zionism to be racist, and 41 percent did not believe the Holocaust happened.

Israeli Arabs' alienation is palpable on Israeli Independence Day, which fell on April 19 this year. There were very few Israeli flags hanging in Shafa 'Amr, except on the post office and other official buildings. It's not that the residents don't like flags. There were lots of them—Brazilian, Italian, Argentine, varying according to each person's affinity for soccer teams contending in the World Cup. On Memorial Day, when Israel's war dead are honored, most people in Shafa 'Amr do not stand still during the minute-long wail of memorial sirens that is heard throughout the country. Unlike in Jewish towns, the traffic in Shafa 'Amr continues as normal. The same is true on Holocaust Memorial Day, when there are the same memorial sirens and the same responses. It saddens me, dismays me, but I cannot say that I don't understand.

When an item about Arabs buying land in the Galilee

was featured on television recently, I happened not to be in Shafa 'Amr, and I was relieved not to watch the report with my neighbors. The issue of land in tiny Israel is fraught with tension. "Judaizing" parts of Israel, such as the Galilee, where I live, has been the goal of most Israeli governments. Jewish suburban communities, with their rows of single-family homes and peaked red-tile roofs, have been deliberately placed between Arab towns, characterized by much more haphazard buildings and flat roofs that make it possible for sons to build homes on the roofs of their parents' houses. While dozens of new Jewish communities have mushroomed in the region over the past few decades, there are no new Arab townships—only the ever more sprawling existing ones. It is asserted in this particular news item that Jewish farmers are selling land to Arab buyers. Whether they are local citizens or foreigners is not made clear, but the tone of the piece conveys that it is shameful for Jews to sell land to Arabs. My Arab neighbors get the



Yet another glass of tea brings the author (left) together with her Arab friend and neighbor Bediya. But some topics remain hard to discuss.

message. How are they supposed to feel? They are not going to up and leave, of that I am certain. Not only do family ties root them here, but those family relations are deeply connected to land and hometown. The fact that I have lived in half a dozen places is cause for amazement, not admiration. Why would anyone go so far away from home?

One day I got into a discussion with my neighbors about Iran. What would they do if it used nuclear weapons against Israel? The answers were unanimous. They would stay right where they were, as they and their families did when Hezbollah attacked northern Israel from Lebanon in 2006, when Saddam Hussein sent his Scud missiles in 1990, in every Arab-Israeli war since 1948, and through all the ordeals dating back to the time when the Ottomans ruled the region. They are here, they are staying. The responses of our friends in Shafa 'Amr are consistent with polls showing

that most Israeli Arabs would rather reside in Israel than anywhere else—and most would not leave to move to a Palestinian state in the West Bank or Gaza Strip. This place is theirs, for better and for worse. Lots of things make them angry about Israel but some things make them grateful.

I remember the evening I invited Bediya to go see the Israeli antiwar film *Waltz With Bashir* in the nearby Jewish town of Tivon. As we waited for the movie to begin, she looked around the hall and murmured, “I bet I am the only non-Jew here.”

“Probably,” I answered. I hadn’t thought about it before.

When we walked out of the movie, which depicts the psychic costs of Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon, her first comment was, “There isn’t another country in the Middle East that would allow a movie like this to be made about it.”

The evening highlighted the reality of an educated Arab wishing to embrace the advantages of the West while remaining essentially marginalized. Arabs can go to

such movies, but by and large they don't. The majority culture is not theirs; they remain outsiders in a country where they have lived for generations.

For Arab women who want to embrace Western freedoms, the situation is particularly complex. It can even be dangerous. A few months after we arrived in Shafa 'Amr, a young Arab woman in a nearby town became yet another victim of honor killing when her father and brother set fire to her car while she was in it. There are at least half a dozen such killings reported each year in Israel, and probably many more that go unreported. In this case, as in most others, the cause of the young woman's dishonor was that she had gone out with a young man not of her family's choosing. The murderous father and brother turned themselves in to the police and acknowledged responsibility. The incident came up in conversation one evening at a celebration of the birth of a baby.

I asked those in the room what they thought of the incident.

"The father had no choice but to act as he did," ventured one elderly friend.

He was of the older generation. Just old-fashioned, I assumed. So I turned to his nephew, who is in his twenties. "Do you think so too?" I asked him.

"Of course," he answered, without hesitation. "The father had no choice."

"Why?" I asked. "Why did he have to do it?"

"Well, it's like when you have a weed around your olive tree. You have to pull it out, you have to get rid of it. Or it can eventually destroy the tree."

I turned to the young man's sister, also in her twenties, who had gone to school with the dead woman. "Do you agree?" I asked.

"That girl was always trouble," she answered.

I sipped my drink to hide my dismay. I was sitting among people I consider friends. Two little girls, sisters of the newborn, played at our feet. I worry for these girls; I wonder how they will navigate between the freedom of the modern world and family expectations.

My friend Bediya lives with that tension every day. She is a feminist, holds a master's degree in public administration, and works full time. She fought with the men in her family for 20 years to win the right to learn to drive. "The women who were

outraged when I first wanted to take driving lessons now all drive," she laughs.

Bediya is no less outraged by honor killings than I am. "People say one has to understand why the men do it. I say there are some things one should never understand because to say it's understandable is to allow it to continue."

A natural leader, she is often invited by Jewish groups to speak about the status of Arab women. She does it, but uncomfortably. She revels in the freedom of living in a Western democratic country, but she also recognizes that living in Israel carries with it the gnawing sense that she will always remain on the margins of society by virtue of not being Jewish. She will never be just herself for the Jewish majority. She will always be representative of something—of how far Arabs have come, of how far Arab women can go, of the possibility that Jews and Arabs can be friends.

I am not so naive as to think that by living in an Arab town, by getting to know my Arab compatriots, I am helping to resolve the tensions Israel faces. Knowing and understanding one another is good, certainly better than ignorance. But it does not, in and of itself, create a common vision of the future. At heart, I remain a Zionist. I believe in the desirability of a Jewish state, of there being one place in the world where Jewish culture prevails. I also believe in democracy as the best form of government. This entails not only majority rule but—no less important—a country of all its citizens and the protection of the civic and cultural rights of minorities. I favor greater acknowledgment of the multicultural nature of Israel, of its Arab minority, of its foreign workers, of the ethnic diversity of its Jewish population, which hails from every corner of the world. But what if the minority becomes the majority someday, and Bediya's culture prevails? For me, the whole purpose of the Jewish enterprise would be negated.

When Bediya and I discuss this, as we occasionally do, we inevitably arrive at an impasse. We find ourselves staring at each other, knowing that the futures we dream of are not the same. They probably never will be. Bediya pours water from the kettle, peels an orange and divides it in two. We return to talk of children, husbands, work, and the latest episodes of our favorite Turkish soap opera, and sip tea flavored with the herbs I have brought from my garden. ■