

ידיעות
תל אביב

כולם מדברים על שלום אף אחד לא מדבר על זבל

Maayan Zigdon, *Yedioth Tel Aviv*, April 25



Everybody Talks About Peace, Nobody Talks About Garbage

The desert sunset is over, and with it the oppressive sandstorms of the day. Absolute, soothing quiet descends on Kibbutz Ketura. On the grass, against the backdrop of the Eilat mountains, next to the dormitory compound, a couple dances. She is an American, of the species known as “Jewish princess,” he is an Israeli of the kind known as “*shloch*” [slob].

Nearby, next to the recycling corner, a young Palestinian woman types her homework on a laptop. “Of course not,” she says when I draw her attention to what appears to be the two people about to become a couple. “After all, they’re not married, and nobody here has sex. What do you think this is?” I try to see if she is joking, or if because of her background, she truly believes that it is unthinkable that two hormonal 20 year-olds, far from home, would follow their passion in a quiet corner of co-ed living. She isn’t joking.

These are the byproducts of a dream that has become reality at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, a school that invites students from all over the Middle East—Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt—and the rest of the world, who believe that they can contribute and be part of the community being formed around the institute. The Arava Institute was established in Kibbutz Ketura 12 years ago by Dr. Alon Tal, with the goal of offering foreign and local students “overseas studies.” Since then things have changed a bit, and except for overseas studies, it offers academic studies, summer courses, research programs and environmental projects initiated by the graduates.

Between the cowshed and the dining hall, between the stable and the solar farm, the students gather and learn environmental law, desert studies, introduction to ecology, water management in the Middle East, environmental leadership, chemistry and physics, and also a little Hebrew, English, Arabic and about each other. There are two things that are important to them to make clear from the outset: “I’m not one of those tree huggers,” stresses a Palestinian woman student, who is echoed by an Israeli woman student: “I’m not one of those Arab huggers.”



“The institute and I are both perceived as left wing,” says Rina Kedem, 26, who studied here two years ago and is now coordinator of projects for youth and communities in Israel, Palestine, Jordan and the United States. “But here the environment is more important than anyone’s opinions. When you study environment in depth, you realize that we share a very small area and we have no choice but to learn how to share our resources. To talk to an Arab you don’t have to be a left winger, you have to be a realist.”

Q: And yet, these subjects must come up.

“Obviously we talk about politics, but you can’t stay stuck in that. We perpetuate the pain of our parents, and this leads us to build new walls between us. My mother grew up in Syria, Arabs threw rocks at her, but that’s her baggage, not mine. I’m not seeking peace, I’m seeking existence. The word coexistence is passé, it doesn’t express anything and it is inaccurate. Let’s start with a partnership, with working together. The goal is for people to learn how to connect.”



Nobody's Heard About Us

The story of Ketura's establishment belongs to the kind of stories that are surprising in their innocence and honesty. In the middle 1990s, Dr. Alon Tal, an environmental lawyer and a member of Kibbutz Ketura, decided to found an institute for environmental studies to teach students from across the Middle East. It was an optimistic time, after Oslo, after the border crossings with Jordan had opened and before—so everyone hoped—peace with the Palestinians.

Tal approached the kibbutz work committee and then the general assembly. The kibbutz promised to support him financially for one year and to provide him with a kibbutz member to help him. The lucky member was Miriam Sheraton, a Chicago-born kibbutz member whose love for the desert had taken her from working in museums to the kibbutz cowshed.

“There were things the kibbutz had to suddenly get used to, and subjects came up that to this day spark division,” she recalls. “Suddenly there were 30 more people in the kibbutz. Where would they sleep? Where would they eat? At first the students lived in kibbutz apartments and studied in a vacant bomb shelter, but it was great fun and it got all of the kibbutz into learning about the environment.”

The first school year opened in 1996 with 26 students, including Americans, Jordanians, Palestinians and Israelis—Jews and Arabs. Some of the Palestinian students were unable to arrive because of a closure imposed after the Western Wall events. “I didn't understand at first why American students would want to come to a small kibbutz in Israel, four hours drive from anywhere. After all, they could go anywhere they wanted,” Miriam wondered. “But the idea drew people—precisely for these reasons—the distance, the setting and the quiet.”

Tamara Rajwan, responsible for student life, came from Montreal. “I worked as a computerization consultant, and I knew I wanted to make a change in my life,” she says.

While the Israeli and American students come here mainly through universities, friends and the institute’s web site, the Palestinian, Jordanian and Egyptian students hear about the institute through ads in the newspapers—which don’t explicitly state that the school is in Israel. “I was looking for scholarships for environmental studies,” says Lina Ismail, 27, of Nablus, “and I saw an ad in the *Al-Quds* newspaper about the Arava Institute. It didn’t say it was in Israel.”

However, everyone agrees that there is not enough awareness of the institute among the public in Israel—neither the Arab nor the Jewish public—and they are working to change the situation. “We noticed that students came from Ecuador and Ghana, but people in the Arava had never heard of us,” says Sharon Ben Haim, the kibbutz member in charge of maintaining contact with the institute’s graduates. “That’s why we established Sviva Barava, which coordinates activity in the region.”

To reach the Israeli Arab public, the institute cooperates with the Sakhnin Cities Union, and specifically, with Hussein Tarabiya, the chairman, who is thinking of moving to the kibbutz with his family; and with Hanidi Hijris, who works with children and youth. “It frustrates me that an American student does a doctorate in Sakhnin on environmental issues, but there is no one from Sakhnin who is involved in our project,” says Amar Sawati, a teaching and research assistant at the institute.

Sawati did his internship in Sakhnin. “There are urgent environmental issues that should be of paramount concern to Sakhnin residents, and this is real opportunity to do real work in environment, to act, not just to talk.”

Sewage Without Borders

“Nations have been destroyed because of things that we don’t understand—volcanoes, storms, drought,” says Rula, 27, of Jenin. “But the 21st century is the first century in which man is creating natural disasters.”

Environment Attorney Jake Jacobs agrees that the situation in Israel is not good and mentions the situation in the US 15 years ago. In his optimistic view, he says we are at the peak of ecological awareness. The role model, of course, is America and the American students try and model for everyone how to practice environmental awareness. “Before I came here, the environmental activists I was in touch with were hippies who shopped at Urban Outfitters and had a 200-dollar bong at home,” says Ali Field Bell, 21, from California.

The problem they are trying to deal with at Ketura is the fact that in the neighboring countries—Palestine, Egypt and Jordan—the situation is even worse, and awareness of environmental matters is even lower than in Israel. “In Nablus there is absolutely no interest in environmental issues,” says Lina. “Compared to the fighting, everything is trivial. How can you talk about recycling when people are being shot in the streets?”

“I am very interested in environmental issues. The problem is that in my community nobody treats this as a major issue. There are a lot of problems in the West Bank that are the effect of the closure and the political situation. We have a terrible problem with garbage and with air pollution—a lot of the cases of cancer in the West Bank are because of burning tires and other garbage in the course of the Intifada. There are no proper garbage dumps in the West Bank, and it’s very hard to get the ground for this because of what Israel and the army call ‘security problems.’ We have problems with water because our sewage flows into the riverbeds and Israel limits our access to water.”



“In Jenin everyone looks out for himself,” Rula describes the situation. “There is no recycling and no environmental awareness. I don’t drink the tap water. It’s a serious problem and it is one shared by Israel and Palestine: it will trickle to the underground water table. Sewage doesn’t believe in borders, it doesn’t believe in agreements. We joke that we believe it will flow to Israel and not to us, but we share the problem and we have to overcome it together.

“In Ketura and other communities in the Arava they recycle gray water, they purify it and use it for irrigation. They talk about doing something similar in Palestine, but for this you need huge sums of money. The government has to start with small projects, and not set its sights on huge projects of that type. You have to improve the situation in each town and every village.”

“We shouldn’t wait for an ecological disaster in order to wake up,” Kedem warns. “I use the word environment and not quality of the environment because I’m referring also to the internal environment. This doesn’t mean nice talk or organic food for the wealthy—it means improving a situation of poverty, in Palestine and in the world.

They have to be taught how to raise sprouts instead of throwing flour and white sugar at them. I see Palestinians teaching a Palestinian grandmother how to use a sprout box. This will happen because it has to happen. It doesn't matter what our opinions are, it's a matter of reality."

And Again, the American Broker

A photographer setting up at the exit to the dining room of Kibbutz Ketura could easily indulge in innumerable, pastoral "coexistence" pictures: a girl in a hijab leaves, followed by a guy wearing a kippa; then comes a young American man who looks like a football quarterback with a Hai tattoo and an "I Love Israel" T-shirt. All of them, incidentally, wear Crocs or go barefoot, depending on the degree of their adaptation to the local heat.

As said, there is no talk here about coexistence, but there is friendship. "We learn to live together, even if we don't agree with each other," says Tamara. "Obviously everyone wants peace, but we are working on the environment and don't talk about peace. We are in a crisis situation and we have to resolve it. Peace can come later."

"I knew that there were Arabs and Israelis and Americans here, but I didn't know if it was right for me, because I'd lost faith in projects like these," admits Muna Dajani, a woman student from Jerusalem. "But I was given an opportunity here to look at it again. We learn things that are important here for the Middle East, for the conflict, and the integration here is completely natural, everyone finds someone to be friends with. You can't avoid it, you live with them in the same place."

The issue of living quarters is complicated and sensitive. Tamara decides who will live with whom based on their requests and based on religious/sectarian demands—there are those who wish to keep kosher, there are those who don't want any alcohol drinking in their room, and there are those who came here to experience everything the desert has to offer youths of their age.

It is amazing to see how this complicated sudoku is resolved into two mixed living units, two separate units based on sector and a few trailers for those who under no circumstances are willing to share their home with ten other people. Sometimes couples emerge from this stew who want to rent an apartment on the kibbutz together, and one couple has already gotten married. "People find their religious path here," says Ben Haim. "I saw a Muslim praying in the synagogue, he said it was the holiest place here, and there were others who would not agree to even go inside."

"You live with people four months or a year, and you see how people live their different reality," says Anat Morville, 23, from Philadelphia. "We aren't about to change greater politics here in the Arava Institute, but you can change individual people. We work on a small scale here, 30-40 students a year, but a lot is invested in these people, who become leaders in their communities."

"My encounter with Israelis was surprising—they don't really know what goes on in the West Bank," Lina explains. "I believe that if they knew they would try and act more, out of a sense of justice, they would raise a cry. But from among the people

I've met here, I think that people are willing to listen and to try and find a solution. The problem is that most of them are blind, they don't see.

"I came here mainly because of the environmental issue, but I wanted to communicate with people whom I'm not allowed to talk to. I wanted to see them as human beings and not as soldiers, to show them that I am also a human being. It's not easy when my mother calls and tells me that there were soldiers in my house. And it isn't easy to talk to someone and to forget that he is a soldier. But I put all this aside and try to see the person inside.

"Before I came here I never spoke to a Jewish-Israeli freely. I talk to Jewish Israelis only at roadblocks, which is the face of the army. Ultimately, if we're allowed to meet and to talk to each other, we will be able to change something. But as long as we are separate and ideas are planted in our heads about the other side—that won't happen."

For Rula too, this was the first opportunity to meet Israelis. "It was difficult but interesting. You have to display a lot of understanding, otherwise you won't be able to live with them. It was hard to be here, particularly when Israel was in Gaza, or when there was a terror attack in Jerusalem. They are sorry about what they are doing in Gaza, and we are sorry about Jerusalem. But there's nothing we can do except be sorry, you feel powerless."



Q: Do you talk about this?

"We started to talk to each other, to try and understand why these things happen, and they too, I think, want to understand us. I don't have a problem with the Israelis now—now they are my fellow students, not soldiers. I assume that when they stood at the roadblocks they spoke about us differently, they looked at us as if we were animals. At first it was weird to be with them because I knew that they were soldiers, but I assume that in the army, you follow orders, and that's it."

"Not all of my family was happy that I'm here," says Aziz, 25, of Jordan. "They know that I'm ambitious, but they're a bit sensitive about the fighting between Israelis and

Palestinians. For me, I only look to the future—not at the conflict. We share water, resources and geography, and we have to help each other. Perhaps I will be a minister in Jordan and Rina will be a minister in Israel, and then we will be able to do something. “

Not all of the kibbutz members are happy about the coexistence in their backyard either, mainly when the political situation escalates. “There are sometimes problems when times are tense,” says Ben Haim. “You meet a student from Hebron while your son is serving there. It’s not that the entire kibbutz is left wing, but the opinion of the majority is accepted.”

And what is the place of the Americans in the conflict? “The Americans are the mediators, not always wanted mediators,” admits Tamara, and Lina qualifies this: “It’s good that there are people here who are outside the conflict. It’s also good that they can go to the West Bank. Some of them visited Ramallah and didn’t believe that we lived like that.”

The trips to the territories and to Jordan don’t always end happily: American Ali was detained at night on her way back from Jordan. Together with Kedem and with a Jordanian fellow student, she is running a project in schools in Jordan, for which purpose she often crosses the border. This time it was decided to detain her and the Jordanian guy with her for two hours.

”I was stripped, and my Jordanian friend was questioned,” she recounts.” He told them he was going to marry an Israeli girl, and the policewoman told him, ‘good for you.’ He answered her, ‘good for her,’ and she said ‘I’m not so sure.’ I was stunned.”

This wasn’t the first time that Ali encountered a problematic attitude from Israeli law agents. “A few weeks ago I went with friends from Palestine to a conference near Bethlehem,” she relates. “I slept over at a friend’s with Anat, a Jewish American girl, and with a Jordanian friend. We were stopped outside Abu Dis and Anat talked to them in Hebrew. We told them we were Americans, but they questioned us for 20 minutes and told us we couldn’t enter.

“They called their commander, who called Rina, who explained to them in Hebrew who we were. They took us out of the taxi, and told us ‘now your driver knows you’re Jewish, I hope you’re aware of the danger.’ I was very scared, mainly because the soldiers talked to us. It is scary to see people in uniform with a gun. At the next roadblock we knew we should only speak to them in English. Until that moment I never felt a need to lie about being Jewish, and I felt it was rather ironic—that I had to lie to Jewish soldiers of all people.”

We are the World

Nobody at the Arava Institute believes they will save the world and certainly they won’t bring peace. But all of them believe that they can change something to promote these two grandiose goals. How? When playing in the mud, for example, when they are trying to rebuild the mud house near their dorms. Between a squirt of water and a squirt of sand, they learn to know each other, the other’s language, and also some fun childhood customs.

They try and leave politics aside, at least they make a conscious effort. “I have a friend who knits from plastic bags,” says Rula, “people here are very creative, and it makes me believe that maybe we can do some things together. If you want to do something and believe in it, you’ll do it. But you have to be realistic. I won’t wait to see what happens, I will change things.”