

Bilingual education strengthens Jewish-Arab relations

By KENNETH BANDLER
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Photo by: Courtesy Neve Shalom Community Council

On My Mind: Neveh Shalom was not the first institution of Arab-Jewish cooperation in Israel to suffer an attack this year

Climbing the winding road to Neveh Shalom takes a certain determination. Most visitors come to this joint Jewish-Arab community on a hilltop near Latrun to meet with the Arab and Jewish residents, all Israeli citizens, who have pioneered in building a shared community since this village was founded in the 1970s. Their bilingual school, opened in 1984, was the first of its kind in Israel.

And then there are the malicious cowards who entered Neveh Shalom in the middle of the night on June 8.

They left messages of "Death to Arabs," "Revenge," and other hateful, threatening graffiti on walls and cars for the residents of the Oasis of Peace, as Neveh Shalom is known in English, to find the next morning.

That the vandalism occurred "in a place where Arabs and Jews pledged to live together in peace made the crime all the more severe," said Israel Police Commissioner Yohanan Danino.

But Neveh Shalom was not the first institution of Arab-Jewish cooperation in Israel to suffer such an attack this year. In February, a bilingual elementary school in Jerusalem, the Hand in Hand Center for Jewish-Arab Education, was twice vandalized with such hateful spray-painted slogans as "Kahane was right" and "Death to Arabs."

"These perpetrators consider all Palestinians west of the Jordan River,

whether they are under occupation or are Israeli citizens, enemies,” says Shuli Dichter, executive director of Hand in Hand, an Israeli organization that has founded bilingual schools in Jerusalem, Wadi Ara and the Galilee. Another bilingual school, Hagar, operates in Beersheba.

“By attacking Hand in Hand and Neveh Shalom/Wahat a-Salam, they are also targeting Jews who are seeking partnership with Arab citizens in Israel,” says Dichter. “This racism is ethnically blind.”

Dichter is hopeful the attacks were isolated incidents. But some of the graffiti, such as “Hi from Ulpana,” strongly indicate a link to disgruntled West Bank settlers. Jewish- Arab coexistence organizations may need to be more vigilant, though they are certainly not going to be deterred by the threats.

What does government action to take down a West Bank outpost such as Ulpana, determined to be illegal by the Supreme Court, have to do with Arab-Jewish cooperation in Israel? The plethora of grassroots and Israeli government efforts devoted to improving majority-minority relations enhances Israeli society, fulfills the promise of Israel’s founders, and provides an example for the country’s Arab neighbors.

But extremists have a very different, and ultimately dangerous, view. They envision Israel as a Messianic paradise devoid of people who are not Jewish. And were they able to rid Israel of non-Jews, inevitably they would turn on fellow Jews who disagree with their political, religious and cultural beliefs. Extremism has no bounds.

Israel, as well as the US, has suffered the consequences of action by unchecked fanatics who will not hesitate to use violence to advance their mission.

The attacks on their schools have encouraged Neve Shalom residents and Hand in Hand participants to expand their efforts to educate young Israelis, Jews and Arabs, together. Israel’s educational system has historically provided separate schools for Arabs and Jews. Hand in Hand, responding to the interests of parents, will open its unique educational framework in Haifa, as well as Jaffa, this year.

These bilingual schools are contributing, at least locally in key regions of the

country, to building a stronger Israeli society where values of respect for others and mutual understanding are vitally important.

The schools are public and use the Education Ministry's curriculum.

Hand in Hand raises additional funds to make the educational experience bilingual. That means providing two teachers, one speaking Hebrew, the other Arabic, and providing additional specialized instruction.

Dichter, who has devoted his career to advancing Jewish-Arab relations in Israel, recognizes the value of investing in community building and school education to advance these relations. So has the US government.

The US Agency for International Development has provided Hand in Hand with a \$1.08 million grant to help establish additional schools and to create communities of adults, both parents of school children and members of the wider community, to create educational, social and cultural institutions to help sustain shared communities.

As they do in other democratic nations, including the US, extremists will no doubt continue to challenge efforts to break down barriers and build more harmonious societies.

Enhanced support, moral and financial, from the highest levels of the Israeli government as well as from American Jews would be helpful.

For now, Hand in Hand is celebrating another milestone this week, as the second class of Arab and Jewish students graduate from its Jerusalem high school.

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