



## Mom sees hope in an Arab-Jewish school



Tamar Cohen and her daughters Nina, left, and Magali, in August at one of the weekly anti-racism marches of the Hand in Hand community, on the Train Tracks Park that connects Jewish and Arab neighborhoods in southern Jerusalem. The T-shirts worn by some of the participants read, in Arabic and in Hebrew, "We march together."

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Native Princetonian Tamar Cohen, 38, grew up with close ties to Israel, but somewhat disconnected from the American-Jewish community.

Her family davened each week with a small, intellectually intense *havura* at the Center for Jewish Life/Hillel at Princeton University, and this colored her understanding of what it means to be a Jew.

"There was a cultural gap growing up with my particular Jewish childhood in Princeton, which had none of the trappings of what I perceive of as American Judaism," she said. "There was nothing fancy, materialistic, or hierarchical — it was people sitting in a room and praying together and having a discussion."

Since moving to Israel in 2000, she has remained committed to closing cultural gaps, especially between Jews and Arabs. In addition to her work as a freelance translator and editor, Cohen has been

active in her children's school, Hand in Hand, in Jerusalem, where Arab and Jewish children study together.

After four years at the YMCA, her oldest daughter started at Hand in Hand, whose mission, according to its website ([handinhandk12.org](http://handinhandk12.org)), is "to create a strong and inclusive shared society in Israel through a network of Jewish-Arab integrated bilingual schools and organized communities." Currently it operates in five locations, serving 1,100 Jewish and Arab students and more than 3,000 community members.

In kindergarten and first grade, all the children learn both Hebrew and Arabic together. From second grade on, the Arabs learn Arabic as their first language and Hebrew as their second, and vice versa for the Jews. Jewish and Arabic children all study other subjects, including religion and civics, together. In history, the students learn the two parallel and even conflicting narratives of 1948.

Cohen chose Hand in Hand because she values raising her children in ways that expand their awareness and understanding of difference. She wanted her children, she said, to have "cognitively a much broader experience than children in a monolingual and monoreligious environment...."

"Setting aside questions of what is going on politically — peace process or no, war or no — on a basic level I wanted to raise children in a way that they are not 'the Man,' not being so entrenched in the center of power that they have no ability to see the circles that are a little further out from the center."

Cohen also traced her commitment to the school to her discomfort at how she got citizenship. When Cohen came to Israel in September 1998, she had no idea where it would lead, but knew she wanted to get out of New York. When she made aliya two years later, her father's best friend from college vouched for her Jewishness, which today makes her uncomfortable. "It ultimately became for me morally compromising — the notion that I took advantage of this ethnic favoritism that favors me," she said.

Assuming at that time that a Palestinian state was around the corner, Cohen was more concerned about what was happening in Israel. "What I was worried about is Israel being an egalitarian democracy," she said.

Noting that she grew up as a member of a minority, albeit one that was not persecuted, Cohen observed that minorities have the advantage of being able to see things a little more clearly. "I think that from the moment I was here, I felt that it was important to me and possible in the foreseeable future — Israel being a real democracy in which people all have equal rights — that this should be the trajectory, not a theocracy."

### **'Peace of justice'**

Her ties to Israel grew both from the sabbaticals her family spent in the country (her father, Mark Cohen, is emeritus professor of Near Eastern studies at Princeton University) and the fact that her mother's parents and brothers made aliya in the 1970s. Having honed her Hebrew at the Solomon Schechter Day School in East Brunswick (which has since closed), she said, "I always had a sense of a greater connection to Israel and the Hebrew language than I did to American Judaism."

In 2003, Cohen met her partner in life, an Argentinian-born Israeli. Their now-nine-year-old daughter started day care in the bilingual YMCA nursery school in Jerusalem, among children who were Jewish and Arab Israelis, non-Israeli Palestinians, and of international background.

The Jerusalem Hand in Hand school is located on land that belongs both to Pat, a Jewish neighborhood, and Beit Safafa, a Palestinian village, a portion of which became part of Israel in the 1948 armistice agreement. That way, suggested Cohen, "the school itself is a bridge."

During this summer's war in Gaza, the school worked hard to promote mutual respect and tolerance. It held community meetings and led visits to the family of Mohammed Abu Khdeir, the east Jerusalem teen kidnapped and murdered by suspected Jewish extremists. Cohen was involved in a Hand in Hand project to send humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip.

The kind of peace Cohen envisions grows out of the same belief system that motivated her to send her children to Hand in Hand. Instead of a peace of quiet — no rockets, no suicide bombers — she looks to a "peace of justice." In addition to requiring a very brave leader, she said, such a peace "also implies some sort of maturing of society to accept a significant Palestinian minority with a different narrative."

"A lot of Americans who come here never recover from the wonderful joy of being able to buy kosher food everywhere and not having to think — the notion of coming home," she said. "For me it was the opposite. The last thing I want for my children is for them to take for granted that everyone around them will be just like them."