Ajyal Youth Movement

Ajyal Youth Movement: Educating Arab Youth for Equality, Democracy, and Shared Society
by Firas Khawaled

In 2006, a group of young Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel launched Ajyal (“Generations” in Arabic), an activist youth movement that uses the tools of informal education to achieve two related goals: promoting equality, democracy, and a shared society in Israel; and fostering the development of the Arab community in Israel and the social mobility of Arab citizens.

Informal education is a vital tool that fills the gaps left behind by the formal education system. It is particularly important for Palestinian-Arabs in Israel, since they don’t serve in the army after graduating from high school and therefore don’t benefit from this avenue for networking and social advancement.

Ajyal works in tandem with its sister youth movement, Hashomer Hatzair. Operating separate frameworks in the fields of education and social activism, both movements feature a network of young entrepreneurs, educators, and social activists, and reach tens of thousands of participants. Since its establishment, Ajyal has created 30 chapters in Israel’s north, south, and central regions. Each chapter’s activity is coordinated by an adult leader with the aid of youth leader counsellors.

Ajyal regards the young generation as the pillar of the community, the engine that will lead the way toward the creation of a democratic and equal society. As a result, youth development is essential for the wellbeing of society as a whole.

So Ajyal understood what a problem it was that, in Arab villages and towns in Israel, there was no such a thing as playgrounds, youth clubs, sports clubs, or other places where youngsters could get together in a safe environment.

Ajyal has focused on creating such spaces for young Arabs. But the youth movement aims not only to provide a safe space for young people to gather and develop a sense of community. It also gives them encouragement as well as the tools to take responsibility for creating a better future for all groups in
Israeli society and paving the way for peaceful coexistence between Jews and Palestinians.

Ajyal serves the young generation, in other words, so that they, in turn, can serve the country. By encouraging young Arabs in Israel to achieve a good education and build a good life, Ajyal shapes society as a whole. Ajyal is cultivating young leadership that believes in equality, peace, humanism, and interfaith dialog between nations, religions, and communities.

Through a variety of volunteering efforts and community service projects, Ajyal instills a sense of belonging and community. The movement’s activists work together on challenges facing the Arab community, such as street violence, gender violence, the struggle for equal rights, and the struggle for better living conditions, as well as the need to increase acceptance of diversity, both in Israeli society and worldwide.

A recent example of Ajyal’s successes was how the youth movement helped the Arab community cope with coronavirus. In 2020, Israel was hit very strongly by COVID-19. In March last year, the country quickly closed its borders and skies and imposed a strict lockdown on its citizens. For weeks, all public life was shut down, schools and offices were closed, and only essential work was permitted. Israel implemented a severe restriction on movement by all its citizens.

During this challenging period, Ajyal kept working remotely with its members. It stayed in regular contact with the youngsters, building a community of people who care about and support one another in a very troubling time, when many people lost their jobs and were apart from each other due to social distancing. Within weeks, Ajyal created a support system, organizing online activities and continuing to educate for a better world so that participants would have a structure and a sense of belonging to a larger goal of justice and democracy.

And Ajyal also served the community: During the lockdown, youth movement leaders took care of the children of essential workers, such as hospital staff. A couple of weeks after the initial lockdown was lifted, Ajyal leaders went to support doctors and nurses in hospitals, bringing them tokens of appreciation in
order to strengthen the community in these turbulent times. When many lost their jobs or could not go to their workplaces for weeks on end, Ajyal filled an important need, offering online workshops and training sessions so that people could stay up to date with the latest developments and learn new tools and techniques.

In addition to volunteering in hospitals, Ajyal members also volunteer with local councils, and are involved in protest activities, such as against the high level of violence plaguing Arab towns and villages.

The Arab community in Israel is going through a period of critical change—culturally, socially, and educationally. In order to help the community navigate these changes as safely as possible, Ajyal works hard to guide and teach the youth appropriately.

One important goal of Ajyal is to have the identity of the Arab citizens of Israel acknowledged, and to help shape that identity. Using the tools of informal education, Ajyal deals with the question of what it means to be an Arab Palestinian living in Israel. The movement not only focuses on Palestinian-Arab history, but also creates a vision of who we wish to be, what our society should look like, and how diversity can be implemented.

Through our educational process, Ajyal also teaches the values of democracy and social justice. But we don’t only preach these values—we practice them in all the movement’s activities and in our interactions with general society. For Ajyal, the democratization of Israeli society includes coexistence between Jews and Arabs based on equality, cooperation, and mutual respect. It also means the need for full gender equality. Therefore, Ajyal strongly encourages Arab women to take active roles in society. And we’re proud that, as of 2021, the number of female activists in Ajyal has surpassed the number of males.

Fifteen years since its founding, Ajyal is now regarded as one of the most valuable youth movements in the Arab community and in all of Israeli society. We are proud to continue our tradition of informal education as well as service to the community. You can learn more about Ajyal at our Facebook community page.
Firas Khawaled, from the village of Sha’ab, serves as Director of Operations for the Ajyal youth movement, the Arab division of Hashomer Hatzair.