

[Givat Haviva project for Arab-Jewish coexistence](#)

The other day (June 22), Dan Fleshler—a colleague in New York-based dovish Zionist circles—posted the following piece at the [Huffington Post](#), originally posted at his [Realistic Dove blog](#). I regret having inadvertently missed this program at my neighborhood synagogue, sponsored by the [Givat Haviva Educational Foundation](#).

This reminds me of my visit to the Israeli-Arab town of Kfar Kara (mentioned in this article) and also having a pleasant conversation in Hebrew at the [Givat Haviva Institute](#), with a young Israeli Arab woman from that very town, when I was on a young adult tour of Israel in 1982. From what I recall, relations between Israel's Jews and Arabs were generally better at that time.

Defiant Dreamers of Arab-Jewish Coexistence by Dan Fleshler

... 62 percent of Palestinian Arabs who live in Israel believe that Israeli Jews “are foreigners who do not fit in this region, and they will eventually leave the country,” ... A similar proportion opposes Israel's continued existence as a Jewish Zionist state.

Meanwhile, 68.1 percent of Israeli Jews told the pollsters that they oppose public commemorations of what Arabs call the Nakba... in 1948. 53 percent say the state has the right to encourage Arab citizens to emigrate, and 62 percent say as long as the conflict continues, Arab voters should have no say in Israeli foreign policy... Gaps in the narratives are matched by disparities in income and educational achievement, as well as systemic discrimination against Israeli Arabs. How in the world can these people ever live together?

That is the kind of Big Question that Nazia Masrawa, the mayor of the Arab Israeli town of Kfar Qara, and Chaim Gaash, the mayor of the nearby Jewish town of Pardes Hanna-Karkur, refuse to answer. Instead, last Tuesday evening ... in New York City, they described a project that appears to be less ambitious but is in fact extraordinarily difficult: their townspeople are working together to solve the concrete, day-to-day problems shared by both communities. It is an initiative of [Givat Haviva](#), an Israeli institute that works to promote coexistence and equality between all Israeli citizens.

Until recently, few people from Pardes Hanna-Karkur and Kfar Qara had anything to do with each other, although these towns in Israel's Wadi Ara region northeast of Hadera are ten minutes apart. But thanks to the “Shared Communities” program, groups of women, teenagers and elderly men from each town have been meeting to choose and then plan joint projects that will help improve daily lives.

Masrawa votes for Hadash, the left wing Arab-Jewish party... Gaash votes for the centrist Kadima party. “We will never agree on the history, or on

politics," according to Masrawa. If their constituents had started talking about politics and The Situation in the occupied territories when they first met, there would have been "a big fight... But they can work together to make small changes."

... There used to be more interaction between Israel's Arab and Jewish citizens. But since 2000, when the intifadeh begun by West Bank Palestinians sparked riots and turmoil in the areas of Israel proper where many Arabs reside, the mutual isolation has deepened. Nearly 68 percent of Israeli Jews told the Haifa University pollsters that they avoided driving through Arab towns and villages. By encouraging contact and joint projects, both Gaash and Masrawa hope they can reduce tensions and slowly develop a sense of a shared future.

Thus far, aided by facilitators from Givat Haviva, the women's group has decided to bring professionals into both communities to deal with a range of problems confronting female children, from eating disorders to parental conflicts. They will also create a joint cookbook. Needing productive after-school activities, the teenagers will start a joint theater group. The retirees are working on finding recreational activities for elderly men. ...

But the tensions are so profound that even those seemingly simple activities have met with resistance in both towns. "Many people don't want us to try," said Masrawa...

... In recent years, some NGOs in Israel as well as American Jewish donors concerned about the plight of Israel's Arabs have grown very skeptical of dialogue and coexistence programs. ... More systemic change, more economic opportunity and political empowerment for Arabs is necessary.

Of course it is. But it's also true that if these two peoples have no contact and no common language to address everyday challenges, and if they assume that their dramatically different narratives make it impossible to share their country, and if nothing is done to dispel tension and fear and hatred, "it will just take one match to make a big explosion," Gaash told me.

Givat Haviva has been doing the seemingly old-fashioned work of Arab-Jewish dialogue – among other things – for decades, and now it is more important than ever. Already, mayors from six other neighboring towns – three Jewish, and three Arab – have asked it to start similar programs. Riad Kabha, the former mayor of the Arab town of Ba'arta who runs the organization's Arab-Jewish Peace Center, hopes this is the beginning of a "grassroots movement" of collaborative problem-solving that will expand to many other divided communities.

Masrawa bristles at the idea that the program involves dialogue for the sake of dialogue. In an interview with me, he was a bit more ambitious than he had been in public. ... But if he and others could show Israeli Jews that it was possible to work productively with their Arab neighbors, that Arabs were responsible citizens, it might wear away stereotypes. And that, in turn, might make political support for far-reaching change more likely. ...

This is about 2/3 of the entire article, that can be read online at the [Huffington Post](#) and at the [Realistic Dove blog](#).