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## Living together as equals in Israel

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By GERSHON BASKIN Published: MARCH 9, 2022 21:13



THE WRITER sits in the coffee and gift shop at the entrance to Neve Shalom holding 'The Anteater and the Jaguar' written by Rayek Rizek.  
(photo credit: Edna Hakham-Baskin)

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Since August 2021, I have been working for a new impact investment fund called the Holy Land Bond, launched by James Holmes, a British investment banker who is neither Jewish nor Arab. One of our goals is to invest in the development of integrated affordable housing for Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel in Israel's mixed cities.

There are many buildings in Israel's mixed cities in which Jewish and Palestinian Israelis live together, not necessarily by choice. Our goal is to help to foster intentional living together (as opposed to living together by chance) and to work with the residents of those buildings to build a community, not just a living space which they happen to share. The only intentional Jewish-Palestinian integrated community in Israel is Neve Shalom-Wahat al-Salam (Oasis of Peace), a small village halfway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. More than 350 Jewish and Palestinian Israelis have made their home in Neve Shalom.

I first began developing my relationship with this unique village community in 1980, when I joined their first course for facilitators of encounters for Jewish and Palestinian Israeli high school students. I co-facilitated joint encounters there for a number of years. Two weeks ago, I decided to visit Neve Shalom on my way home from the Negev, where we went to see the wild flowers blooming after this rainy winter.

Near the parking lot at the entrance to the village is a small coffee and gift shop run by Rayek and Dyana Rizek, two of the early residents of Neve Shalom. My wife and I spent two hours with Rayek and Dyana, conversing in Arabic and appreciating their wonderful coffee and later their delicious food. More than that, we drank up their wisdom and insights about living together with Jewish Israelis.

In 2017, Rayek published a book in English called *The Anteater and the Jaguar*, documenting and detailing Rayek's life experiences and insights that brought him and kept him living and working in this intentionally integrated Jewish-Palestinian community. The title of the book is quite curious, which I didn't understand until I reached page 221, near the end of the book in which he wrote: "Often I have thought about the case of our two peoples as being similar to a description of an encounter between the anteater and the jaguar."

In his book, *Life on Earth*, [David Attenborough](#) alludes to this story as follows: "There is a tale of the bodies of a jaguar and an anteater being found out in the savannah, locked together. The anteater had been dreadfully torn apart by the jaguar's teeth, but its claws were sunk in the jaguar's back." That is a pretty vivid allegory of how Jewish and Palestinians have lived on their shared contested land for the past more than 100 years.

The accepted norm for conflict resolution of our conflict since at least 1936 has been to divide the land between the two peoples into the two states solution. This solution has failed to materialize even though almost the entire international community has adopted it and tried to advance it.

This is the solution I have also embraced since 1975 and have tried very hard to advance throughout my adult life. I have advocated it as the only viable solution to this conflict because we have all proven our willingness to fight, to die and to kill so that we can have a territorial expression of our identity.

Rayeh Rizek based his fascinating book on his own life experience living in Neve Shalom for most of his adult life, where he has been struggling also to find solutions with a different vision. While this vision is almost universally trashed in Israel, it is gaining more popularity and support in Palestine. As the two states solution proves to be more and more non-viable, perhaps it is time to begin to confront this other vision with much more seriousness and curiosity.

RAYEK WRITES: "I have talked about the idea of an undivided land for the past few years, even though I am acutely aware of the complexity of the conflict. I know many arguments could be made against this possibility. Just as many arguments, however, can be made against a partition solution. Yet while arguments can be proffered that cast doubt on any possible solution, examples can also be offered in favor of those kinds of solutions – including some that have been implemented, in more or less parallel form, elsewhere... I believe many Palestinians would respond to my suggestion that the solution to the problem be to grant equal citizenship to everyone living within the borders of Israel. Some, of course, will balk at the suggestion and say, 'Do you think the Jews will accept such a solution?' But my reply is this: 'Why not?' If we agree, first of all, that the Israeli Jews, like us and like people in every other nation, are not copies of one another and, second of all, that our intention is not to deceive them or to displace them, then why not? Sometimes I wonder how the Israelis would react if we raise their flag with ours in the course of a movement for equality and peace. I really wonder about the immense power that such symbols have on our psychology."

He continues "It should be clear that a viable solution would be just as much about liberating them as it is about liberating ourselves. After all, we are victims of the present situation, whether we happen to be the oppressed or the oppressors. As the Black singer Marian Anderson once said, "As long as you keep a person down, some part of you has to be down there to hold him down, so it means you cannot soar as you otherwise might... We must, therefore, be willing to declare that we have no problem with the presence of Jews in our homeland, as long as their Zionism does not exclude us and recognize us as equals. We must be willing as well to omit from any existing or proposed Palestinian constitution all words that would contradict our recognition of them as equals. If full equality is our ultimate aim, then I do not see any more humane way to achieve it between our two peoples than this. However, we must not wait any longer for them to take the first step, for the situation is much more urgent and critical for us than it is for them."

Rayek does not live in a dream world but rather in a real living community of people who have struggled over the years to create a society of equality in a very unequal reality. In Neve Shalom, they have lived through all of the wars and the political realities that all of us Israelis Jews and [Palestinian Arabs](#) have lived through.

They have not lost their own separate national and religious identities but they have created a community of peace and mutual respect in which they can educate their children, not only to be bi-lingual, but also equipped with the tools necessary to know how to live in peace with each other. This is the kind of example that I would like to copy and transplant all over this land.

*The writer is a political and social entrepreneur who has dedicated his life to Israel and to peace between Israel and her neighbors. He is now directing The Holy Land Bond.*

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