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The Arab Was Named Voltaire

In the Israeli village of Neve Shalom, an unusual group of Jews and Arabs try to live together peacefully. It works, mostly.

By Joe Freeman | August 5, 2015 12:00 AM

My boss was a thick-bearded Arab-Israeli, the only man I ever met in the Middle East named Voltaire. Voltaire and I were in the early stages of building a huge playground for a school. I was a volunteer construction worker in Neve Shalom or, in Arabic, Wahat al-Salam—"Oasis of Peace," alluding to Isaiah—a small village between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. For nearly 40 years, the village has been an intentional community where Muslims, Christians, and Jews have decided to live together to endorse coexistence.

This was 2006, when the Muslim world was gripped by anger over cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad first published in the Danish press the year before. News footage showed Palestinians burning Denmark's flag and using it as a doormat. We never talked much while working. But the furor over the cartoons was bothering me. A few months out of college, I had applied to volunteer in the village because I believed in its idealistic mission. Now here I was having not very idealistic thoughts.

"Hey, Voltaire," I said, pausing to stick the shovel in the dirt and catch my breath. "What do you think about all this cartoon mess? I mean, it's only a drawing, don't you think it's a little crazy?" There were a few seconds of silence. He didn't stop shoveling, but he slowed down, as if to make room for his response. "You know, Yusef"—that's my name in Arabic—"I'm not religious, at all. I even make jokes about religion. But we have a saying in Arabic: 'You can't piss on somebody's head and tell them it's raining.' " I thought to myself that that didn't sound like a saying in Arabic.

When I lived there for nearly six months at the end of 2005 and into 2006, the Oasis of Peace was a small village of about 50 families. Of those, roughly half were Muslim and Christian Arab-Israelis (the village prefers the term "Palestinian Arab"); the remainder were Jewish. All are citizens of Israel. It has since grown in population to about 70 families and will grow more as part of a planned expansion. In late May, the village primary school—to which I contributed that playground, among other things—a pioneering place where children are brought up bilingual and attempts are made in classrooms to tell both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian story, celebrated its 30th anniversary. A hotel helps the small local economy by bringing in tourists and conferences. A "School for Peace" serves as an institute of sorts for conflict-related studies and activities; in 2016, students are expected to enroll in the first semester of a graduate degree program in conflict resolution. A public library was recently built. Residents have access to a pool, a basketball court, and a multifaith meditation center, though bus service is weak and irregular (I did a lot of hitch-hiking to get in or out).

Geographically, there are few better settings for a beautiful idea than this one. Houses are clustered on a 1,000-foot hilltop overlooking the Ayalon Valley. Tel Aviv is a half-hour drive to the west. Jerusalem a little closer to the east. Hiking trails lead into a pine forest at the fringes of the community. There are almond, fig, pomegranate, and date trees. On a warm breezy evening, the smell of rosemary bushes would waft through the communal kitchen in the volunteer house. Sometimes, when I finished work, I would walk down the hill to the Latrun monastery, where Trappist monks sold their own beer and wine. Pleasantly tipsy, I'd walk back up. This wasn't the Israel you read about in the news.

But the oasis was not immune from the tumult elsewhere in the desert. Coexistence in Israel seems easy from afar, and then history worms in and complicates everything. At the end, I left a little disappointed, a little less idealistic, and a little dubious about the impact of the noble project. It was an early inkling of what would happen afterward, when I joined the Peace Corps in Jordan . Beliefs are put to the test, and most of us come up short. I look back on the Oasis of Peace with fondness now because I'm able to summon a more romantic version of myself, the kind of person who is not a cynic, who thinks he is going to help change the world and is willing to shovel a lot of dirt in the process. I guess you could say I was young.

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Neve Shalom/Wahat Al-Salam was dreamed up by a visionary named Bruno Hussar. Born Jewish in Egypt, he converted to Catholicism when he was 19 but retained an affinity for his Jewish roots. He moved to France and then Israel, where he conceived the idea of many faiths living together in the Holy Land. As the story goes, Hussar approached the brothers of the Latrun monastery, who owned an uninhabited hill that nobody was using. It was perfect. The brothers offered to lease the land to Hussar for an annual pittance. Seizing the opportunity, he paid up front, in a lump sum, for 100 years. Hussar moved there with his French companion, Anne, in the early 1970s and lived out of a bus. These must have been lonely years, testing years; the first family didn't arrive to settle down until 1978. Hussar

watched the village grow as he grew old. In 1996, he died and was buried in the small village cemetery.

I learned about the community by chance in the fall of 2005, when a postcard arrived at my house in Philadelphia. The American Friends of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam were fundraising by mail–about half of the village's income comes from international donors. I had graduated from Kenyon College, in Ohio, a few months before and had spent the summer in Cairo studying Arabic, following two years of language courses in school. My plan was to live there for a while and move on to the Peace Corps in Jordan. But three months into Cairo, my dad developed a lung infection that nearly killed him. I flew home while he recovered. I picked up the postcard one day while checking the mail. I did some research and was taken with the whole idea of the place. About a month later I flew to Israel.

My only previous experience in the country was a three-week Hebrew-language summer course in the Negev Desert, at Ben-Gurion University. I spent most of the month partying. This time would be different. I lived with three Germans and one Czech in a single-story volunteer complex built by the German Friends of Neve Shalom/Wahat-al-Salam. Volunteers were expected to contribute to the village by doing menial work. The volunteer coordinator placed me first in the hotel, where I tidied up rooms, folded sheets, scrubbed floors, cleaned toilets, and helped with the occasional village maintenance job. On my first day, I was given a pair of latex gloves and told to open a manhole cover so I could reach down into the sewer to manually unclog whatever was stopping up the flow. Performing the task while eyeing a cockroach clinging to a piece of used toilet paper, I had my reservations about the significance of my overall role in the struggle for peace.

In part this was refreshing, because we got to see the daily life of the village and how it operated, how it ran. I wasn't very good at the hotel job, which must have been evident because about a month in a miracle occurred. I was "fired." The hotel manager asked to speak to me in her office after lunch one day. She spoke with customary Israeli bluntness. "You aren't happy here," she began. "You don't work hard, you talk too much to the girls, and you are not a good cleaner."

After a bit of back and forth, I was told to report to work at 6:30 the next morning, when I would be working with some guy I'd heard about named Voltaire. He was something of a legend in the village. From a Greek Orthodox family, though like other residents not personally religious, he'd been named Voltaire because his grandfather used to read the writer in the original French. He had been in the village since he was about 20 years old. He had to be in his late 40s or 50s by then. I wasn't sure what his job was. He was a construction manager, but he also was a former teacher. He was one of those people who are good at more than one thing.

He was short and stocky. His face was marked by a bushy beard, a curving mustache, a chubby nose, and round blue eyes. Voltaire spoke English, but our hours together are the reason I know so many names of construction tools in Arabic. Arabic is the kind of language that can make even banal items sound magical to the Anglo-ear. *Bourgi* were screws, *arabeya* was wheelbarrow, *faas* meant pick, and *zaradeya* was pliers. Over several months, I helped build a small club designed as an after-school hangout area, a large sandbox, a garden, a new nursery, and a brick courtyard for the kindergarten.

I've never worked harder in my life. I rose just after the sun and walked to work under a pink sky. I came home exhausted and was in bed by 10, sometimes earlier. Voltaire taught me how to identify, pick, and eat wild asparagus, how to skin the stem of a mustard seed plant and suck the juices out, the best time to eat the figs and almonds growing on the trees in the village. He knew about the mating cycles of local cats and where the snakes liked to hide. He knew when a sabra fruit was ripe enough to eat and how to make Arak liquor out of the anise plant. He taught me how to clip the wings of chickens.

He was hard to read. Sometimes I sensed weariness. We were working together one day when a village official showed up and started speaking to him. There was some sort of disagreement, but it wasn't completely clear what it was. After it ended, he went quietly back to the job. "This is supposed to be an idealistic place," he grumbled.

I saw fissures elsewhere. There was talk of potential residents who were suspected of choosing the village for its prime location and not its core mission. The panel approving applicants to live there decided to hire a handwriting expert to determine if a person's script displayed signs of prejudice. And then there was the story about Tom Kitain.

In 1997, Kitain was a combat soldier fighting in Lebanon. His family lived in the village. The two worlds intertwined when he and dozens of other soldiers were killed in a helicopter crash. The family wanted to dedicate the new basketball court in his memory, but several families–mostly Arab–objected on the grounds that doing so would send the wrong message. The village director was quoted as saying in a 2007 blog post:

> We [Palestinians] saw the situation in a different way. I can be sympathetic to my neighbor that his son was killed. I can feel his ache.
> Still…that doesn't mean I agree that I should memorialize a soldier. For a Palestinian who lives with the whole oppression, a soldier in the military is still a soldier. The Army is still the Army. But, I knew Tom, I watched him grow up.

The compromise was to place a small plaque on the basketball court. One day I was running around on the court and noticed it. There's his name, the dates of his birth and death, and a small inscription describing Tom as "a child of peace who was killed in a war." Could Bruno Hussar see the kinds of sacrifices he was ultimately going to ask people to make?

Still, living there felt like living in any community. Houses are grouped around a narrow main road that circles the village and then spills down the hilltop toward the valley. The school was busy, as any school is; the hotel staff greeted visitors; village officials worked in a small office by the entrance; cars left in the early morning to commute to city jobs. There was a store to buy snacks and drinks, though any heavy-duty shopping needed to be done outside. This wasn't a kibbutz. People had their own separate lives but still interacted. It was more like a small town or a neighborhood. Arab and Jewish teenagers grew up together, hung out, played soccer games, or went swimming. Older residents came to the volunteer house, whose courtyard and common area often served as a place for socializing. It was a quiet place but you were rarely alone. It was a small place—you could walk the main road loop in less than 30

minutes—but it was big in stature. The village's profile meant it attracted celebrities and media attention from time to time. The Israeli writer Amos Oz came to give a reading in the hotel conference room (I remember holding the door open for him); Iraqi Jewish musician Yair Dalal turned up to serenade the community for a few delightful hours one night. Not long after I left, Roger Waters of Pink Floyd put on a concert.

I was in the village for the 2006 Palestinian election that resulted in a surprising Hamas victory. On the construction team was a middle-aged Palestinian man from the West Bank named Zacharia. When he returned to work from voting, he said three words in Arabic: *Ana mish mabsoot* ("I am not happy"). I knew what he meant. Hamas had claimed victory. Suddenly, everything felt very, very far away. At the cafés in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, there were security guards with metal detectors. At the entrance to the village there was a teenager who sat in an old car with a baseball bat.

After hearing the news about Hamas, I looked at Voltaire, who was tying his shoelaces and shooing away his dog that always followed him to work. We went back to it with the *faas* and the *zaradeya*. Nothing changed. The election didn't seem to have much of an impact on the village either. I wanted to see more of Israel, so I left in May and did a short internship at *Ha'aretz*, my introduction to daily journalism. I went home for a visit and flew back to the region a few months later when I entered the Peace Corps.

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Violence was coming. Israel would go back to Lebanon, Israel would invade Gaza later. Israel would shift to the right. Many people would die again. The Oasis of Peace didn't seem to affect anything significant outside of the oasis itself. And if that was true, was there a point? Or was it a nice idea in a land where nice ideas go to die?

Since I left the village, I have been back three times. Twice during my years in the Peace Corps, and once after I left. I stayed there for a few months trying to figure out what to do with my life, but it felt a little like coming back to college and lingering after the reunion. I left, taught tennis at home, went to graduate school, went to Egypt to intern at the Associated Press, then went back to the United States for a few years to get more journalism experience. When I started to get the itch to go back abroad, I decided to pivot, like the U.S. government, to Asia. I now live in Myanmar. As I write these words, monsoon rains fall on the streets of Yangon. I have traveled farther than I ever thought I would from my little village.

The Oasis of Peace made me understand that there is no such thing as an Oasis of Peace. Sure, Arabs and Jews coexist there in ways they don't elsewhere in Israel, but they grapple with the same issues. In Israel, no one seems to be in a hurry to copy the model set out by Bruno Hussar in other communities. But at the same time, few people who have lived in Neve Shalom ever leave it. That says something. It is still there, it is growing, it exists. I hear Voltaire is now teaching in the school.

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