

Last update - 02:33 27/06/2005

Waiting for equality

By [Jerrold Kessel](#) and Pierre Klochendler

Throughout the just-ended soccer season Ghazal Abu Raya, Sakhnin's spokesman, the town's unofficial "minister for majority affairs," has met with many groups from the Jewish sector. His is a single message: We need to meet each other more and more, again and again, to try to create overlapping circles of common interests.

Ghazal's "coexistence encounters" sometimes read like an emblematic Middle East morality play and sometimes like a script from the theater of the absurd, the sort of exchanges encountered in a Beckett play: Surreal, unrelated characters debate each other but relate to their own realities, waiting for better times, waiting for hopes to be fulfilled, waiting for the other to change the set and the act - but mostly waiting.

ACT I, Scene 1: Givat Haviva center for Arab-Jewish coexistence. Ghazal addresses a group from the Ruppin College, many kibbutzniks, many from small towns around the Metropolis, most from the heart of the majority consensus. They are taking a course about political groupings, and this particular field trip is about "the Arabs" in Israel.

Ghazal Abu Raya: "We never really knew the Arab world. The first time we encountered the Arab world was during the [Anwar] Sadat visit. My first landscape is the Jewish-Israeli landscape. Just as you did not decide to be Jewish, I didn't decide to be Arab. But I am an Arab, and I am an Israeli. But my `Israeliness' is not something mechanical. It's dynamic.

"Growing up, I never used to identify with the Israeli national soccer team or with Maccabi Tel Aviv. But today I see my son Iyyad. He's 18, he totally identifies with Maccabi, just as because of the World Cup goal by Abbas Suan [the Bnei Sakhnin captain] all Arabs now identify with the national team.

"What is my identity - Israeli, Palestinian? When I say `Palestinian', there's no intended threat. Nor by saying `Israeli', am I trying to curry favor. You have your history, your narrative. I have mine.

"Let me tell you. It's no easy predicament when your people confront your state and your state confronts your people. For the Arabs we're not Arab enough, for the Israelis we're not Israeli enough. That leaves

our identity damaged, crippled. It means having to walk a very thin line, always."

Remembering 2000

Interjector A.: "It's not about how we relate to you, nor what you are, but what you do. I still worry about what happened in October 2000. That's where the thin line is."

Amplifying Interjector: "Personally, I never felt the need to fear."

Chorus: "When you feel insecure, fear is the best security."

Amplifying Interjector: "I drive through Kfar Manda, Sakhnin, Arabeh between my work and my home. What's still fresh in my mind is the October 2000 riots. I can still feel them. You still see the burned tire marks on Highway 65. So when you talk about walking a thin line, what goes through my mind is, 'Will it happen again?'"

Ghazal: "I don't rule out the power of fear. If you tell me as a neighbor that you are afraid, I must respect that. But also, take my fear into account. When do fears and suspicions mount? When there is no meeting. That's when stereotypes and hatred run rampant."

Interjector B.: "It's the suspicions that you created about yourselves that makes you have to walk that thin line of yours. You've forced this situation on us."

Ghazal: "Let me tell you a thing about loyalty. Is it feasible that I wake every morning with one song in my heart asking my wife, 'Are you faithful to me?' Or, she, asking me: 'Are you faithful to me?' Tell me, over 50 years, how many Arabs have been disloyal to this state? We have always had to carry this burden of loyalty, like a loyalty file - the constant demand that we demonstrate our loyalty."

Interjector C.: "If only yours were the voice we hear. We hear only extremists in your community."

Ghazal: "Until now the only way we've ever had any attention from the majority in this country is as 'disorderly news.' Bnei Sakhnin soccer may be making a difference. Suddenly, we're seen as producing 'orderly news.'"

Interjector D.: "Maybe it's because of your leaders. All that we hear from them are provocations and statements about the conflict with the Palestinians. If you want to be accepted, then we have to hear more people like you talking coexistence."

Ghazal: "There needs to be soul-searching as to what happened in 2000. It's not about a settling of accounts, it's about real soul-searching, but on both sides. It's certainly happening among us."

But let's not ignore another aspect of what you see as our assertiveness. Being assertive is part of our being Israeli. Also it's a global world now - all minorities everywhere are more assertive, more forceful in trying to secure their rights."

ACT I, Scene 2: After a tour of Umm al-Fahm.

Field Trip Participant E.: "I've never dared to go into this Arab town before. I've got nothing against Arabs but I've been taught to fear them. If I'm able to trust them, then I have no problem with them being here. On the contrary. Equality is fine but where will it lead? Do they want me here? I see how much their towns and villages here in Wadi Ara have expanded. That scares me. We're only 70 percent. That's not really a majority."

ACT II, Scene 1: Givat Haviva branch in Wadi Safa, Sakhnin.

Ghazal Abu Raya is meeting a very different mind-set; this group from the majority are teachers from yeshiva seminaries who are taking a course at Bar-Ilan University on "minorities." Ghazal has been forewarned by the course coordinator Y. that his group holds strong political views about Arab rights. To paraphrase the prime minister, a credo that "the Arabs of the Land of Israel have all the rights in the land, no rights to the Land."

Chorus: "Their term of reference is very different - the `Arabs of the Land of Israel' - a minority for whom it is a religious, not only civic, duty of the majority to care. It's fertile ground for Ghazal to settle in their hearts, increase his standing in Israel's league of acceptance."

`Can you really?'

Ghazal: "We haven't shut ourselves off from society. Maybe I don't go to army reserve duty but don't I also have a part in the building of this country? There are rows of houses on Derekh Hayam in Haifa where for years I worked as an assistant plasterer."

Interjector V.: "I appreciate all you say about us needing to understand your predicament, your drive for equality, but I don't quite see how this can work if you don't accept that we have our own goal - a state with a Jewish character. Can you fit into that? Can you celebrate Independence Day with us when for you it's your Nakba [catastrophe]? With all the empathy for your plight and your desire to become `part of,' can you really?"

Ghazal: "Grant that I do accept that wish of the majority about the nature of the state."

Interjector W.: "Still, while I can accept that we are all in this together, Israelis and Arabs living in the Land of Israel, for us this is an existential issue: Feel our feelings. It seems that what we always

come back to is the question: `Whose land is it?'"

Act II, Scene 2: Nabil Abu Salah, head of Sakhnin's education department, and Ghazi Abu Raya, editor-in-chief of Sakhnin bi-weekly Al-Ahli, join the discussion.

Nabil Abu Salah: "It's fair to say that to this very day, 57 years into Israel as a state, you've never looked Arab citizens straight in the eye on the question of equal rights. It used to be that a good Arab is one who keeps to the straight and narrow. I want you to accept my worth, to accept me as I am, I want your respect in the same way that I respect you, and then we can go forward together."

Interjector Y.: "Just as in soccer. No Arabs, no goals."

Interjector X.: "Goyim equal golim!" [Non Jews equal goals.]

(Laughter evoked by the emblematic moment when equalizing goals by Arab players kept Israel's World Cup hopes alive).

Nabil (picking up the pass): "Equalizing rights is the key. If a democratic society doesn't relate well to its minorities, it has no valid existence."

Interjector X.: "With all the sympathy in the world for your predicament, what I don't understand is why as a collective there's been no outright condemnation of the terror attacks?"

Condemned attacks

Ghazi Abu Raya: "Everyone, every time there was a terror attack, it was condemned wholeheartedly. But I do think we, the Arab community as a whole, made one grave error. Right away, we should have staged demonstrations to display our opposition to such attacks."

Interjector Y.: "I, too, understand your dilemmas. I even understand why we're being blamed for your situation, but still I don't see why you hold us responsible."

Interjector Z.: "I'm from what can be called "Nitzolei Hamizrach" ("Oriental survivors"). I really can empathize with your feelings about how you've been treated. You're not the only ones discriminated against in this country. We've learned the hard way that if you believe in yourself, they'll begin to respect you. That's the way out."

ACT II, Scene 3: The Majority-Minority match on the National Ground.

CHORUS: "Finally, a real meeting of minds, of identities - the alliance of the Discriminated Against, a Covenant of the Screwed. It's

a discovery for Ghazal Abu Raya - against his expectations. These religious Jews are more amenable to understanding Arab frustration. He realizes that this openness, this willingness to reach out to him derives from their self-confidence. But he also understands that they understand his demand for equality differently."

</hasen/objects/pages/PrintArticleEn.jhtml?itemNo=592497>

[close window](#)