

## **MASA/MASAAR – “THE JOURNEY,” 2009**

**By Dalia Landau of OPEN HOUSE**

From July 26 to 31, **Open House** once again sponsored “**The Journey**” (*Masa* in Hebrew, *Masaar* in Arabic). The purpose of this program is to expose our young people to the different communities in this land, to their cultures, to their historical experiences, and to their relationships with the land. We held the program in partnership with the spiritual center of *Neve Shalom/Wahat as-Salaam* (NS/WAS) and with the support of the Japanese Buddhist **Arigatou Foundation**, which promotes the spirituality of children worldwide. The leaders of “The Journey” were **Dorit Shippin** from NS/WAS and **Vivian Rabia** from Open House.

Beginning at NS/WAS, the group of Jewish and Arab teenagers traveled to Jerusalem, Jaffa, and the Galilee. In Jerusalem, the group visited the Dome of the Rock with **Ghassan Manasra**, a Sufi sheikh, who has been meeting our young people for the last few years. A visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was accompanied by **Sr. Carmen Farrugia** from the Sisters of Sion. In the afternoon, I met the teens and shared with them the story of Open House, then took them to the Western Wall.

At the security checkpoint before entering the Western Wall plaza, there was a minor incident. When the police saw that the group included Arabs, we were told to stop. I tried to explain who the group was and expressed my strong conviction that they should pass through the security checkpoint like anyone else. But the police officers decided to call their commander. (While we were walking in the streets, we received some cynical remarks from passersby for still believing in Jewish-Arab coexistence, so by now I was getting a bit upset). In the meantime, the line behind us started to grow. One religious Jewish woman of North African origin realized what was happening and shouted to the policemen, “let them pass; can’t you see that this is humiliating?” Soon the commander arrived and called me outside the security booth. He wanted to hear who the young people were. He was an Ethiopian immigrant with beautiful, gentle eyes. After hearing me, he said, “I am sorry for the inconvenience. Of course you understand why we must double check. I sincerely apologize. May God give you strength to continue your work. Your group is free to enter.” And again it seemed to me that in Jerusalem one can meet the unexpected, for better or for worse, a bit more often than in any other place.

Since most of our Muslim and Christian participants had never been to the Western Wall, they were at first somewhat afraid to enter the prayer area, asking themselves, “what if they see that I am an Arab and they look at me?” **Biyān** and **Manaar**, from the Bedouin neighborhood *Gan Hakal* in Ramle, were particularly wary, since they were wearing *hijabs* and full-length black *jalabiyas*. So the Jewish participants enveloped their Arab friends and we entered the prayer area, the women going to the women’s section and the men to theirs. Everyone was eager to stick a note of supplication in the Wall, so we maneuvered through the crowd of people. Biyan and Manaar attracted no

special attention, perhaps because many observant Jewish women dress similarly or perhaps because the women were concentrating on their prayers. On gathering again at the plaza, it seemed to me that there was the excitement of having passed a test of courage.

One of the more challenging days of “The Journey” featured **Moshe** from *Kibbutz Lohamei Hageta’ot* (Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz) and **Muhammad** from *Al-Samriya*, a destroyed village on whose land the kibbutz was built. Moshe shared what it was like to grow up as the son of Holocaust survivors in the oppressive silence that hung over the kibbutz. He then took the group to the kibbutz cemetery, which has a monument memorializing the relatives of kibbutz members who perished in the Holocaust. Muhammad, in turn, took our young people to the ancestral cemetery of his destroyed village, a place surrounded by barbed wire that has not been used since 1948. All that is left of *Al-Samriya* is the blocked mosque and the forlorn cemetery. Moshe and Muhammad seemed to have been conducting a dialogue for quite some time. Moshe said we have to look forward and create a future together and not keep our consciousness focused on the past. But Muhammad wants an answer to the question: “What about my story, and my land on which your kibbutz is sitting?” He said, “I am not asking you to pack your things and go back where you came from, but at least you need to acknowledge that I have rights here, that you drove me out of here, and that we need to find a solution for this together.” Moshe understood, and he can acknowledge Muhammad’s experience. He even shares that experience with others, yet he asks Muhammad to understand that he can not return to his ancestral village.

This dialogue was conducted in the Jewish cemetery of *Kibbutz Lohamei Hageta’ot* on the fast day of *Tisha b’Av* (the 9<sup>th</sup> of the Jewish month of Av), which commemorates the destruction of both holy Temples in Jerusalem. Most of our young Jewish participants were observing the day-long fast in the summer heat. In the evening, back at the youth hostel in the Arab village of Peki’in, the days experiences were processed and the topic of “collective narrative” was discussed.

Some of the connections between people on this educational journey were truly inspiring. As religious people, **Manaar**, a devout Muslim, and **Aviad**, an observant Jewish boy from Beit Shemesh, discovered that they had a lot in common.

Naturally, fun aspects were also present included in the overall experience, including ice skating (a real challenge) and a sea voyage in Jaffa, following an introduction to this mixed Arab-Jewish city and its history before and after 1948.

On the last day, each person was invited to share how the journey affected her or him. Our young people expressed their initial fears, their positive feelings about each other at the end of their time together, and how they went from a state of blindness before “The Journey” to a much better understanding of the other community and its collective experience. This debriefing confirmed that the central goal of the program had been achieved: young Jews and Arabs had been helped to undertake an inner journey of transformation that paralleled the outer, shared journey through their common homeland.