

Thursday, July 15, 2010 | return to: news & features, local

Israeli activist shares idea for unique peace center

by stacey palevsky, staff writer

Follow j. on [twitter](#) and [facebook](#)

What if there was a retreat center near the Dead Sea that was open equally to Israelis and Palestinians, where cultural and political boundaries were not barriers to working together toward peace?

Ultimately, it could grow into a residential village, with people from both sides of the conflict living as neighbors.

This is not a hypothetical situation. It's something Ilana Meallem is working to build.

"We need to create something in an area both [Israelis and Palestinians] have access to, that belongs to us both, where neither group is 'hosting' the other group," Meallem said. "There are many forces at play working to keep us separate — separated physically and separated emotionally by fear and mistrust — but we want to bring together, to humanize and to cooperate because we are the same human beings with a different narrative."



Ilana Meallem (second from left) with a Bedouin family.

During her first winter in the Judean Desert, Meallem slept outside next to her camper. "I kept bumping into Palestinians walking past my house," Meallem recalled. "So I would invite them to sit, drink tea with me."

The following year, in 2008, she took things a step further, planning a pro-peace weekend gathering at the Dead Sea for Israeli Jews, Arabs and Palestinians. Through sheer word of mouth, 100 people attended — and more than half were Palestinians.

The experience proved to Meallem that Israeli, Arab and Palestinian peace activists need land where all can move freely and easily, and where they can gather at any time to dialogue, plan and be close to nature in an eco-friendly and sustainable setting.

3 tweets

retweet

12

Share

Submit to digg

resources

- E-mail a Friend
- Print
- Leave a comment
- Spread the Word
- Recent Articles by this Author

blogs

Recent E

- ▶ **Jew Tu**
Crunch
Zoyres,
- ▶ **News i**
Slate: `
boycott
- ▶ **The Ar**
"Jews a
Love St
Festiva
- ▶ **Chai Li**
Jewish
activate
Giants

most popula

- Take 30: celebrate
- Tisha B'A Grant kill
- A new sp circles ar around th
- Groups p Tisha B'A
- Camp Ne director s

Now, the Arava graduate is investing her time and energy into making this dream a reality. She's currently at work on a business plan with Israelis and Palestinians and is talking to a solar energy company about using some of their land for the project.

"Anytime we want to have a peace event with Jews, Palestinians and other activists in the Middle East, it's a challenge of where to do it," Meallem said.

If the gathering is in Israel, Palestinians must spend hours waiting to apply to get a permit to leave the West Bank, and the permit only allows them to leave for 24 hours, if they are granted a permit at all, Meallem said.

"It is a frustrating and humiliating process," she said.

But if the gathering is in Palestinian territory in the West Bank, say, in Ramallah, Israelis are legally barred from entering those cities.

To avoid the complications, peace activists from the Middle East often travel to Europe or Turkey to meet for conferences. Meallem's center, once built, would eliminate the need for peace activists to leave Israel to do peace work.

"There is a shifting in consciousness," Meallem said. "Many people are cooperating in ways we never before thought possible."

Meanwhile, Meallem also is continuing to work on the graduate project she started while at the Arava Institute.

She wrote the proposal, applied for grants and recruited environmentalists to help start the Biogas and Bedouin Women's Health Initiative.

Thanks to Meallem's efforts, Bedouin women are learning how to operate equipment that will turn their community's solid waste into energy to heat their homes, cook their food and power their electricity. The project empowers women while making their environment cleaner, safer and healthier.

Meallem grew up in an Orthodox family with an Egyptian Jewish father of Iraqi descent. She moved to Israel after high school. After polishing her Hebrew on a kibbutz and a few months in the army, she studied biology and environmental studies at Hebrew University.

She traveled and volunteered abroad in her 20s, and in 2003 began studying at the Arava Institute, an interdisciplinary program that trains Palestinians, Israelis, Jordanians and internationals to be environmental leaders.

"Ilana personally is incredibly spiritual and able to connect with people," said Eric Berzon, who housed Meallem when she interned in Oakland and also serves on the board of trustees of Friends of the Arava Institute.

"She connects on a very real, personal level, and she's open to the world around her," Berzon added. "So we look at her in amazement as she has all these contacts around the world."

Comments

Be the first to comment!

Leave a Comment

In order to post a comment, you must first log in.
Are you looking for [user registration](#)? Or have you [forgot your password](#)?

Username

Password

Auto-login on future visits