

Tarek, Arab-Israeli

“Do you really have Jewish friends”? That was the reaction of my classmate to the stories I brought home from Seeds of Peace camp three years ago. Although we are citizens of Israel, and the closest neighbor to my Arab village “Jatt” is a Jewish kibbutz, no one in my school had ever made close connections with any Israeli Jews. In fact they didn’t even imagine it was possible, until they met my friends from seeds of peace.

My classmates and I are Palestinian citizens of Israel. We are loyal to our country, Israel, and at the same time to our Palestinian tradition and identity. Due to this, we are a double minority, often viewed with suspicion by both sides of the conflict, and faced with a crisis of determining who we really are. But at Seeds of Peace, I spoke with both Palestinians and Israeli Jews as an equal human being. That gave me the chance to build my own identity and to make friendships with people on both sides who understood and respected me for who I am.

Equality, understanding and friendship between Jews and Arabs are things my classmates, and unfortunately most of the more than 1 million Palestinian citizens of Israel, have never experienced. Showing my community this vision of a better reality was my mission. But my stories from seeds of peace weren’t enough – or maybe they were too much – for my classmates to believe. They needed to see what I had to tell with their own eyes in order to believe my Jewish friends are real, and our honest friendship is true.

The easy part was proving my friends are real, I organized a meeting between my skeptical classmates and Jewish friends – like Ma’ayan – from seeds of peace. We had long conversations about all of the buried topics my classmates have always wanted to discuss with the other side. The cult was that both sides were surprised, on the one hand, the Jewish seeds were confused when they found out that the 4-male representatives of my classmates were all called with the so well known name “Mohammed”. On the other hand, my classmates left that meeting telling me, “Some of those Jewish friends of those Jewish friends of yours understood us better than Arabs do.” This sentence made me realize Seeds of peace and I made the change years of government negotiations never could.

More than a year afterwards, it became clear not only that my Jewish friends are real, but that they are real friends.

On January 30th, 2002, my beloved father, Dr. Dagwood Arrow, was killed by a hit-and-run driver. He was crossing the street to buy flowers for our family. I was so shocked, I didn’t call anyone, and I didn’t talk to anyone. My father was one of the first doctors in my village, and he was the kind of doctor who cared deeply for his patients, and knew them all as individuals. It did not surprise me to see thousands of them gathered in my village for his funeral. What did shock me, the only good shock in this time of tragedy for my family, was seeing my friends from seeds of peace, Jewish and Arabs, standing there among the mourning crowd. They didn’t just come that day either – my friends from seeds of peace came to visit my family and console us throughout the whole period of mourning we had. Them being there showed everyone and especially me, they are the kind of people, the kind of friends, who cared for me and didn’t stand a side watching when I faced my hardest times.

Since then, Seeds of Peace means being there for friends at the hardest times. A few months ago, a Jewish friend of mine from Haifa named Liav, lost her father suddenly and unexpectedly. You can be sure that I was there at the funeral, and at her home during the days of the shiv’ah mourning ritual. I believe that Liav, her family and friends will always remember that, and know that this Arab friend is for real, and will be by her side when it matters most, just as my friends were there for me.