Building an Equal and Shared Society in Israel

Jewish and Arab students from our Shared Learning Initiative’s Netanya/Jatt school pair touring Jatt together.
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From the co-Executive Directors

Friends,

Around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and compounded social inequalities. Here in Israel, utilizing our unique position and deep relationships with both Arab society and the government, we helped authorities tailor public health interventions for the especially vulnerable Arab community. We addressed digital gaps and dropout risks for Arab students, advised the IDF Home Front Command and Knesset COVID-19 Committee on preventing rapid spread in Arab towns, and took special measures to protect communities during Ramadan.

Despite increased police presence to enforce COVID-19 regulations, 2020 was the deadliest year to date for Israel’s Arab society, with 96 Arab citizens murdered. Recognizing that personal security cannot be achieved by simply increasing enforcement, The Abraham Initiatives successfully advocated for the establishment of an inter-ministerial task force to address the root causes of violence in Arab society. In July 2020, the task force released their plan. This is the first time the government is taking a holistic approach to crime and violence in Arab society, marking a significant policy shift.

Within the field of education, despite school closures in response to the pandemic, we managed to continue our programming online and engage thousands of students across the country – from elementary schools to colleges and universities. We trained educators to run activities virtually and support their students from afar during the 2020-21 school year.

Finally, our work to promote Jewish–Arab political partnership proved critical in a year consumed by election cycles. Our work to promote partnership aimed at breaking the political deadlock on the national level, and we raised the profile of the need for equality and political partnerships in Israel’s mixed cities. We significantly expanded the scope of our Shared Cities Initiative, hosting our second annual conference and bringing Jewish and Arab elected officials together to share perspectives on issues affecting residents of their cities.

Our overarching goal is to create structural change that promotes equality and positive Jewish–Arab relations in Israel. To do this, we employ a theory of change called Advocacy Through Action – we pilot innovative models for shared living, develop a proof of concept, evaluate the impact, and then hand the projects over to large institutional partners for adoption and scaling. To this end, we made significant progress in 2020, from the government’s allocation of 150 million shekels to combating the root causes of violence in Arab society, to Acre’s and the mixed Jewish–Arab Gilboa Regional Council’s agreement to expand Shared Learning throughout their communities.

All of our accomplishments achieved in this unprecedented year are thanks to our partner organizations, government ministries, state institutions, Jewish and Arab leaders, and our supporters across the world. We are grateful for their tremendous support as we work to build a more equal and shared society in Israel together.

Amnon & Thabet
Almost without exception, Jewish and Arab children in Israel attend segregated schools and have little to no meaningful contact with each other. The long-term effects of such limited exposure to one another’s language and culture exacerbate already existing divides within Israeli society.

Based on a model developed in Northern Ireland to bridge the separation between Protestant and Catholic schools, The Abraham Initiatives’ Shared Learning Initiative pairs Arab and Jewish classes from neighboring communities to learn a core curriculum subject together. Each class is co-taught by both teachers and alternates meetings between the two schools. The project focuses on English language learning as the subject for middle school students, as it is a neutral language and offers the opportunity to meet on equal footing.

In the 2019–20 school year, Shared Learning doubled to 20 school pairs (40 total schools). The increased scale enabled us to operate in more diverse school environments, engage a wider range of teachers and students, and deepen our partnership with the Ministry of Education.

Despite the long school closure during the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of Shared Learning classes were held. Nearly 100 teachers were trained to continue running the lessons online and support their students from afar. Concluding events were also held online, including the screening of a bilingual play for over 1,000 elementary school students and a bilingual discussion with Mizrahi Jewish comedian Noam Shuster for 500 middle school students.
We succeeded to step into the others’ shoes and go on a journey of understanding and acceptance. I realized that together, we can bridge the gaps between different cultures by shedding light on our similarities.”

Rama Abu Yunis
from Taha Hussein School
in Sakhnin

We launched an in depth program evaluation with the Henrietta Szold Institute, focusing on students’ language competency before and after participating in Shared Learning, and attitudinal change related to empathy between the two groups.

The evaluation is critical to the process of government adoption and scaling.

80% of students in the program believe it is possible for Jews and Arabs to live together in peace

94% of principals in the program said they were grateful for the opportunity to work with principals from the other education system
Recent studies have found that racism and intolerance are growing among Jewish youth in Israel. The Abraham Initiatives’ Living in One Land Initiative educates Jewish high school students and recent graduates enrolled in pre-army leadership academies (mechinot) about Arab society to break down stereotypes. In 2020, we reached students in 11 high schools and three mechinot.

The initiative features a lecture series led by Arab staff members of The Abraham Initiatives and guest speakers from Arab society, including journalists, performers, and community leaders, who share their personal stories about navigating Israeli society.

The program uses Israeli TV and movies as a cultural springboard for conversation about important issues facing each community.
Thank you for opening my mind and heart to Arab society – I didn’t realize how little I knew. I now understand that a shared Israeli society is the only way forward for our state.”

BINA pre-army academy participant

Over 1,000 teenagers from 11 high schools and 3 pre-army academy participants participated in Living in One Land activities
Promoting K–12 Arabic Instruction

Following the Ministry of Education’s adoption of The Abraham Initiatives’ Ya Salam - Spoken Arabic Initiative in 2018, we have increased our focus on promoting legislation around K–12 Arabic instruction across the Jewish public school system.

In 2020, the Ministry of Education commissioned us to develop a textbook for learning spoken Arabic in 5th grade, with our partners at Merhavim. The textbook was published and offered to hundreds of Jewish schools for use in the 2020–21 school year. Work has commenced on a new 6th Grade syllabus which will be published for use in the next school year.

To expand the impact of this work, we organized a public committee of Jewish and Arab education experts, academics, authors, former politicians and judges to research best practices and recommend a framework for K–12 Arabic instruction across the Jewish public school system. Based on the research, we published a report recommending that native speakers teach Arabic, and that lessons be socially, culturally, and historically contextualized.

The report was widely covered in Hebrew, Arabic, and English media, and was presented to decision makers.
There is a need to reconsider all relevant components of Arabic language instruction in Israel – the approach to learning, study years, study requirements, teachers, teacher training, acquaintance with Arab students, etc. This is vital for the sake of relations between Jewish and Arab citizens and for promoting peace and neighborly relations between Israelis and Palestinians, and the nations of the Middle East.”

Dr. Yonatan Mendel and Gal Karamarski, the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute
Israel’s higher education system, the main and often first arena for Arab–Jewish interaction, offers an important opportunity to leverage its diversity and become a platform for promoting shared society. This is of increased importance with the recent growth of Arab participation in higher education.

However, the multi-cultural reality of the student population has not yet translated into culturally attuned frameworks at Israel’s higher education institutes in terms of accessibility, inclusivity, and social cohesion. This fuels significantly higher dropout rates among Arab students, and consequently, fewer Arab graduates entering the workforce.

The Abraham Initiatives’ Campus as a Shared Space Initiative helps make campuses more inclusive through cultural competency training for staff and administrators, research, and advocacy for inclusion.

In 2020, cultural competency courses were held at Ruppin Academic Center and Ono Academic College. The course teaches staff and administrators to create a multicultural space for positive interactions with the Arab students they serve daily and includes a tour of an Arab town.

We released a series of four videos aimed at Arab students in partnership with the National Union of Israeli Students and the Council for Higher Education. The videos speak to the alienation and lack of information many Arab students feel entering a Jewish institution for the first time. Each video provides a link where students receive more information about their rights and the services provided by their campuses.
Many Arab students have enrolled in academia over the last decade. While we are seeing progress towards inclusive campus climates, much work is needed to promote positive relations between Jewish and Arab students. It is not our duty to finish the work, but neither are we at liberty to neglect it.”

Prof. Yaffa Zilbershats, Chair of the Council for Higher Education

Recommendations for promoting inclusion on Israeli campuses

- Develop messaging that promotes Jewish–Arab interaction
- Encourage joint work between Jewish and Arab students
- Promote free speech and critical discourse
- Expand Arabic signage and Arab cultural activity on campus
2020 was the deadliest year to date for Israel’s Arab society. 96 Arab citizens were murdered, including 16 women; 76 of these individuals were killed with firearms. In only four years, the murder rate among Arab citizens has jumped 50%. Despite increased police presence in Arab communities to enforce COVID-19 regulations, crime and violence continued to spiral out of control. Within this context, the Safe Communities Initiative expanded significantly, effectively shaping public and political discourse around the demand for personal security in Arab society.

Following our sustained advocacy, in October 2019, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced the creation of an inter-ministerial task force to address the root causes of violence in Arab society. We spent 2020 working closely with the task force, and in November, the Prime Minister presented the plan in a meeting of the Special Committee for Eradicating Crime in Arab Society, led by MK Mansour Abbas. The plan, which is proposed to run from 2021-2025, focuses on expanding social welfare services, improving access to financial services, combating organized crime, and investing in education, extracurricular activities, and employment.

Our third annual Personal Security Index (PSI) examined the impact of crime and violence on Israel’s Arab communities. The publication was presented in a Knesset hearing organized by the Special Committee for Eradicating Crime in Arab Society; participants included Members of Knesset and police representatives. The Personal Security Index has become a widely-used tool by policy...
The Abraham Initiatives has accompanied this Knesset Committee since its inception, providing direction and policy recommendations which have improved the efficiency of our discussions. I appreciate and recognize the work of The Abraham Initiatives on the issue of lowering crime and violence in Arab society, and we will continue to work in close partnership.”

MK Mansour Abbas, Chair of Knesset Committee for Tackling Crime & Violence in Arab society), opening remarks to Knesset hearing dedicated to the Personal Security Index published by The Abraham Initiatives

Following our advocacy, the Israeli government allocated 150,000,000 ₪
to combating crime and violence in Arab society
We completed the second year of Personal Security Courses for Arab women and youth in Majd al-Krum, Jisr az-Zarqa, Lod, Ramla, and Arara (Negev). This project instills emergency response skills, builds leadership capacity, and empowers action to decrease violence in Arab communities through a 20-part training on topics including CPR and first aid, sexual education, cyberbullying, accident prevention in the home, and road safety.

The course also includes leadership training, discussion about how to build safe communities, and meetings with emergency bodies.

Bereaved mothers marched from Haifa to Jerusalem to demand government action to stop violence in Arab communities. The Safe Communities team supported the march and joined for stretches in solidarity alongside MK Ayman Odeh (head of Joint List).
Thanks to the session on personal finance, I know how to manage my finances, and I have taught my children a number of valuable lessons. I also understand why we must avoid turning to crime organizations for loans at all costs."

Ramla Personal Security Course participant

Arab women and youth were trained as emergency responders in our 55-hour Personal Security Course
Mixed cities are a growing phenomenon in Israel and present the closest proximity of Jews and Arabs living together. With no formal definition of what constitutes a mixed city, the government has not developed any specific policy for these communities. As a result, mixed cities have been overlooked in government funding decisions.

Following the 2018 municipal elections, which resulted in Jewish–Arab city council coalitions in every mixed city for the first time, The Abraham Initiatives launched the Shared Cities Initiative to support these nascent partnerships and promote the development of mixed cities as equitable and shared spaces.

In 2020, our newly created Mixed Cities Leadership Forum met three times. The forum enables Jewish and Arab elected officials from each of Israel’s seven mixed cities to meet and exchange perspectives on issues affecting their residents including the representation of Arab women in leadership roles and equitable funding for Arab neighborhoods.

We also held our second Annual Shared Cities Conference in Ramla, providing a platform to check in on the status of Jewish–Arab partnership in Israel’s mixed city coalitions and plan for the future. MK Keren Barak (Likud) and MK Ayman Odeh (Head of Joint List) each presented their policy visions for mixed cities, and panels of political and education leaders discussed challenges and opportunities for partnership and shared education.
The Abraham Initiatives works on many levels to promote partnership in mixed cities and transform them into shared cities. One of the key initiatives is the Shared Cities Leadership Forum, of which I am a member. This forum brings together officials from all seven mixed cities in Israel and is a platform for discussing the similar challenges we face and sharing best practices.”

Ronen Rothstein, Jewish council member in mixed city of Ramla

Finally, we ran Personal Security Courses for Arab women and youth in Lod, Ramla, and Acre through our Safe Communities Initiative, and joint English lessons for Jewish and Arab students in Ramla and Acre through our Shared Learning Initiative.

Over **100** elected officials and welfare professionals were trained in Arabic language and cultural competency
Limited and negative media coverage of Arab society remains a central obstacle to improving intergroup attitudes and building a shared society in Israel. The Abraham Initiatives’ Media as a Shared Space Initiative aims to mainstream Arab voices and issues in the media through courses for journalists and media outreach.

In 2020, four Arabic language and culture courses were held for Jewish journalists from Haaretz, Kan, Ynet, Yedioth Ahronoth, and other media outlets. The course equips journalists with skills and knowledge of Arab society to broaden their perspective, and ultimately their coverage. Tours to Qalansawe and Tayibe were also given to specific journalists, which led to two stories on the Arab vote in Israeli elections in Globes and Yedioth Ahronoth.

During COVID-19, a webinar was held to brief financial reporters on the economic impact of the pandemic in Arab society. As a result of the briefing, a story was published in The Marker detailing the financial crisis in Arab communities.
A personal goal I have set for myself is to build relationships of mutual respect with Arab citizens of Israel. The Abraham Initiatives provided me with a unique opportunity to get to know Arab culture, and I am grateful that I can share what I’ve learned with others through journalism.”

Tali Lipkin-Shahak, Galatz journalist

Over 100 media items covering Arab society were published in Hebrew media outlets as a result of our advocacy.
The Israeli workforce is becoming increasingly diverse thanks in large part to recent changes in government policy and the growing number of Arab students pursuing higher education. However, many managers of Israeli companies are not attuned to this new reality, nor do they have the appropriate knowledge and skills to foster more inclusive working environments.

Within this context, The Abraham Initiatives launched its Organizational Cultural Competency Initiative to help promote greater inclusion in Israeli workplaces and improve service delivery in the Arab sector. Three trainings were completed this year, two at Prigat (soft drink manufacturer) and one at Tnuva (Israel’s largest dairy company), in partnership with Collective Impact Partnership for Arab Employment. The training focuses on both Arabic language and cultural competency.

Lectures were also given to employees at Israel Elwyn (NGO serving thousands of Israeli adults and children with disabilities) and the Council for a Beautiful Israel (NGO promoting quality of life in Israel) about improving and expanding their services in Arab society; a webinar was also held for higher education staff on sexual harassment on campuses, focusing on the experience of female Arab students, in collaboration with the Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel.
managers of major Israeli corporations were trained in Arabic language, cultural competency, and service delivery in Arab society

“We may not have been able to learn to speak fluently in 10 lessons, but our employees’ enthusiasm for learning Arabic is worth it.”

Sales manager at Strauss after participating in our Arabic language and cultural competency course
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Jewish and Arab elementary school students participating in an obstacle course together.

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*The Abraham Initiatives' Legacy Giving Program
Our Financials

Overall Budget 2020

$3,300,000

Revenue by Source: 2020

- Private – 24%
- Foundations and Federations – 52%
- Government – 24%
Expenses by Initiative: 2020

- Education for a Shared Society – 30%
- Safe Communities – 22%
- General and Administrative – 16%
- Resource Development, External Relations, and Global Operations – 16%
- Media, Communications, and Advocacy – 12%
- Shared Cities – 4%
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Staff day out: Abraham Initiatives team rafting together in Northern Israel
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Donate at www.abrahaminitiatives.org