

Link to article in Hebrew: <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/magazine/shishabat/article/2579326>

Brave Friendship: Tohar and Muhammad Do Coexistence

She was offended when he shared a blatant post against Israel at the height of the fighting in Gaza • He saw her as a sympathetic ear, who could identify with his difficulties with his conservative family • Together they learned about the Holocaust and terror attacks during the Intifada • Tohar Shalem, a religious Jew from Katzrin, and Muhammad Jayousi, a Palestinian-Muslim from East Jerusalem, study in the GHIS International Leadership Program at the Givat Haviva Educational Center, and prove that coexistence here is possible, despite all the controversies.



[Yifat Erlich](#)

24/6/2021, 04:59, updated 24 / 6/2021, 05:57



PHOTO: "In the end, the beautiful friendships in their simplicity were stronger than anything." Muhammad and Tohar in Jerusalem, this week, Photo: Oren Ben Hakon

Muhammad Jayousi is a star. As he walks along the paths of the Givat Haviva Educational Campus, near Kibbutz Maanit and Wadi Ara, many admiring glances are sent toward him. For the leadership program's graduation ceremony, he looks meticulous, with a bow tie and a tailored suit, an interesting contrast to the wild curls on his head.

Tohar Shalem is also a star. She is radiant and happy, but there is also considerable tension on her face. For the ceremony, she wears a long floral dress, which contrasts against the background of her classmates' short dresses.

Muhammad (18) grew up in a religious Muslim family in the village of Issawiya in East Jerusalem. Tohar (18) grew up in a religious Jewish family in Katzrin in the Golan Heights. They both completed the Givat Haviva International School's (GHIS) leadership program in Givat Haviva. Against the background of the tensions and manifestations of hatred that have arisen since Operation Guardian of the Walls in Gaza, the friendship forged between the two in the two years they studied together is intriguing.

A few months ago, Muhammad and Tohar took advantage of a school holiday to tour the Old

City of Jerusalem. Along with wandering the alleys and eating hummus, the trip also included a shared visit to the Temple Mount. The unusual ascent of a Muslim man and a Jewish woman to the tense site, which later stood in the center of so much tension, was commemorated by them with smiling selfies. But now, just before the graduation ceremony at the center, Tohar refuses to be photographed with Muhammad. Even next to a German student wearing a keffiyeh around his neck she is unwilling to be documented.

"These days, right after we got out of the war, I would not be photographed next to someone with a keffiyeh," she explains quietly but firmly. When I try to find out which black cat passed between her and Muhammad - she evades resolutely.

With her three roommates, two Jews from Tel Aviv and Maagan Michael and an Israeli Arab, she is willing to be photographed. The four stand together in front of the boarding school's club house next to a handwritten sign that everyone agrees with what is written on it: "In Gaza and in Sderot, girls want to live."

PHOTO: On a joint visit to the Temple Mount, a few months before Operation Guardian of the Walls. "In the end we always talk and understand each other." Photo: From the private album

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The days of fighting in Gaza. The missiles that Hamas fired at Israel and the riots that took place in different cities in Israel caused a lot of tension within GHIS. There were arguments, shouts and tears, but in the vortex the Jewish and Arab students continued to sit together around the dining table and sleep side by side.

The GHIS school, intended for 11th and 12th grade students, was established three years ago by Nurit Gery, director of the Givat Haviva International Center, and Yuval Dvir, director of the school. In each grade, about 50 students study there, half of them Israelis, in an equal division between Jews and Arabs. The rest come from all over the world: from the US, Germany and Australia, to third world countries in Africa, such as Liberia and Sudan.

The school, funded by private donors, was established to train young leaders who will promote an egalitarian and shared society in Israel, the Middle East and the world. The students live together in boarding school conditions on their way to acquiring a prestigious international IB high school diploma and who hope to continue to study at prestigious universities.

Muhammad grew up Issawiya on the slopes of Mount Scopus. When he was five, his mother left and he was sent to his grandmother who raised him. Until tenth grade, he studied at the

neighborhood Palestinian school.

"There wasn't a serious learning atmosphere there. My friends talked a lot about work and money, and less about academic progress. By high school, many of my friends had already been in and out of jail after stone-throwing incidents or other acts of violence. I realized that I live in a bubble, in a place where everyone thinks the same, and that I will not go far in such an environment. I decided to look for a different structure."

At first he looked for schools in East Jerusalem, but then a friend tagged him in a Facebook post about the GHIS leadership program. "When I read it, I thought it wasn't real. That there couldn't be such a school, where Jews and Arabs and young people from all over the world study together. The first phone call I made was to find out that the advertisement was real and that they weren't trying to dupe me."

The school's entrance exams, as well as the studies themselves, are conducted in English, and Muhammad worked hard, he said, to improve his language skills. "I just sat all day in front of the internet and learned through free software." He also conducts the interview in English, since his Hebrew is weak.

He approached the exams apprehensively. "Only one aunt knew about it, and only when I received a positive answer did I tell the rest of the family. It wasn't easy. The education I received is Muslim-religious, in a boys-only setting, and suddenly I'm going to a boarding school with students of both sexes, from all over the world, and in a non-religious setting. The family feared that I would break away from tradition and the community.

"In a short time they realized that thanks to my studies, I am much more confident and able to express my position much better. I didn't come to the program at GHIS to change my identity, but to have an opportunity to possibly study abroad, as well as to have an opportunity to explore in depth who I am.

"I met people here I never dreamed of living with. I learned a lot of new things about Israelis, Jewish history, and especially the Holocaust. I also learned about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and I have a lot more to learn. I hope to be accepted to a prestigious university abroad and study environment. I want to be Minister of the Environment in the future. I feel a sense of belonging and want to contribute and influence all populations."

Do you define yourself as Israeli or Palestinian?

"I always say that I'm from Jerusalem. This is my identity. I have family members both in Israel and in Palestine, I do not want to choose. I am in favor of one bi-national state, in which Arabs and Jews live together. I believe in coexistence because we have no other choice."

The days of the activities in Gaza and the riots in the mixed cities were challenging for Muhammad. "I was very worried about my family and friends. There was a lot of misinformation that managed to confuse everyone. Some of my friends in Issawiya severed ties with me after I explained to them that the reality is not black and white and that we should be attentive to other positions as well. It was a difficult time, with feeling that the news was constantly preoccupied with a mutual blame game and the question of who is right and who is wrong, instead of trying to find solutions."

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Tohar also learned about the school in Givat Haviva through social media. "I saw an ad on Instagram and the program seemed very interesting to me. The opportunity to study for two years with young people from all over the world, together with Israeli youth from various sectors, caught my attention. It looked exciting and enriching."

"The school that I attended in Katzrin was a meaningful place for me, where I grew up a lot, and I joined the program at GHIS with a sense of having a mission. On the one hand, the desire to represent the national-religious society I come from, and on the other hand, a great desire to learn from others and develop myself."

Her enthusiasm cooled immediately on the first Shabbat in Givat Haviva. "The activities here were not suitable for a Sabbath-keeper. The kiddush was read over a cell phone, and, of course, clearly there was no organized prayer since there wasn't an active synagogue on-site. It was strange to see everyone dressed in everyday clothes, coming to eat in the dining room in the evening for a few minutes and going about as if it were a normal day. That same evening the activity was done around a campfire."

"I went into shock and walked away from everyone. The lack of basic knowledge about Judaism stunned me. I was personally offended by it. I didn't understand how a society that considers itself liberal, caring and open to 'difference' could deprive itself of knowledge about such a significant issue and entire sector. Out of frustration, I decided not to stay at school on the weekends."

But then Corona arrived and forced Tohar, along with all the school's students, to stay for long periods in the boarding school - including Saturdays. "I realized that if I wanted people to know, I just had to let them know. I took the opportunity to share my world and opened up to them, introducing them to new things. Precisely because of the difficulty, my personal Shabbat experience has also intensified greatly. "

It seems that you have quite a bit of criticism of the program at GHIS, which is still in its infancy.

"Constructive criticism. Because my identity is very different from the mainstream of the school, I had a lot of questions. Sometimes I would come across cases where, in the name of political correctness, ideas and personalities were delegitimized because they simply did not fit the agenda. The so-called 'cancel culture.' It pained me to see that I received official announcements on the occasion of important national days for various people, but no one found it appropriate to mark Gush Katif Day, even though I explained its significance to me. To my surprise, some of my Israeli friends didn't even know what Gush Katif was."

PHOTO: Students in the GHIS program at the Haviva Center. "The multiplicity of perspectives leads to an understanding of the other." Photo: Efrat Eshel

According to Tohar, it has been difficult for her to see the boarding school teachers and counselors go out to controversial demonstrations with students, or express their unequivocal political views in the classroom space.

"From my perspective it is seen as taking a stand, in a way that makes the educator much less accessible to me. Unfortunately, there was a very left-wing and false lecture by the Zochrot organization at school, but then a right-wing representative came here only once as part of a panel. The school needs to do a better job at offering a balance of perspectives in the lectures."

What did you get from the school on the positive side?

"Beyond my English, which has greatly improved, the curriculum here included many texts that helped me develop my academic writing ability and I can learn at a higher academic level - something I lacked in the Israeli education system. Beyond that, I made amazing friends from all over the world that I would not meet otherwise."

"Of course, there are arguments and tension, but in the end the beautiful friendships in their simplicity were stronger than anything. We all live here together, eat, advise each other about school, miss home and laugh together in our room before going to bed. With all the disagreements, in the morning we get up together to study, work and just walk around with people who are very different from us."

Tohar feels that being at GHIS has added another aspect to the social spectrum of the place. In the first year there were no religious Jews except me, or even right-wingers. So my voice added

an important point of view to the discussions, which could easily have been ignored if I had not been there. I had a lot of responsibility on my shoulders, which I sometimes was a burden. In every discussion I felt that I was taking on the responsibility of not being the 'belligerent right,' the 'dark' or the 'religious coercion.' Beyond that, I think I also brought a certain degree of sensitivity and caring that I received from the program I attended in Katzrin.

Did the studies change anything in your worldview?

"Many have asked me if my political opinion changed in my two years at GHIS. To be honest, it has not changed at all. In fact, I now have a deeper and broader basis for my opinions. Now I can grasp a position precisely since I understand the multiplicity of layers and aspects of reality.

"After the two years here I learned to see and experience things that people miss because of the normal outlook they are used to. It feels like moving from a regular movie to a 3D movie. Sometimes it's scarier, but more like the real world. At GHIS I grew up and became able to talk with people in their own language. Not an easy experience, but very formative."

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Tohar and Muhammad say that only three months after starting school in Givat Haviva, they discovered the common launch point between them.

Muhammad: "There was a group meeting when I described where I came from. I said that I attended a religious Muslim school with only boys, and that my family had a hard time accepting the fact that I was moving to a coed boarding school. Suddenly I realized that the one who understands me best is Tohar, who came from a religious school. "We had quite a lot in common, and we started talking more. Tohar taught me a lot of things I did not know. For example, about the Holocaust."

So what happened between you that made her refuse to be photographed in your company before the graduation ceremony?

Muhammad is surprised. "Tohar refused? Can't be. Are you sure? She did tell me something about an update I shared, which she didn't like, but we didn't manage to talk about it in depth. I'll find out from her what happened, and I'm sure everything will work out. After all the disagreements, in the end we always talk to and understand each other."

Tohar later explains that she was "very hurt" by Muhammad, after he shared on Instagram a blunt status against Israel and the IDF during the fighting in Gaza. "There was a group of Arabs in the boarding school who define themselves as Palestinians, and they are very nationalistic.

Muhammad is not part of this group, so I was surprised and very sad that he was dragged into their fervor."

Last week, after the graduation ceremony, Tohar and Muhammad had a long conversation, at the end of which they agreed to disagree. Muhammad offered a qualified apology to Tohar for the blunt status update he shared. As a result, the two agreed to meet again in Jerusalem - this time Tohar agreed to their joint photo shoot.

"Through discourse on social networks, it's very easy to degenerate into anger and hatred, without thinking about the other person," explains Muhammad. "We talk despite the anger, and move on from here. Living together in a boarding school taught us to respect each other, regardless of different political positions."



Nurit Gery, director of the International Center in Givat Haviva, explains that GHIS is a "unique community that allows teenagers to live together and develop listening skills and tolerance that also bridges significant gaps. This multiplicity of perspectives leads to understanding the other. We don't intend to change a student's worldview, but to educate them that inclusion is a guiding principle for openness."

The multiplicity of perspectives can also be found in the school staff. Maysaa Asli-Boirat (40), a mother of four from Kafr Qara, is an Arabic teacher and deputy principal. "The last weeks we went through, with all the riots and violence, were very difficult for the school, and they personally caused me a lot of pain and confusion. I felt like I was experiencing pain from within. I am an Israeli citizen, but the police and Israeli friends treated me like a terrorist. This, of course, once again provoked frustration in the face of the long-standing discrimination and racism from which that Arab society suffers."

Maysaa was one of the founders of the Gesher-Wadi Jewish-Arab school in Kafr Qara, where she also sends her children. "I move between different worlds: as a woman, as an Arab, as a Palestinian, as a citizen - I absorb from all directions."

In 2002, Maysaa witnessed the explosion at the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus, in which nine people were killed and about a hundred were injured. She was standing at the entrance of the cafeteria when an explosive device was detonated. "I saw all the difficult sights, and I smelled the stench that has never let go of me to this day. The physical injury was relatively minor, but the trauma accompanies me."

Regarding what she experienced, she told students about it as part of a special two-day event that the school commemorated in May. "We held a joint memorial service for all peoples, a

ceremony full of pain for each person, and the next day we fully dedicated to life itself, to celebrate it.

"I shared with everyone about an attack that became a turning point in my life, and I explained that after that I realized that life is a right. I made it clear that the optimistic view must not be given up, even when it seems naive. I ask: Arabs - what are they arguing about? Arabs argue with Jews, Arabs argue with Arabs, and Arabs argue within their families. Why? Isn't it better to look people in the eye and see a human being? If each of us takes this message, we will change the world."

PHOTO: Management Team. Right: Maysaa Asli-Boirat, Nurit Gery and Yuval Dvir, Photo: Efrat Eshel

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At the height of the last round of fighting, the school invited students' parents for an open discussion. Arab parents spoke there alongside parents from the Gaza Strip.

"The father from Kibbutz Zikim spoke about the discrimination he felt against the background of how they were treated compared to the cities in the center of the country when they experience missiles from the Gaza Strip. The Arab parent talked about the feeling of discrimination that has accompanied him for years feeling like a second-class citizen," says Yuval Dvir, 43, the school's principal and founder, and father of three, member of Kibbutz Ma'anit.

"In this educational space we find so many similar and common things. Sometimes the blood boils, but we have to see that it boils in others as well. We have become so used to four separate education systems in Israel: state, state-religious, ultra-Orthodox, and Arab. Why is there no common education? Why are we afraid of it?

"If there are no ties between the communities within the education system, there is no chance that they will exist in civil society. As an educator, I feel there is an opportunity here to learn what people really feel, and not through the media or slogans.

"This place symbolizes a space of normalcy. On the one hand, students find similarities with others; on the other hand, they sharpen and deepen their own identity. Ultimately, we try to raise a person here with a clear identity, but also with openness and courtesy towards the other. It's not always easy. There are also disagreements within the team."

Misaa: "I'll give an example: two hours ago I saw the students arrange the chairs for a

graduation party. The chairs are white, and the students added a blue cloth for decoration. I looked at it, and I saw the Israeli flag, blue and white. I didn't want the whole ceremony to be blue and white. I also want to have a place and representation as well. So we brought more fabrics in a variety of colors so that there would be room for everyone."

The GHIS management requested that it respond to the allegations raised by Tohar in the article: "The school community respects the sons and daughters of all religions as a founding and central principle of a multicultural community. Among other things, the dining room in Givat Haviva is kosher, the campus has a place for prayer, and boarding school activities are adapted for Shabbat. In cases where students felt a desire to keep the Sabbath at home, the school supported this choice.

"The school encourages critical discourse on current affairs and supports activism, as part of the concept of building leadership capabilities in adolescents. The school is careful not to take a political stand, but to allow room for opinions. Along with maintaining authentic pluralism, the school adheres to the boundaries of discourse and to maintaining mutual respect among all community members, students and staff alike. Students at the school represent the whole of Israeli society, the range of opinions is wide - and according to their positions they also participate in demonstrations (the staff permits, it does not direct).

"Proper and fair representation of different perspectives by guest lecturers is a key principle in the school's multicultural community. In this context, the required balance between representatives of the right and the political left in Israel is maintained."

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