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Standing Together: A Jewish-Arab Partnership Is Building a Young New Peace Camp in Israel

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Amid the war in Gaza, Standing Together is on a roll: It has 5,000 dues-paying members, the number of its student chapters has doubled, and new groups of Jews and Arabs are working to preserve solidarity - and to instill hope for shared life in Israel



Co-directors Rula Daood and Alon-Lee Green. "Joining the movement became a life-changing journey for me," Daood says. Credit: Tomer Appelbaum

"You're not alone," said the Jewish woman to the Arab woman. Shedding tears, the two Israelis, who were meeting for the first time, embraced. The scene played out in the modest Lod apartment of the Arab woman, Isra About Laban Oudi. She's a single mother, and her 3-year-old son, Tareq, scampered merrily among the 14 strangers, Jews and Arabs, who were guests in his home.

From the beginning of the school year, Oudi says, her son, who speaks only Arabic, had attended a municipal Hebrew-speaking preschool. After [October 7](#), when the children returned to school, Tareq too was happy to reunite with his friends after what had been a two-week break. However, Oudi says, when she heard him speaking Arabic, his teacher hit him and demanded he not use "that language."

Oudi filed a complaint with the police, which is still under examination, but since then, for some weeks, Tareq hasn't been going to nursery school. The teacher, who denies hitting Tareq and claims that she only scolded him, also filed a complaint with the police, alleging that Oudi was accusing her falsely. She is still employed in the preschool.

The whole situation left Oudi feeling helpless and very much alone. That is, until the solidarity encounter that took place in her home, when members of Standing Together - an Arab-Jewish social movement that seeks to advance a beneficent, egalitarian society in Israel through joint grassroots activity - came to show their support.

Three days after that visit, Oudi and her toddler son attended an event organized by the movement in the nearby city of Ramle which, like Lod, has a mixed population. There, in a banquet hall that had no banquets to host, Arabs and Jews were working side by side to prepare food packages for Jewish, Muslim and Christian families whose source of livelihood had been truncated because of [the war](#).

Oudi and her son did not join in the activity of Standing Together (“Omdim Beyahad” in Hebrew) by chance. It’s part of the “recovery plan” that the movement recommends for people who have been hurt by racism: to transform the affront into constructive activity. “It gives people the strength to translate the hurt into joint activity, restores a renewed sense of control and also brings us new and highly motivated members,” explains Omri Goren, 24, who oversees the movement’s activity in the Ramle-Lod area and also heads its student division.

After the volunteers finished packing all the food products, and just before the care packages were dispatched to addresses across the city, the 30 volunteers gathered in a dialogue circle. Goren asked them to introduce themselves and describe how they were feeling at this tense time.

One man, an Arab, related that his wife was frightened about [the war’s implications for Israel’s Arab citizens](#) and had gone abroad with one of their children, while another son, an electrical engineer, had been fired from his job because of “the situation.” A Jewish man sitting next to him said that for three decades he had been the proprietor of a store in Ramle where Jews, Christians and Muslims shopped, and that he had warm, close relations with all of them. “We are like brothers,” he said. “There is respect and genuine love. I am proud to be a Ramle resident who has friends in Ramle.”

A Jewish woman told the others that her niece was killed on October 7, and that she was worried about the shared future in Israel. “And that’s why I am here.”

Standing Together volunteers distribute food packages in Ramle in November. Credit: David Bachar

Although many may be surprised – though the movement’s leaders are not among them – demand for Standing Together’s message of solidarity and vision of a shared future has been on a constant rise since the war started. Those who thought that the uptick in mutual suspicion between Arabs and Jews is causing the fragile fabric of Israeli society to unravel, is invited to take part in the movement’s activity and discover that they are wrong.

Standing Together, which was founded in 2015 and espouses values of equality, peace, social justice and socialism (and in normal times, is involved in environmental, educational and social issues, in a number of different campaigns), is currently gathering momentum. Its membership is growing daily. The purple color associated with the movement, and its newly minted slogan, “Together we will get through this,” can be seen in more and more places in both the real and online worlds. Most of the new joiners are young people, Arabs and Jews, the movement’s directors note. Since October 7, a dozen joint Arab-Jewish groups, dubbed “solidarity guards,” have been established across the country, joining the eight already active branches. Eleven student chapters have also been created, besides the nine that previously existed.

It’s no trivial matter to be a member of the movement, as it requires a monthly payment of dues. The payments are flexible, their level based on each person’s economic ability – starting at the minimum level of 5 shekels (about \$1.40). At present there are more than 5,000 dues-paying members, and another 2,000 people attend movement events without being official members.

The membership fees account for half of Standing Together’s budget, and the other 50 percent comes from private foundations, small and family-based, or large, well-known philanthropies, such as the New Israel Fund. As a matter of principle, in order to preserve freedom of action and the idea

that it's a citizens movement, Standing Together does not accept money from foreign governments.

Tamar Asadi is someone who joined the movement in the wake of October 7. Asadi, 28, is from the village of Deir al-Asad, in the country's north. She's a homeroom teacher for 12th-graders at a Jewish high school in the area, where she's worked for the past six years. She too says she has been "very worried" since the start of the war. "I also knew some people at the [Nova] party and in the Gaza border communities, and in general I was concerned about what would happen," she says.

"In the social media," she continues, "all the posts were dark and frightening, and suddenly I saw a purple-colored post, which said something about partnership, in both Hebrew and Arabic. I felt like someone had thrown me a lifebelt of grace. I wrote to the people behind the post, who were from Standing Together, to ask whether the movement had a branch in Deir al-Asad.

"They said they didn't, so I decided to take the initiative and set up a solidarity guard of Arab and Jewish communities in the Galilee. Within hours, we had 350 new members. We held our first meeting via Zoom, and the feeling was so good that we decided to continue with a face-to-face meeting."

Asadi continues: "We invited everyone to us, to the community center in Deir al-Asad. One of the people who came, from Kibbutz Tuval [nearby], apologized for having to leave early, because he had guard duty at the kibbutz - 'to protect us from you,' he said - and everyone laughed. I haven't stopped talking about that remark, and I understood how important what we are doing in Standing Together is.

"Since then, my activity has only picked up momentum. We visited joint medical teams of Arabs and Jews at health-care facilities; we paid a solidarity visit to Maayan Sigal-Koren, five of whose relatives were abducted from Kibbutz Nir Yitzhak, two of whom are still being held in Gaza; I invited friends for an encounter at my place, which left me very emotional; and much more.

A solidarity visit to Maayan Sigal-Koren's home. Five of her relatives were abducted from Kibbutz Nir Yitzhak.

"Standing Together gives me a place to be who I am," she explains, "along with the hope I have been searching for for a long time. My activity in the movement is also a message to my students. They see an Israeli homeroom teacher, an Arab woman, a Muslim, a Palestinian, who on the one hand identifies with Israel, yet is not ashamed of her [Arab] identity. The change has to come from the public. Our generation is confused about its identity, and is sad and fearful, but Arab society is behaving with solidarity, dignity and empathy at this time - not only out of fear, but mainly because of a shared destiny."

Sigal-Koren, a resident of Kibbutz Pelekh, in the Misgav region, describes the solidarity visit that movement members paid her as "the most powerful and most hopeful I have experienced since all this started. The encounter touched me in a way that no other meeting in this period has," she tells Haaretz.

The Standing Together activists asked Sigal-Koren how they could help her and other families of the captives, and suddenly it occurred to her that the campaign being conducted online and via posters and billboards calling for the captives' release should be translated into Arabic too. That was in fact speedily done with the aid of members of the solidarity squad. Sigal-Koren was subsequently invited to tell her story at a meeting of Standing Together in the Arab town of Nahaf. Speaking before an audience of 300 Arabs and Jews, she called for the return from Gaza of her uncle, Fernando Marman, and Louis Har, her mother's partner (her mother, Clara, was released on

November 28).

Many people don't understand that Israel's Arabs are afraid of everyone. We are afraid of Hezbollah... We are afraid of Hamas... And we are afraid of the police and the army in Israel, and also of Jewish civilians, who might attack us.

Sally Abed

Since that hellish Saturday, the movement has conducted more than a hundred activities, including joint conferences for Arabs and Jews in Hebrew and Arabic in Tamra, Nazareth, Abu Ghosh, Lod, Jerusalem, Be'er Sheva, Tel Aviv and other venues. They have visited hospitals to meet with wounded soldiers and speak to Jewish and Arab medical teams; cleaned out public shelters; sent food packages and other things to families whose source of income has dried up; monitored cases of racist violence in Israel; and made solidarity visits like the one in Oudi's home.

One of their significant actions is the setting up of an emergency hotline, offering assistance to anyone who's been harmed by racism or requires physical accompaniment in order to get to their place of work, the local clinic - or the police station in order to file a complaint about racism. The hotline, which operates seven days a week, has taken hundreds of calls from people whose cases are in various stages of treatment.

The hotline is currently being staffed by 90 volunteers, says Oded Rotem, their coordinator. Many more wanted to join, he notes, but the movement has declared a hiatus on accepting new volunteers, as it's unable to meet the pace of training.

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Some 700 people showed up for Standing Together's Haifa conference, held on November 4. Not

unusually in these parts, the event took place only after an alternative was found to the original location, which they were forced to abandon following pressure by right-wingers. At the event, Sally Abed, who directs the movement's resource development team, spoke about her mother, who works for the northern district of the National Insurance Institute (social security administration), which deals with the social-welfare needs of bereaved families and the families of the Gaza hostages. She related how, after a hard day of emotionally draining work, her mother comes home, turns on an Arabic news channel and sees what is being perpetrated against members of her family in the Gaza Strip.

"We're told that we have to take a side," Abed said. "But that choice inevitably denies the humanity of the other side. I refuse to have my humanity robbed. I refuse to be deprived of my Israeliness," she declared, to the applause of the audience. After the meeting, Abed was approached by an elderly Jewish man wearing a kippa, who had tears in his eyes. Embracing her, he said, "Thank you, this is the first time I've breathed since October 7. You made it possible for me to feel pain for the other side and to feel like a human being again."



Sally Abed. The movement, she thinks, is the first in a long time that's "conveying a political story that is capable of competing with the far-right story." Credit: Tomer Appelbaum

Similar moving phenomena could also be witnessed at a meeting in Tira, an Arab town in central Israel, two weeks later. There, about 120 Arabs and Jews listened attentively to MK Ahmad Tibi (Hadash-Ta'al), Prof. Dani Filc (of the political science department of Ben-Gurion University) and others. Afterward, the participants split into intimate circles, allowing them to share and process their feelings and fears. Many remarked that the evening had given them a sense of hope. During a long interview with them in the offices of Standing Together in Tel Aviv, whose walls are painted purple, I ask the Jewish co-director, Alon-Lee Green, 35, and his Arab counterpart, Rula Daood, 38, to attempt to analyze the source of that hope.

"In my opinion, the key to understanding that hope lies in partnership," says Daood. "For some people, our activity provides the first encounter with 'the other' since the war started. They were feeling anger and confusion, and we make it possible to speak only about pain, without it being intertwined with hatred and nationalism, or arguments about politics. That is liberating. When you see an Arab woman crying together with you over the same things, it creates hope that together we can get through this."

Green: "At the beginning of the war, what dominated here were fear and loneliness. Our activity makes it possible to meet those who are termed the 'enemy,' and you hear from them that they're also afraid, sad and lonely. It's validation for those [Jews] who don't want to be afraid of Arabs, but nevertheless are afraid - and there's no need to prettify things: October 7 and the days that followed really were scary. I think this is part of what provides hope: I was afraid, and now I'm a little less afraid. We don't tell people, 'Racism is bad, tsk, tsk, tsk'; we dismantle racism by means of a joint struggle for our shared interests and experiences in this country."

"And," Daood adds, "we have so much in common. Many tend to forget that, but we are always happy to remind everyone."

Later, Abed, whom I meet in the movement's offices in Haifa - which shares the purple motif of the Tel Aviv HQ - adds her explanation concerning hope. "We don't preach to anyone," she says. "We only strengthen the human experience, and that apparently provides hope."

Morality is another key issue in understanding the current success of Standing Together. Here the underlying concept is that of "ethical dissonance." According to social psychologist Shahar Ayal, a professor at Reichman University, the term refers to inconsistency between a person's immoral behavior and their need to preserve a positive moral self-image. To reduce ethical dissonance, people evoke a variety of justifications for the [behavior of their government or army](#), or their own. For example, a mechanism of double distancing: They judge others severely, but perceive themselves as more moral and ethical."

This form of dissonance underlies the prevailing demand at this time to choose sides. To escape the moral spiral, Israelis are "forbidden" to show pity for Gazans, and Palestinians are "forbidden" to show pity for Israelis. In order to continue to go on seeing themselves as moral individuals, many Israelis tell themselves in effect that Gazan children are suffering because they are Hamas supporters. On the Palestinian side, many tell themselves that the October 7 massacre is an Israeli fiction, or another link in the chain of the struggle against the occupation. Standing Together is effectively proposing a third way, which renders ethical dissonance superfluous. You can feel pain for both; you don't need to choose sides.

"It's alright to look at a boy as a boy, at a family as a family, it doesn't matter where they're from," Green says. "We say this also to the lunatic left in the United States - not to forget that Hamas exists and that there was a horrific massacre - and to the right in Israel, whose proponents go on TV and say shocking things about children whose only 'fault' was that they happen to have been born in Gaza. It's very difficult to be in a place that tries to hold both of these things together, but it's necessary."

There's a lot of criticism of what you're doing. A right-winger told me that you're naive, a woman from the center of the country told me that this whole thing can't work on the basis of Arab-Jewish partnership, and someone on the left said that you don't invoke the occupation enough.

Green: "One of our slogans is, 'There is no movement without friction.' If we want to get things moving, obviously there will be differences of opinion about us. Standing Together is a stream of thoughts, from which we derive our actions. We have brought a new idea to Israeli society, namely politics that sees people. You can tell us from now until tomorrow that the terms 'peace' and 'Jewish-Arab' are kitsch, but I don't know any other kitschy words for which people are called 'traitors' and are persecuted. You can call us 'naive,' but you can also say that peace is the least naive political solution there is today."

These days, Standing Together's trademark purple and its new slogan, "Together we will get through this," are showing up in more and more places. Credit: Amoon Shany Gillon

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Green, a social-political activist since his youth, served as a parliamentary assistant to former MK Dov Khenin (Hadash). He's paying a steep price for his wish for peace. As co-director of Standing Together, he works almost around the clock, barely getting any sleep, and deals with multiple fronts simultaneously. His phone never stops ringing, he says, but not in a good way. He gets an obsessive number of calls and text messages replete with vilifications, curses, wishes for his torture and death, and the classic "Go to Gaza."

Since right-wing activists, including the notorious right-wing rapper and activist Yoav Eliasi, aka “The Shadow,” made Green’s phone number public, he has been under incessant verbal attack, sometimes in the street when he’s recognized. The vicious curses and brutal remarks are hard to take, he acknowledges. He’s filed two complaints with the police about harassment (which to date have remained non-physical), but no action has been taken.

To escape the moral spiral, Israelis are “forbidden” to show pity for Gazans, and Palestinians are “forbidden” to show pity for Israelis. Standing Together is proposing a third way: You can feel pain for both; you don’t need to choose sides.

Green, though, says he is less worried for himself than for the Arab women in the movement. “They are too easily victimized. It’s so simple to attack an Arab woman in Israel today,” he says. Cringing, Daoud talks about the many rape wishes she gets. “What hurts me most is when I get that from women, like there’s no solidarity between women in the world.”

Green: “That’s one of the hardest things for me at the personal level – how easy it is to lose something within yourself and wish another woman one of the most terrible things that our [women suffered on October 7](#). I see the way cynical politicians exploit fertile soil and encourage all this. When I hear the curses that my female Arab friends in the movement endure, I can only wonder how they are able to remain as members. How do you pick yourself up from that moment of humiliation?”

As Abed sees it, “The radical right-wing forces are obsessing about Standing Together. I think this is because we are, for the first time in a long time, conveying a political story that is capable of competing with the far-right story. While those forces were working well and in an organized way, and moved from the illegitimate fringes of Israeli society into the Knesset, the government, the army, the media and the Israeli mainstream – the left lost its relevance, and lost the Arabs, especially of the younger generation. Now we are conveying a good story, building a new peace camp of the young, of Arabs and Jews, of progressives in the positive sense of the word – not the crazy types, of true liberals. We’re saying, ‘We have reached the bottom, and from here on we will rise together.’ We are fighting for our humanity.”

Abed, too, is a battle-hardened social-political fox. In 2021, she was arrested in a demonstration against the eviction of Arabs from their homes in Jaffa, but released within a few hours without any charges. Last month, she was on the receiving end of verbally violent attacks from Jews on X (formerly Twitter), for having dared to write that her heart is broken by what happened to the Israelis and also by what is happening to the Gazans.

“We are not being left with space to express ourselves,” she says. “I personally have been keeping quiet since then. What pains me most is that moderates came out against me. ‘Why talk about Gaza now?’ they asked. They want me to talk only about Jewish-Arab solidarity inside Israel. Many Jews don’t perceive us, the Arabs in Israel, as part of society, so they don’t believe that my pain about the atrocities of October 7 is authentic.

"Many of them don't understand that Israel's Arabs are afraid of everyone," she continues. "We are afraid of Hezbollah - I grew up in the north during the Second Lebanon War, I know how frightening Hezbollah is. We are afraid of Hamas - we saw that they spare no one, Arabs as well. And we are afraid of the police and the army in Israel, and also of Jewish civilians, who might attack us."

In contrast to Green and Abed, Daood entered the world of social-political activism relatively late. A speech and language pathologist by training, she spent many years working in the profession. She became acquainted with Standing Together during a demonstration the movement held in Jerusalem in 2019. "A woman in a purple T-shirt, with writing in Arabic and Hebrew on it, was standing there and shouting slogans in both languages. She started to march and everyone marched behind her. I was amazed by her and by the power of such a simple act. I realized that if I wanted to change the situation, I was in the wrong line of work. I joined Standing Together, which became a life-changing journey for me."



Standing Together volunteers. They visit wounded soldiers in hospitals; clean out public shelters; send food packages to families whose source of income has dried up and monitor cases of racist violence.

The term "life-changing" came up again in the interview, this time in the context of Saturday, October 7. "I grasped that this was a life-changing, paradigm-changing event that also would change the course of history," Green says. "During the first days, we were occupied only with providing aid and support to members of the team who were harmed, the members of the movement and whoever needed help. It was only in the second stage that we began thinking about what our role is as a movement at this moment, and we were caught up in a trenchant debate.

"One group," he recalls, "said, 'Let's drop Gaza at the moment, we'll talk about peace between Jews and Arabs inside Israel, we'll be the least political we can be in order to create the greatest possible space for partnership, including for all those who say they are disillusioned.' The second group said that if we don't act as a peace movement that talks about the day after, no one is going to do it. There were a lot of arguments. In the end we decided to reinforce both narratives, one alongside the other."

How do you reply to those who say that [after October 7] they have no more illusions, and now believe that Hamas has to be obliterated, no matter how many victims this entails on the Palestinian side?

Green: "What are they actually suggesting? That we remain in a perpetual war of mutual annihilation, to choose a life in which only one side triumphs each time a little. We, in contrast, are offering a smidgen of horizon, even if it looks distant at present. I think that the shattered illusion that it's right to come away with from October 7 is that the wish for the Palestinians to disappear from the region is not going to be realized anytime soon.

“Another shattered illusion involves realizing that Hamas was the weakest player during the Oslo period, when the Palestinians harbored true hope and had a diplomatic horizon. That shows that in order to defeat a horrific idea like Hamas, we need to put forward a charismatic, persuasive different idea, to both the Palestinians and the Israelis. One such idea consists of peace and equality, and I say this from a patriotic place, from a self-interested one, wanting to be able to live here in security.”

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The purple movement’s message is in demand abroad as well as in Israel. Green and Abed recently returned from a publicity tour in the United States, where they spoke to thousands in synagogues, mosques, community centers and academic venues. They were interviewed by major media outlets, and met members of Congress including Sen. Bernie Sanders (Dem., Vermont) and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (Dem., New York). All of them wanted to hear how Jews and Arabs are doing something together against the background of the war.

I met with Green at the gathering in Tira, a few hours after he landed, and with Abed in Haifa on the day after she returned. Both looked worn out, and not only because of an exhausting trip or jet lag. Abed explained why she felt so empty after the visit to America.

“The discussion there is so disconnected from our life, our challenges, our reality. Each side has its fantasies about what Israel is and what the liberation of Palestine means. I asked them how the debate between them in the social media helps people in Israel, who are in a war situation, are experiencing attacks, are caught in a deep trauma, are burying their dead, worrying about the captives or are being bombed. They don’t have answers. They are fighting a war of narratives, over who is more correct. With the Jewish side, I felt like I had to contain their pain, even though they did not actually experience the assault, but only a distant collective trauma, without understanding that I experienced an actual trauma, as an Israeli.

“With the Palestinian side,” she continues, “I felt they were being judgmental because I was working with Jews. One of the Muslims we met asked me, ‘What is this Zionist-liberal s--- that you’re part of?’ The two sides refuse to see that Arab people and Jewish people live here, with their own desires, feelings, traumas and shared experiences. The encounters and the talks required me to take in the fears of each side: the American Jews who are afraid of antisemitism, and justly so; and Palestinian Americans, who are appalled at the possibility that their relatives will die. It drained me emotionally.”

To which Green adds, “Our friends in the United States are in a hashtag crisis. They feel they have only one of two options: either an ‘I’m with Israel’ hashtag, or a ‘My heart is with Gaza’ hashtag. We told them that if we, who are in the heart of the storm, are able to maintain the understanding that both peoples are suffering at this time and also work together for humanity, then certainly they are capable of it. All they need, really, is plenty of desire and a little effort.”

Netta Ahituv

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P.S.

• Haaretz. Jan 5, 2024 8:13 pm IST:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-01-05/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/a-jewish-arab-partnership-is-building-a-young-new-peace-camp-in-israel/0000018c-daa9-d751-ad8d-ffadd6e00000>