

Jewish and Arab Teens Turned Their Cameras on Each Other - This Is What They Saw

'I guess I realize that they're exactly like us'

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Arab and Jewish Israelis participating in Beit Berl College's summer camp on getting to know one another through documentary filmmaking, August 2017. Moti Milrod

Najeb Abu Kheid's aunt got married at 16 and never graduated from high school. Only years later, after her children were grown, did she complete her high school diploma requirements, attend university and earn both her bachelor's and master's degrees. Today she runs an art therapy clinic in Tira, an Arab town in central Israel.

His aunt's mother (Najeb's grandmother) was never as fortunate. Pulled out of school in the fourth grade, she has spent most of her life since slaving in the kitchen. By contrast, his aunt's daughter (his cousin), clearly influenced by her mother, never even considered getting married before completing her university studies.

His trailblazing aunt was the inspiration for a short documentary 16-year-old Najeb is filming this week. The focus is three generations of women in his family, but Najeb believes it tells a much bigger story about social trends in Arab Israeli society.

"My aunt was part of a generation that began breaking down barriers," he says.

Serving as crew on Najeb's filmmaking project are three Jewish-Israeli teenagers who, until this week, had never set foot in Tira.

What brought them there is a new initiative that offers Jewish and Arab teens the opportunity to take an intimate look at each other's worlds through filmmaking collaborations. Six Arab Israelis and six Jewish Israelis are participating in this two-week summer camp organized and sponsored by Beit Berl College, which happens to be ideally situated between a cluster of Arab towns on one side and a cluster of Jewish towns on the other.

"All kids these days are making their own little movies, so we thought that cinema would be a good tool for bringing together teenagers who otherwise would never have the opportunity to meet, even though they live five or 10 minutes away from one another," says Dan Muggia, director of the film department at Beit Berl.

Filmmaking, he adds, offers another advantage in potentially volatile situations. "When you're behind the camera and interviewing someone for a documentary, you can ask questions you wouldn't otherwise feel comfortable asking," he says.

After spending the previous day at his grandmother's home, Najeb and his crew were working in a studio on campus one morning this week logging and translating her interview from Arabic into Hebrew. Images of her expertly chopping wild greens in her kitchen — as she responded to questions — popped up on the screen overhead.

"With my aunt, we decided to do the interview in a big empty space rather than a cluttered kitchen," he says. "It's supposed to symbolize the emptiness in her life until she began studying."



Najeb Abu Kheid, lower left, Tal Arazi, lower right and Haya Egeiq, upper right, at Beit Berl College's summer camp on documentary filmmaking, August 2017. Moti Milrod

Opening a new world

The first week of camp was spent learning the rudimentaries of filmmaking while tossing around ideas for projects. The participants were instructed to focus on topics that touched them personally. Eventually, three were chosen.

Huddled together in another corner of the campus studio were four teenage girls – three Arab and one Jewish – working on a film that explores their fascination with YouTube celebrities. “We came up with this idea because our parents are always annoyed at us for spending so much time watching videos on our smartphones,” says 17-year-old Haya Egeiq, who comes from the nearby town of Taibeh.

A day earlier, the crew had gone out on location to film interviews with their YouTube idols, all Arab Israelis, whom they had managed to track down. For Tal Arazi, their 16-year-old cinematographer who does not speak a word of Arabic, this presented some obvious challenges. At the same time, she adds, it opened up a whole new world for her. “I was unaware what a huge phenomenon this is,” says Tal, who hails from the small town of Bat Hefer. “I guess I’m just not on social media that much.”

Seventeen-year-old Eram Jaber loves sports and follows a popular Zumba instructor on YouTube. “We tend to follow YouTubers who do things we also dream of doing one day,” she says, “and the question we’ve been asking ourselves is whether following these YouTubers will eventually help us realize our dreams or have the opposite effect.”

Two days into their production work, they had yet to reach a consensus on the matter.

At Ometz, an agricultural community about a half-hour drive away, another crew was filming on location. They were working on a documentary about a pretty vast topic: teen love and friendship. The day before, they interviewed Tal Naor, a bubbly 16-year-old who is directing the film, about her relationship with her best friend. “We’ve known each other for 10 years and only ever had one fight,” she explains.

On the day a reporter visited, they were visiting the home of Gal Efraim, whose boyfriend Nir Arad is part of the crew. “This is the first time either of us has ever fallen in love,” confides 16-year-old Nir as he reaches for his girlfriend’s hand. “We’ve been together for three months now.”

No Arab friends before

As the cameras roll, Tal, the director, begins to probe. “Do you feel that being in this relationship has distracted you in school?” she asks Nir and Gal. Without giving them much time to answer, she moves on to her next question. “Do you find you’re spending less time with your other friends since you’ve become boyfriend and girlfriend or more time?”



Najeb Abu Kheid, left, at Beit Berl College's summer camp on documentary filmmaking, August 2017. Moti Milrod

Standing behind the camera is Layla Daher, a 17-year-old Arab teenager from Tira. The next day it will be her turn to get in front of the camera and talk about her special relationship with her twin brother. When they accompany Layla to her home, it will be the first time that Nir and Tal have ever visited Tira.

“I admit I had lots of reservations about attending this camp because I had never had any Arab friends before,” says Tal, as she glances at her filmmaking partners to gauge their response to the confession. “But this experience has really changed the way I see things. I guess I realize that they’re exactly like us.”

The filmmaking camp opened during a particularly tense week for Arab-Jewish relations in Israel. The government’s decision to install metal detectors at the entrances to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, following a terror attack that killed two Israeli police officers, sparked widespread protests. Eventually, the metal detectors were removed.

“We avoid discussing politics at this camp,” Nir says. “It’s not a good idea.”

But after a few seconds, he doesn’t seem terribly convinced. “I mean, what do you think?” he asks his fellow crew members. “Do you think we should be talking about the political situation? I’m afraid if we do we’ll end up fighting.”

Changing the subject, he apologizes for his absence the previous day. “I had to go through the first step in my army recruitment process,” he says.

He then takes a long look at Layla and Sara Daes, the other Arab crew member, as he gathers up the courage to ask his next question: “You know I was wondering, how do you two feel about me going to the army? Does that bother you at all?”

They hesitate for a few seconds before responding. “No,” Layla says. “We understand that this is something you’re obligated to do.” Sara nods in agreement.

With the conversation moving in this direction, Tal uses the opportunity to ask her new Arab friends a question that has been bothering her as well. “I was just wondering how you feel about living here in Israel,” she says. “Do you feel that you are part of this place?”

It’s Sara’s turn to answer now. She measures her words carefully.

“You can say that we do,” she says after a pause.