

NAZIER MAGALLY

Israel Is a Hope for Its Arab Citizens, Too



IT IS NOT EASY to be happy these days in our Middle East. If it's not Covid, then it's civil wars, oppressive regimes, an earthquake. Not a day goes by without bloodshed. Sometimes it is Palestinians. Sometimes it is Jews. Not to mention Syria and Turkey, burying their loved ones by the tens of thousands. In recent years, we have known no rest from the plague of murderous death, from Libya to Yemen, from Sudan to Iran.

Still, we have an obligation to create joy—Arabs and Jews alike.

So on that beautiful night, when I was surrounded by my wife, three children, six grandchildren, and other relatives and friends, my tears flowed with laughter and joy. Our eldest granddaughter

This article has been translated from the Hebrwe.

had passed all of her university exams with honors. Our second granddaughter, who graduated from high school last summer and decided to take a break from her studies, had finished her third month working in tourism. She earns a higher salary than her grandmother, who has a master's degree and works as a senior official in the municipality. Our third granddaughter had completed a course at the Technion for seventh graders, where students got to know the medical profession up close. Our grandson was one of a team of six sixth-grade students who received First Prize in the Ministry of Education's competition for a scientific invention; he began to explain to us how it is possible to fight air pollution with a new device the team created together with their physics teacher. Our fourth granddaughter shines in everything she does: academics, music, ballet, and acting. She is a talker; she knows how to express herself well in Hebrew and English, not only in Arabic. And the youngest granddaughter, only 16 months old, manages to drive the family crazy with her incredible intelligence.

Everyone is becoming a success story. Everyone, *baruch Hashem*, is healthy. Being together with them, each and every one of them, and all of them together, is always special. Warmth and pride. Even when we are watching the news—and we are not those who run away from watching difficult events—we try to look for a positive way out. The glass is half-empty, but we focus on the full part. For us, news is knowledge, not just pain and anxiety. We carry the heavy burden of difficult and frustrating events, but we lean into surviving with a hope that does not know despair. We know from history that it could have been worse.

So that night passed peacefully, until midnight. The children and grandchildren dispersed, each family to its own home. My wife, to her online English class. And I, to my office in our cramped library, reading and writing.

Then a horrifying sound of gunshots broke the silence. This is not a rare occurrence in our area — like all of Arab society, we are plagued by a terrible crime wave — but I refuse to get used to it. It wasn't directed at me or my house, God forbid, but it was close by, in the neighborhood. Criminal organizations. Fighting one another, fighting within themselves. The whole neighborhood woke up, but no one went near a window. People are scared of stray bullets; this puts them in a state of anxiety and fear. In the quiet that followed the shooting, you hear a plea to God — help these organizations destroy one another, deliver us from their evil. Someone else calls out the hope that Itamar Ben-Gvir, now the minister of national security, will be able to stop the criminal violence from taking over Arab society. But in this battle, we can't survive on emotional aspirations. Far too many innocent bystanders fall victim to this gang warfare, receiving a bullet in the head while in a store, or at a gas station, or coming from prayer in the mosque.

This issue has become more worrisome than any other issue among Israeli Arabs. As usual, we point the finger of blame at the police. It's hard for us to acknowledge our own responsibility, the wrongdoings of our own communities that have led to this situation, which threatens all the achievements we have earned through our hard work over the 75 years of the existence of the State of Israel. And there are many achievements.

I stood at the window overlooking the street, in the beautiful neighborhood established in the 1990s according to the plan of the minister of housing, Binyamin Ben-Eliezer. There is no trace of the gunfire. I moved to the other side of the house, overlooking the Jezreel Valley and Beit Shean, the city where my father lived before the Nakba. It was incredibly quiet there, too. The bullets seemed to have

swallowed up the vibrancy of life. The next day, and even after many days, there was no mention of the event in the media, and I, as a journalist of our day, knew why. No one had died.

So the police registered another incident without solving it. The municipality expressed relief that there were no casualties. Our politicians protested the lawlessness and lack of governance. And we, the public, whispered that we must take responsibility and oppose the criminal organizations openly. We fear, however, that the current government is closing the door in our faces.

In recent years, we have gone through two welcome experiments that inspired great hope, which we fear will not return soon. After many years of Arab citizens being pushed to the margins of society, we suddenly became a respected group in civic and political life. We have been a fundamental workforce since the founding of Israel. We were engaged in building the country. We broke new ground, worked, studied, sang, danced, and over time became a presence that could no longer be ignored in civil society. By 2020, when we made up about 20 percent of the population, nearly half of the recipients of Israeli medical licenses were Arabs; half of all new nurses, more than half the dentists, and 57 percent of pharmacists were Arabs. The academic research institutes are full of Arab creators and inventors. Businessmen, artists, sports stars, writers and poets, journalists in the Hebrew media—excellence has become a national flag. These achievements would not have been possible without help. The road was indeed difficult. Every Arab needed to make twice the effort in order to succeed. But there is no Arab who succeeded without the support of a good Jew who lent a shoulder.

Then two things happened: Covid and Arab partnership in the last government coalition. Covid is a virus that does not distinguish between Jew and Arab, between religious and secular, between Ashkenazi and Sephardi. It forced us to join together to fight it. The

medical teams, the education systems, various officials, and IDF personnel all fought valiantly together to protect the health of everyone.

Arab partnership in the coalition was another step, a historic one. Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid established a government that was different from anything that politics in the world had known. Naftali Bennett's Yisrael Beiteinu, to the right of Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud, was a member, together with the centrist parties of Benny Gantz and Yair Lapid, Labor and Meretz from the Left, and the United Arab List under the leadership of MK Mansour Abbas. For the Arab population, this was a new era. For the first time, they had representatives in the ruling coalition of the government.

Unfortunately, the government was not given the time it needed to succeed. It made many mistakes, but it was nevertheless a remarkable achievement. Yes, the experiment was interrupted in its infancy. But it managed to breathe new life into the country. Nearly 34 percent of the Jews and 64 percent of the Arabs supported the partnership. And in the elections that followed, voting for Abbas's party increased by 25 percent.



As someone who follows the politics of the Arab world, I have seen the effects of this experiment ripple across borders. Many in the region viewed it hopefully, and not only in countries that joined the Abraham Accords. This leads me to believe that the last government was not merely a singular event, a moment in time. I expect it to seep deep into the Israeli being. I allow myself to see hope in it, despite the setbacks and failures.

Anyone who understands what hope is and where the song “Hatikvah” comes from knows that this hope continues. All that is needed is to look at our children and our grandchildren with open eyes and tell

them: In the celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the State of Israel, we were part of the public that believed from the bottom of our hearts that there was room for partnership. Not only between Jews and Arab citizens of Israel—the partnership here will be a model that can be imitated across the region, including among the Palestinians. A partnership that will bring a true and just peace.

So, to my Jewish friends, I say: You will continue to sing “Hatikvah,” and I will stand respectfully, and together we will bring hope to the land and all its inhabitants. *

NAZIEL MAGALLY is a writer and journalist who lives and works in Nazareth. He is a fellow at the Shahrut public-policy think tank and teaches at Bir Zeit University.