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Debate for Peace participant Sharehan Alwakily raises her hand at a Debate for Peace workshop at the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv on March 16. (Photo/Courtesy Debate for Peace)

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Debate bridges ethnic divides for teens visiting from Israel

BY **ROB GLOSTER** | AUGUST 21, 2018

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Her father warned against joining the program. Her school principal threatened to mark her as absent, and called her parents to try to prevent her from attending. Teachers and community members expressed their disapproval.

But Sharehan Alwakily, a Bedouin teen from southern Israel, went to **Debate for Peace** gatherings anyway — joining Jewish, Christian and other Muslim students from throughout Israel in open discussions about the problems they face living side-by-side in a divided society.

“I was made to feel like I [was] doing something against my society because I met with Jewish friends and I went abroad,” Alwakily told J. “I was shocked.”

Alwakily and three other members of Debate for Peace told their stories Aug. 16 while on a visit to the Bay Area, at a Jewish Community Relations Council event in San Francisco and at Temple Beth Abraham in Oakland. They came to the Bay Area after attending the 10-day Jerusalem Peacebuilders interfaith citizenship **conference** for teens in Houston.

Debate for Peace, part of the Jerusalem-based **Interfaith Encounter Association**, is a 2-year-old Israeli program that brings together Arab and Jewish students to participate in debates and discussions in English based on Model United Nations conferences. About 1,000 students ages 13 to 19 have attended the conferences, which receive financial support from the U.S. Embassy.

For many of the students in Debate for Peace, their participation marks the first time they have met someone from outside their own ethnic group.

“Before, I had only met a few Arabs, which is kind of crazy considering the population of Israel right now,” said Amalia Cedar Kellner, a 16-year-old from Tel Aviv. “Before this program, all that I knew was screaming, non-factual discussions with people in your own community, which is very limiting. Nobody was listening. Now I realize what I can achieve through debate.”

Yafa Nassar, an Arab teen from northern Israel who sometimes has to leave home at 5 a.m. to attend the conferences, said, “I never thought I would have friends who are Jewish,” and that Debate for Peace gives her a chance to discuss topics such as Israel’s West Bank settlements, Gaza and international borders without being “worried about getting in trouble or going to jail.”

Alwakily, 18, comes from Bir Almshash, a tiny village in the Negev desert where traditional Bedouin culture frowns on a young woman participating in such a cross-

cultural program. She first learned about Debate for Peace in a U.S. Embassy Facebook post.

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When Debate for Peace offered to present a program at her school, she said, the principal at first agreed — and then a day before, canceled the event. He also called her parents to warn of her attending the group’s events.

“He said you cannot gain anything from this program, and if you go I will mark you as absent,” she said. “I chose to continue in Debate for Peace, and my teachers started to look at me in a strange way and to punish me.”

Steven Aiello, founder and co-director of Debate for Peace, called Alwakily’s mother and convinced her that Sharehan would benefit from the program.

“She’s both an extreme case and paradigmatic of what we do,” Aiello said via email. “We have had nearly 1,000 students participate in our programming, and many face various obstacles; traveling hours each way via public transportation, resistance from family, society or school, raising money to participate in delegations abroad. She encompasses virtually all of the challenges that our students may face, and her success is a testament to her will and motivation.”

Alwakily, whose goal is to someday attend medical school in the United States, calls Debate for Peace “life-changing for me,” and Aiello said she’s responded by offering her unique perspective to fellow participants such as Kellner, Nassar and Bara’a Massalha, a Palestinian who was the fourth member of the group visiting the Bay Area.

“Sharehan embodies what we’re trying to do — bring the brightest, most motivated students from diverse communities together and give them skills and opportunity to interact together,” Aiello said. “Of the girls on the trip, Bara’a and Yafa from Arab towns in the north, Amalia from Tel Aviv and Sharehan from an unrecognized village, would at best have met in university a decade later in life, without the opportunity to develop this kind of friendship.”

“It’s worth overcoming the adversity for seeing the magic that happens when we can get the best students in the same room — regardless of their religion, ethnicity, hometown, socio-economic level, political views, etc. and provide them with the opportunity to learn from one another.”

Several of the visiting teens described themselves as a “new generation” of Israelis, and said it is their responsibility to fight for a common future. Part of their learning process, they said, is hearing all sides of an issue at Debate for Peace.

“Now it’s a pretty young program, but I think long-term a lot of us are interested in politics,” Kellner said. “We’re coming up with things that not everyone agrees with. When we grow up, then we will be in power and we can make changes.”

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Rob Gloster z"l was J.'s senior writer from 2016-2019.

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