



'Enemies are people who haven't met the other side'

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Jewish-Muslim law student who grew up in coexistence village, is part of the Bar Ilan mediation team discusses her outlook on peace.



MAI SHBETA Photo: Yonah Jeremy Bob

"My motto is enemies are only people who haven't yet had the chance to meet the other side," said Mai Shbeta, a Bar-Ilan University law student, regarding her involvement in an international mediation competition that took place in Paris in February.

The Bar-Ilan team achieved mixed success, on the one hand winning a special prize for the best mediation plan, while on the other not finishing nearly as well as last year's unprecedented second place.

But while Shbeta's skills as a mediator, and her value to the team in the competition were obvious, who she is personally is even more fascinating.

Shbeta is no ordinary Bar-Ilan student.

She grew up in Wahat al-Salam-Neve Shalom, a small coexistence village of 50 Arab and Jewish families living together in the center of the country near Latrun.

That a young woman like Shbeta, coming from a coexistence village would be part of a Bar-Ilan team, essentially representing what is often viewed as a highly religious Jewish

and right-wing university, is a story in and of itself.

But Shbeta's story goes even deeper. Of all of the 57 families in Wahat al-Salam-Neve Shalom, Shbeta's family is the only interfaith one. Her father is Muslim, her mother is Jewish and she is half-and-half, what she calls, "both 100 percent Jewish and 100 percent Muslim."

Reflecting more on the issue of identity, Shbeta said that the bottom-line is "I am a person, a human being."

She continued, "I was born and raised in Wahat al-Salam-Neve Shalom. I want everyone to have a country and live in peace."

Asked if she would ever live anywhere else, she said that "only here can you live and be who we are." In a "mixed family in a Jewish city, or [in] an Arab city, you need to take a side."

On the subject of representing Bar-Ilan and the State of Israel at an international competition, she looked a bit uncomfortable, but then with resoluteness responded, "I am a Bar-Ilan student. It might have a reputation for being very right-wing and religious, but three of the four students on the mediation team are not religious."

Shbeta continued, "The university itself has no agenda or politics. It's not an issue. I don't represent Israel. I am an Israeli and I am only representing myself."

The law student added that she found this perspective of focusing on the individual was also crucial to coexistence and peace-centered mediation, which she also participates in outside of the competition.

Shbeta implied that when people see the conflict in terms of nations, it is hard to "understand the other side."

But she said she has seen "Israelis living in the South thrown out of their houses [by rocket fire] and Palestinians living in the West Bank with family members killed," during rounds of fighting, later come together, such as during the Creativity for Peace [summer] camp [for Jewish and Palestinian adolescent girls], and have a completely different "creative" approach to peace "as soon as they meet" on a personal level.

Shbeta said that one reason she joined the mediation competition was her focus on conflict resolution as opposed to litigation.

"I want to solve problems by dialogue and talking, not litigating in court," she said.

She also strongly believes in people's power to change, noting that when her Jewish mother made aliya to Israel from Switzerland decades ago, she "did not even know there was an Arab minority in Israel." Later, she became a peace activist and married

Shbeta's Muslim father.

Shbeta said that she did feel extra tension during the recent Gaza War, but that she tries to explain to Jewish Israelis that "not everyone in Gaza wants to kill," and to distinguish between "extremists," and what she considers the larger mass of people in Gaza.

She concluded by saying that most people "just want an end to bombs falling and buses blowing up. I believe in peace. I don't know if it will come anytime soon, but I'm doing my best to make it happen."