

# *Rabbi John Rosove's Blog*

<https://rabbijohnrosove.wordpress.com/2016/02/29/the-orchard-of-abrahams-children-towards-the-creation-of-a-shared-society/>

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There are at least three nursery schools in that have Jewish and Muslim children enrolled together. One is in Jaffa, a mixed Arab-Jewish town, alongside Tel Aviv.

One day this past week, I went to visit along with 30 American and Canadian Reform Rabbis as part of our CCAR annual meeting in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. We gathered in the school's backyard garden and playground near a chicken coop with very raucous roosters. The school is aptly called "The Orchard of Abraham's Children."

Ihab Balha is the school manager, and he greeted us warmly. He's in his early 40s, is tall with cascading long black-gray hair framing his handsome olive-colored face. He wore the long white robe of a Sufi mystic. He speaks beautiful Hebrew and he told us his unusual story about how this school came to be created.

Ihab grew up in the house in which the school welcomes the children each day. He is one of four or five children of a loving Palestinian Arab Muslim family. However, his father's love only went so far. He hated Jews with an uncommon passion, and he taught his children to hate Jews as well.

When Ihab was 16, he attempted to fire-bomb a synagogue. When he was 20, he encountered Jews for the first time with a group of Palestinian friends. Each side took the opportunity to release their pent-up venom and rage toward the other. Something strange happened, however, in the verbal assaults. Ihab and the others (Jews and Arabs both) wanted more opportunities to be heard and to listen. Soon, they realized that their bigotry was not rationally based, that there was humanity in the other and that they shared far more than they had ever imagined. That realization launched them into a dialogue series that transformed them.

Ihab didn't initially confide with his parents that he was participating in these conversations nor that his attitudes about Jews were changing. At long last he told his parents, but there was a serious fall-out with his father. They did not speak nor see one another for the next five years, a painful time for the entire family. For comfort and wisdom, Ihab turned to Islam and the Quran, and he became a Sufi mystic.

After the 2<sup>nd</sup> Intifada in 2002, Ihab attended a discussion between an Imam and a Rabbi, both of whom had lost children because of the violence. In 2006, Ihab helped to organize a conference of Muslims and Jews that was attended by 5000 Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews at Latrun on the road between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, the site of an historic battle in the War of Independence. Around that time, Ihab reconciled with his parents. In 2008, his family made pilgrimage to Mecca.

At the age of 35, Ihab met and fell madly in love with Ora, an Israeli Jewish woman. They married two days after they met, and he struggled with how to tell his parents. Because Jaffa is a small town and his family is well known, everyone knew that he had married but no one knew who was his bride.

Ihab and Ora decided to introduce her to the family without revealing that they were, in truth, married. He brought her home along with a group of Jewish and Palestinian Arab "friends," the first time Jews had ever set foot in the Balha home. Ihab's father told Ora and the other Jews how he hated and resented Jews who he believed had stolen so much from the Palestinians during the 1948 War. He did like Ora – a lot.

His parents kept asking Ihab why they had not yet met his bride and when that would happen. At last, when cousins came to visit from Holland, using them as a buffer, one of the cousins told his parents: "You have met Ihab's wife. She is there (pointing at Ora)!"

Ihab's father exploded: "You Jews have stolen everything from us, and now you steal from me my son!?"

Ora said, "I love your son."

Ora was soon pregnant with their first child, and she and Ihab decided that they wanted to raise their son with Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslim Arabs. They envisioned starting a nursery school but needed a building. Ihab's parents

volunteered their house. Today, the school has 200 children who come every day . They call the school "The Orchard Of Abraham's Children." Ora is the Director and Ihab is the Manager. Ihab's father visits the kids each day and is a loving "grandfather" to them all, Arab and Jew.

This story is remarkable in so many ways, most especially because it shows the transformation that can be experienced by enemies, and about what happens when we listen and seek to understand the "other." It's about learning the other's narrative, and how empathy and compassion are critical in the building of friendship, community and a shared society.

After Ihab shared his remarkable story, I said to him: "Ihab – You have experienced great pain!"

"Yes," he said, "but also great joy!"

