

One desert, two communities of women

Hagar Baram

Yitzhak Rabin signed, with Jordan's King Hussein, a treaty of peace with Jordan on 26 October 1994. It was only the second ratified peace treaty Israel signed with an Arab state. To the Israeli and Jordanian communities of the Arava—the wide valley connecting the Dead Sea with Eilat—the treaty held a promise of trade, tourism and cross-cultural cooperation. But this potential was left begging until a group of women from the Israeli Arava took it upon themselves to meet with their Jordanian counterparts and explore the arts and crafts that united them. The result? Regular meetings, a cooperative business venture and cross-border tourism.

Their story has special meaning for the Australian Jewish community because of the Arava Australia Partnership. Since 1995, Australia has partnered with the Central Arava Region through Partnership 2Gether (P2G), a program akin to a sister city relationship. Created by the Jewish Agency for Israel, P2G aims to connect communities in the Diaspora with regions in Israel through unique people-to-people activities.

In December 2018, five women from the Central Arava visited Jordan to look for partners for joint meetings on handicrafts. Most of us had never been to Jordan previously, despite living only a few hundred metres from the border. Jordanians seemed to us like distant and insurmountable riddles. We left the Arava with the hope of finding women who would agree to meet and talk to us.

In Jordan—particularly in the peripheral areas—the cooperative model is common among women. Groups of 10 to 15 women work together on clay, beads, botanical dyeing, mosaics and more.

We visited various cooperatives in an attempt to find potential partners. These encounters were both exciting and somewhat alarming. We were led into side rooms in remote villages, where we met with women covered from head to toe, women for whom these were their first ever encounters with Israeli women. It was very difficult to break the ice; both sides came with a great deal of apprehension and memories of war and hostility. But once the fabrics, thread and spools of wool were deployed and the handicrafts brought out, conversation began to flow, with each side admiring the other's skills. Both sides found that they had a great deal in common.

After this visit, a core group of five Jordanian and Israeli women was formed. These women served as ambassadors with a new message to the villages in Israel and in Jordan. They found additional women and artists with the courage to come and visit the other side of the border. Bless Your Hands was born.

Twenty Israeli and 20 Jordanian women subsequently participated in seminars on women's crafts. Despite a common language (aside from a small amount of English), miracles began to happen in the landscape of the desert wilderness. We worked in mixed groups: a Jordanian master weaver with a graduate of the Shenkar College of Design, a jeweller from Israel with a Jordanian creator of Muslim prayer necklaces, clay and indigo, graduates with academic training together with experts in traditional crafts. The groups touched upon the entire range of arts practiced by the women. The practice of ancient crafts and skills became a laboratory for new creations, in an electrifying atmosphere of artistic inspiration, working without language or borders.

In the Israeli Arava, there are artists who engage in wet felting, a craft that originated in Russia and the northern European countries. Wet felting is a minimalist technique that requires small amounts of wool, water and natural soap. The Jordanian women are well versed in the rich wool culture that hails from the East, and have

in-depth knowledge of various woollen crafts, which are considered female desert-craft, passed down the generations. However, while the Jordanian women are extremely skilled in spinning, weaving, knitting and wool processing, they were not familiar with the craft of felting.

They looked at this new craft and could not believe their eyes. Wool, which is a key element in their lives, had revealed a new face to them. The women explained that, in Jordan, wool is one of the most problematic causes of environmental pollution. Due to the substantial number of herds in Jordan, large amounts of excess wool are dumped in rivers, streets and open waterways at the end of the shearing season. The wool piles up on roadsides, pollutes rivers, blows into houses and agricultural irrigation ponds, and is a great source of annoyance to the residents. We understood that this excess wool is actually an available raw material which is abundant in Jordan, and that there is a real social and environmental need to find another use for it. From the conversations and brainstorming, the idea arose to create a joint product, one which begins production in Jordan and ends in Israel, which has passed through both Jordanian and Israeli hands and crosses geographical and internal borders, a product born of the raw materials of the desert: women, wool, plants, and living water.

The Jordanian women collect the wool from the surrounding rivers, clean it and then felt it into lengths of wool material of various sizes. The material is then sent to Israel, where Israeli women collect leaves, branches, pods and flowers from local willow trees, which they botanically print on the lengths of wool. Our guiding principle is to ensure that the products are made from the raw materials around us, without the use of chemicals, out of concern for the environment and due to the environmental challenges of our time. The result of the process is a beautiful mural, made of 100 per cent wild natural wool, each with a unique botanical print. An online store showcasing the jointly-produced prints, as well as

the additional projects in development by the initiative, has been established. The joint project was good, but not enough. We wanted to open up a road and a border crossing, and link the same ancient roads that once connected East and West. We have created tour packages for women from all over the world; five-day trips during which we meet with women in the Jordanian Arava, visit the local sites, cooperatives and various women's initiatives, are hosted in community kitchens and visit the homes of the village elders. The trip then crosses the border to visit the women of the Israeli Arava, hear the story of the Arava and learn the secrets of its establishment. One desert, two communities of women and the new bridge being built between them.

In the beginning it was difficult to find Jordanian women who would agree to meet with Israeli women, as there is much resistance to normalisation of relations with Israel, particularly in the remote rural communities. As time went on and the Jordanian women visited Israel and personal encounters between the women turned into friendships, as well as the hope of establishing a joint business, new foundations were created in both Israeli and Jordanian communities. More and more women began to join the meetings and the Jordanians who returned after being hosted in Israel admitted that everything they had heard or thought about Israel was different from what they saw: "I thought you were all soldiers with weapons", "I feel like someone pulled me out of a grave". They explained that in their villages, "Anyone who cooperates with Israel is called a traitor." "I am going to tell everyone how nice it is in Israel and what lovely, good women there are".

For the Israeli women, who live in a male-oriented agricultural region, the meeting with the Jordanians inspired other women's groups.

The Israeli–Jordanian border is defined as a quiet border, with few security incidents, but quiet is not always a blessing. For 25 years, very few joint projects have sprung up, and the people on

both sides, who are less than a ten-minute drive away from each other, had never met. In the meantime, mines, fears, alienation and disconnection have filled the void. Bless Your Hands is the first seed of a new opportunity in the Arava.

Working together, shoulder-to-shoulder, full of creative joy, solving difficulties within the artistic process, cooking together, hosting each other, telling stories of birth and death, stories about husbands, mothers and children. Without knowing Hebrew or Arabic, but with a sense that a strong bond of friendship has been forged in working together for our future and for the future of our children.

October 2019 marked 25 years since the historic peace agreement between Israel and Jordan was signed; no state ceremonies in either Israel or Jordan were held to mark the anniversary, but on that weekend we hosted a delegation of Jordanian women in the Israeli Arava. We sat together in a circle under an acacia tree, knowing that nothing official would mark the day, no peace ceremony between the two countries would take place, and yet there we were: sitting together, dreaming and working together on this anniversary. Peace in action. A legacy of Rabin.