

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

A Wellspring in the Desert:

Exploring a new model for intercultural peacebuilding in Israel-Palestine

By

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Abstract:

This research delves into a new model for P2P peacebuilding introduced by the non-profit *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*, “A Wellspring in the Desert”. *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* aims to build intercultural connections between Palestinian and Jewish university students by facilitating semester or year-long, one-on-one language learning partnerships. Using data from semi-structured interviews with Jewish program alumni and coordinators I hypothesize that *Ma'ayan Bamidbar's* particular structure for individual personal engagement, centered on language and learning, generates empathy in Jewish participants for their Palestinian peers. The impact of participating continues post participation as the program is integrated into the student's daily lives. Through personal relationships, *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* constructs a collective identity between university students focused on a belief in humanity and shared society. This collective identity is central to the national movement for shared society making *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* an effective catalyst for activism and social change.

Keywords: Arabic, Palestinian, learning, university, Jewish, peacebuilding, Hebrew, peer-mentorship, shared society, intercultural

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Introduction

The U.S. actively allocates hundreds of millions of dollars to organizations working to create a shared society for Israelis and Palestinians. Many of these organizational and programmatic efforts employ a people to people (P2P) method of intercultural peacebuilding action. P2P organizations are non-profit initiatives focused on creating “[a] a more peaceful reality for Palestinians and Israelis, defined by less hatred, tension, and violence, b) increased quality of life, and c) improved systems for interaction” (Rothbart et. al 2020). P2P peacebuilding organizations aim to cultivate these three tenets by establishing a controlled environment for cross-cultural engagement with a focus on deriving mutual practical benefit. By situating participants in a safe environment to learn and reflect, P2P peacebuilding organizations hope to create a shared society with mutual acknowledgement of the humanity of the other (USAID 2011). Some notable P2P peacebuilding organizations facilitate group tech trainings, hold seminars to teach sustainable agricultural practices, or lead therapeutic post-trauma processing circles. The mission to establish a shared society is grounded in theories of social change and collective identity. Classical social change theories specify that social movements grow through a burgeoning collective that share beliefs and motives (Taylor 1994, Klandermans & Weerd 2000, Ketelaars et. al 2014). In theory, if Jews and Palestinians can, on a micro-level, believe in the others’ right to live freely, they can align in a movement to advocate for a shared society.

Despite 30 years of intensive funding efforts to promote P2P peacebuilding in Israel-Palestine, there has been little to no progress in the creation of a shared society for which P2P peacebuilding aims. Today, within the legal boundaries of the state of Israel, Palestinians and Jews live in extreme segregation (Karayami 2007, Amara 2018, White 2012, Mendel 2021).

Israeli segregation permeates housing legal codes, youth groups, language usage, and the education system (Falah 1998, Pingel 2003, Dallashi 2018, Uhlmann 2021). Many Palestinian cities do not receive equitable funding for infrastructure from the Israeli government. Palestinian schools are underfunded relative to their Jewish counterparts. In the scope of Israeli society, the Arabic language has ever-diminishing value in the broader economy (Amara 2015, 2018, 2021, White 2012, Tannenbaum 2016, Halabi 2004). The current state of segregation between Jews and Palestinians in Israel suggests that prior P2P peacebuilding tactics have been ineffective at cultivating a long-term shared society.

Recent evaluations of P2P peacebuilding programs cite two major limitations to the work. Firstly, regardless of a program's intentions, the participants are not equal. The social inequality between Jews and Palestinians leads to innately asymmetrical relationships. The inter-participant asymmetry leads to Palestinian participants often feeling cornered, disenfranchised, and muted and Jewish participants often reacting hyper-defensively or dismissively. Secondly, many P2P peacebuilding programs fail to create a long-lasting impact due to the participants' "re-entry" into the extreme ethnoreligious segregation following the completion of the program. While participants from both sides may have empathy for the other group and be motivated to make changes in society immediately after completing the program, these personal impacts effectively dissipate following the return to segregated society (USAID 2011, Lazarus 2017, Rothbart et. al 2020).

This research will delve into a new model for P2P peacebuilding introduced by the non-profit organization *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*, "A Wellspring in the Desert," that cultivates inter-cultural connections between Palestinian and Jewish university students by facilitating semester- or year-long, one-on-one language learning partnerships. *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* operates on a

theory of peer education which supposes that students create more meaningful interpersonal relationships by teaching and learning from one another (Kim 2015, Parker 2020). This theory of education is complemented by the practical function of training Jews and Palestinians in their counterparts' mother tongues. Language holds particular weight on university campuses as the language rift on-campus has led to universities being socially segregated, students having inequitable learning outcomes, and even inter-group rioting (Uhlmann 2017, Golan-Agnon 2021). *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* engages with the two primary peacebuilding limitations of participant inequality and re-entry by not shying away from the asymmetry. Jewish and Palestinian students come to the program for different reasons. Yet, each student is enabled to be a teacher and a student— choosing their own curriculum and learning goals. *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* addresses the issue of re-entry by integrating the programming into the students' daily lives. Participants stay within their original communities throughout the program, neutralizing the adverse effects of re-entry by bringing the integrated learning model into segregated spaces. Additionally, the year-long experience in the program aims to help participants grow together in a shared learning environment contrasting a handful of prior initiatives which create concentrated week or two week long intensive inter-cultural experiences.

P2P peacebuilding in Israel-Palestine aims to cultivate long-term goals (Rothbart et. al 2020). Therefore, the effectiveness of one model of inter-cultural engagement versus another is difficult to assess. Yet, the overall lack of progress in this field over the past 30 years mandates trying new techniques and models for P2P programming (Allen et. al 2014). In this research, I engage with *Ma'ayan Bamidbar's* Jewish-Israeli alumni and current program coordinators through semi-structured interviewing to understand and give meaning to the experience of intercultural engagement through peer mentorship. By analyzing the best and worst practices

relayed by program alumni and insiders, I will answer the question of how peer mentorship and shared language learning impacts Jewish students' perceptions of their Palestinian peers. I hypothesize that by using individualized personal engagement tactics centered on language and learning, *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* constructs a collective identity between university students, helping Jewish students nurture empathy for their Palestinian peers. This collective identity bolsters the national movement for shared society making *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* an effective catalyst for activism and social change.

Literature Review

Sociolinguistic Context

Language is a functional representation of cultural meaning and value (Irvine & Gal 2000). In Israel, understanding how Arabic and Hebrew are taught and valued is key to analyzing structural inequalities (Pingel 2003, Amara 2015, Yitzhaki 2016, Shehadeh 2019, Mendel 2021). Currently, Hebrew is the sole national language of the country and is overwhelmingly used as the dominant medium for communication. Additionally, the vast majority of businesses, higher-education institutions, the health care system, and technological industries function predominantly in Hebrew. Yet, Arab-Palestinians represent 20% of the population and learn Arabic as a first language in school. As a result of this linguistic marginalization, numerous scholars suggest that Arabic holds minimal capacity to facilitate upward socio-economic mobility (Falah 1996, Halabi 2004, Tannenbaum 2016, Shehadeh 2019, Uhlmann 2021, Mendel 2021).

The stigmatization and erasure of Arabic in Israel is concurrent with the generations of Mizrahi Jews who disowned their Arabic heritage and language origins. Arabic was the mother

tongue for many Mizrahi Jews who immigrated or were resettled in Israel in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Yet, over the course of the following generations, parents would cease to teach their children Arabic in favor of the more socially and economically mainstream language, Hebrew (Tannenbaum & Yitzhaki 2016, Dalashi 2018, Shehadeh 2019). Currently, children of Mizrahi descent display higher levels of anti-Arabic sentiment than their Ashkenazi peers (Mendel 2020). Many 2nd and 3rd generation Mizrahi youth perceive Arabic as alienating to their fellow Jewish peers and see the language itself is “low-capital” meaning it lacks economic purpose or functionality (Dallashi 2018, Mendel 2020). Mizrahi Jews’ distancing from Arabic language and culture demonstrates not only the low standing that Arabic holds in Israeli society but how the existing hegemonic structures erase Arabic culture and heritage through diminishing the value and stigmatizing people who partake in the culture (Shehadeh 2019, Uhlmann 2021). The distancing of Jewish Israelis from the Arabic language underlies social segregation and is an obstacle to the creation of intercultural connections between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians who speak Arabic as a first language.

Over the past 73 years, Arabic learning has become minimal to non-existent in Jewish schools and formal, literary Arabic, *Fuscha*, is currently only offered as an elective for 7th-9th graders (Pingel 2003, Dallashi 2018, Uhlmann 2021). Even the Arabic Language itself is difficult to standardize, as *Fuscha*, is different from the localized dialects, *Ammiyah*, making Israeli efforts to teach spoken Arabic widely ineffective. Moreover, *Ammiyah* varies between geographical regions across the middle east making P2P *Ammiyah* teaching efforts with a standardized curriculum highly complex. For this reason, even when Israelis are able to learn Arabic through public education, they learn *Fuscha*, instead of *Ammiyah*. The diglossia form and regional variance of Arabic are roadblocks to learning Arabic for casual communication (Medel

2021, Uhlmann 2021). As a minimal number of Jewish-Israelis are proficient in spoken Arabic, (Uhlman 2017), an arm of the P2P peacebuilding movement aims to teach Jewish Israelis Arabic to facilitate inter-cultural engagement and interchange.

Yet, Israel is not a homogenous country; the North, South, Central and Jerusalem districts are highly culturally, legally, and linguistically variant among Palestinian communities, making a centralized program for helping Palestinians in universities very difficult to implement (Amara 2015, Shehadeh 2019, Uhlmann 2021, Lefkowitz 2004). The heterogeneity of Palestinians is evident in cultural and legal differences between the North and South, as well as their prior familiarity with Hebrew (Tannenbaum & Yitzhaki 2016). Notably, Palestinian students living in the North often have strong Hebrew speaking and writing skills compared to their Palestinian peers from East Jerusalem or the occupied territories who vary in their prior engagements with Hebrew. Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the occupied territories face further hindrance to their ability to thrive at university as they need to pass through military checkpoints dividing neighborhoods, villages, and cities to attend classes. Depending on the local or national political tension, Palestinians in the Jerusalem district may be barred from accessing their campuses (Golan-Agnon 2021). The diversity of social contexts in Israel-Palestine adds complexity to any attempt to build a shared society as different subgroups navigate society differently. *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* attempts to engage with the regional diversity in Israel-Palestine by focusing their program within single university campuses, localizing the student engagement to their own social contexts.

University Settings in Israel-Palestine

While there is potential for Israeli universities to be a place of intercultural exchange and a model for a future shared society, higher education institutions continue to reflect the social

segregation and ethno-religious domination which pervades the country (Lefkowitz 2004, Golan-Agnon 2021). Universities have classically served as incubators for progressive social movements by bringing together students from diverse backgrounds and offering opportunities to engage with new ideas (Van Dyke 1998, Crossley 2008). While this holds true for universities in Israel-Palestine, those universities are also strongholds of Hebrew domination and are highly socially segregated (Uhlmann 2017). While there are no official separations between Jews and Palestinians in universities, the surrounding segregation often leads to academic and social settings dividing the two groups apart. Moreover, courses are taught in Hebrew. Arab-Palestinian students are often under-prepared for this academic setting, as their prior education was primarily in Arabic (Yitzhaki 2016, Uhlmann 2017, Shehadeh 2019). This system structurally favors Jewish students, the majority of whom speak Hebrew as a first language (Uhlmann 2017, Golan-Agnon 2021). Higher education and University settings exemplify Israeli-Palestinian power asymmetries and support the Hebrew speech community's (Irvine & Gal 2000) domination of the social milieu.

Modern-day Israeli universities are primed to be centers of social movement activism. Historical patterns of inter-group alignment on Israeli campuses suggest a propensity for further shared activism. A comparative analysis of 1970s university student activism confirms that the linkage between prior campus activism positively impacts a university student body's propensity to mobilize around a current issue (Van Dyke 1998). This analysis is particularly relevant to understanding modern campus mobilization as the campus movement for shared society originated on Hebrew University's Jerusalem campus in the 1970s with the alignment of the Sons of the Village Palestinian national ground and the National Progressive Movement student group. This inter-alignment brought together the Palestinian nationalist movements with the

progressive Jewish movement using a shared language in protest of colonialist forms of Zionism (Rouhana & Sabbagh-Khoury 2018). While the movement was stifled in 1987 by the beginning of the 1st Intifada, its existence demonstrates the possibility of modern-day university campuses becoming incubators for progressive social movements to build a shared society.

Universities are often the first point of contact between Jewish and Palestinian young adults making campuses incubators for social movement activists and cultivators of collective identity. Classical Social Movement theorist Sidney Tarrow (1998), broached the idea that social movements develop from the broadening of “Dimensions of Opportunity.” This term refers to the necessary social context which proceeds the development of a contentious social movement or activism. A key aspect of this theory is that different actors have differing awareness of the issue as well as different levels of access to resources. The opening of an opportunity aligned with the conception of a collective identity between groups on the basis of empathy and mutual needs leads to the formulation of a social movement (Melucci 1988, Klandermans 2014). Based on the contextual segregation between Palestinian and Jewish students, the fact that they are positioned together to learn in university makes the campus a key focal point for creating a collective identity between students to join in contentious social movement activism.

P2P Peacebuilding and Peer Mentorship

Ma’ayan Bamidbar is categorized as a P2P peacebuilding program as it aims to integrate higher education by empowering Jewish and Palestinian students to create personal inter-cultural ties and gain tangible skills to aid future inter-cultural engagement. According to exit surveys cited on the *Ma’ayan Bamidbar* webpage, close to 90% of participants report that they created a new personal connection with their cross-cultural partner (Tzionei Derech 2022). Based on reports from major organization donors, *Maayan Bamidbar*’s work and mission are in sync with

concurrent P2P peacebuilding projects in Israel-Palestine (Interview with Philanthropic Israel Planning Director).

However, *Ma'ayan Bamidbar's* model of long-term peer-to-peer mentorship enables Palestinian students to take charge and frame how Arabic is taught resists the systemic “Hebraization of Arabic”. Historically, the dominant Israeli society has applied pressure to Arabic speakers to integrate Hebrew lingo and verbiage into their daily Arabic vernacular” (Amara 2015, Dallashi 2018, Mendel 2021). By positioning Palestinians as the Arabic teachers for their Jewish peers, this learning model resists the “Hebraization of Arabic” by allowing the Palestinian student to control the Arabic narrative.

Additionally, peer-to-peer mentorship positions Arab students to represent their own cultural experience, empowering them through self-recognition and disrupting the propagation of Arabic as a tool to “Know Your Enemy” (Talyor 1994, Shehadeh 2019). The “Know Your Enemy” narrative is a public education pedagogical framework implemented by the Ministry of Defense to encourage Jewish Israeli high schoolers to study Arabic for the purpose of serving in military intelligence units following high school. Reportedly, in the late 1980s, the social stigmatization around learning Arabic in high schools got so extreme that the military was having difficulty recruiting intelligence officers who had any knowledge of the language. In an effort to maintain regional military legitimacy, the Ministry of Defense successfully lobbied the Ministry of Education to allow them into schools to more directly recruit students to Arabic courses (Pingel 2003, Shehadeh 2019). This legislation demonized and polarized the use of Arabic in the Israeli education system (Uhmann 2021). By investing their time and effort in learning Arabic from a peer, the Jewish student internally undoes the “Know Your Enemy” narrative by building a connection with the Arab peer-teacher.

To remedy the aforementioned demonization, *Ma'ayan Bamidbar's* peer mentorship structure aims to foster Jewish-Arabic friendship while enhancing participants' academic achievements and other educational outcomes. *Ma'ayan Bamidbar's* program prompts Jewish students to learn Arabic from their peers and, in exchange Palestinian students get support in academic Hebrew. Ideally, this peer-to-peer mentoring structure cultivates personal and in-depth relationships between the two students (Parker 2020). The intimate dyadic relationship is intended to foster higher academic achievement and create friendships and connects networks (Kim 2015). Many participants get course credit from their participation in *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*, increasing the pragmatic appeal of the peer mentorship structure.

The creation of personal ties through peer mentorship which bridges ethnoreligious segregation, inculcates students to support human rights, priming them for social mobilization. Peer-mentorship in academics is proven to improve student knowledge of the topic and interest in the subject matter at a higher rate than classroom studies making the peer-mentorship model a key component of *Ma'ayan Bamidbar's* contribution to shared society and inter-cultural empathy. In broad assessment of 65 peer-mentorship studies, Cohen (et. al) concluded that peer mentorship positively impacts both the teacher and the student's knowledge of and interest in the subject matter (Cohen et.al 1982). The latter of these two findings is essential to *Ma'ayan Bamidbar's* theory of education and shared society as the program leverages the peer mentorship model to increase the student's interest in engaging inter-culturally following participation in the program. With language learning, the takeaways are twofold as the subject matter is also integrated into cultural engagement and empathy (Uhlmann 2021).

Yet, as *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* is a new P2P peacebuilding program, it is necessary to test the idealistic structure and exit survey insights for the same limitations as antecedent studies of

P2P initiatives. This research will engage with the two priorly cited limitations by investigating Jewish program alumni to understand how they reflect on their experience in *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*. Additionally, I interviewed a number of current and former program coordinators and staff to get a nuanced perspective on the inner working of the program. I conclude that *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* successfully creates a framework for personal inter-cultural interactions which can serve to humanize and personalize the Jewish participants' understanding of Palestinians. Through peer-to-peer mentorship *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* inspires Jewish university students to approach Palestinian issues with empathy.

Research Design

I used semi-structured interviews to gather stories and reflections from a range of program alumni, coordinators, and managers to delve into how Jewish university students experienced and were impacted by participating in *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*. I relied on a network of coordinators and managers to circulate my recruitment materials to alumni WhatsApp groups and email lists. My primary point of contact in *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* was a current Manager who for the sake of anonymity we will call Shira. Shira and I met every few weeks throughout the first stages of this project to define the best way to engage with the diverse individuals associated with *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*. Shira served as the primary gatekeeper for this data collection period, disseminating English and Hebrew recruitment material to program coordinators to send to the program's alumni. While Shira, aided my recruitment process, all interviewees were informed that their testimonies would be kept anonymously and that the study was being conducted externally from *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*. I also interviewed Shira to understand her personal experience as she is not only the current manager but also participated as a student and coordinator. I utilized a mix of snowball sampling and intentional sampling to target students

from particular regional contexts to participate in the study. By gathering participants from a variety of regional contexts, I was able to engage with a broad extent of student experiences and perspectives.

Semi-structured interviewing is the ideal methodology for this research as it enables the exploration of the meaning encoded in the alumni's experiences of peer mentorship and intercultural engagement. I interviewed alumni from the 2020-2021 academic year, focusing the interviews on story-telling and participant reflection to give meaning to their experience of participating in *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*. By engaging with alumni, I accounted for the aforementioned re-entry limitation by guiding interviewees to reflect on how their perception of their peers had changed since participating in *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*.

There are two particular major events, the Covid-19 pandemic and national rioting which led to a war in Gaza in May of 2021, that greatly impacted these alumni's experience of the program and served as benchmarks for understanding the progression of the interviewee's experience throughout the year. I employed these two themes to lead participants through reflections on how their experience with peer mentorship changed while participating and as an alumnus. A sample of the interview guide I used to ground my interviewing methods is provided in the appendix

Data

In order to understand the process that Jewish Israeli university students who participate in *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* experience, I conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with a mix of program alumni from the 2020-2021 academic year (N = 15), current or prior program coordinators (N = 5), the current and former managers of the program (N = 2), and a funding

manager from an American Jewish philanthropist group which will remain anonymous. All interviews were conducted over zoom. Each interview lasted between 40-90 minutes. I also reviewed general participant bio data to glean general demographics of university enrollment distribution, average age, and gender. The participants' university, gender, hometown, and region within which they study is listed in the appendix. This information was gathered from interviews and informs the use of interviewee narratives. All participant names used in this study are pseudonyms created by me to ensure anonymity.

Organizational Structure and Participant Roles

Ma'ayan Bamidbar's organizational hierarchy is composed as such; there is one manager, Shira, who organizes a small group of regional coordinators. The regional coordinators and campus coordinators work together to organize the learning materials and match participants in pairs. Campus coordinators, who are the direct arm for interacting with participants, organize group meetings throughout the semester and respond to any individual needs within the curriculum. Almost all of the coordinators and managers are currently enrolled in university and almost all of them were once participants themselves. By interviewing interlocutors at different positions in this chain of command, I was able to engage with the individual and the organization' mechanisms constructing the program experience.

Positionality

The impetus for only interviewing and focusing on Jewish-Israeli participants for this research was developed from a personal reflection on my own research capacity and respect for the intricacies of Palestinian culture and identity. As I am Jewish and have lived in Israel among Jewish -Israeli university students, my ability to tune into their experiences was more reliable

than if I were to try to engage with Palestinian alumni from *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*. While I can speak conversational Hebrew, I have no background in Arabic, limiting the range of students who I would be able to interview to just English speakers. This sampling flaw would distort my interviewee pool and filter the narrative through an English-centric bias. Instead, I chose to hone in on solely the Jewish-Israeli experience of the program and garner how learning with a Palestinian peer affected the Jewish-Israelis students' ideological framework for understanding the current social milieu. While the Jewish students' experiences are only a portion of the larger social phenomenon of intercultural peer mentorship, they are privileged potential contributors to a shared society making understanding their experiences interesting in the conversation regarding the effectiveness of P2P peacebuilding

The same dynamic which restricts my capacity to interview Palestinian participants allowed me to engage more deeply with the Jewish-Israeli participants. Throughout the interviews, I utilized a range of cultural and regional focal points to demonstrate to the interviewee that I had an in-depth and informed grasp of local and regional politics. This interview technique and cultural competency allowed me to access more nuanced and intimate interviewee narratives.¹ Yet, regardless of cultural knowledge, I am still not an Israeli. When my

¹ Naming Choices and Terminology: The labels and names that people in Israel-Palestine use are very controversial and loaded with implications. Even calling the region "Israel-Palestine" is a political choice. I chose to use this moniker as it is inclusive of a variety of narratives and is used by other peacebuilding organizations and researchers (Rothbart et. al. 2020, Lazarus 2017). Additionally, I chose to call the non-Jewish students, Palestinians and not Arab-Israelis. The official name used by *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* to refer to Palestinian students is "Arab," intended to be inclusive of students who do not identify as Palestinian but as Druze, Bedouin, or Arab-Israeli. Yet, in conversation with prior managers and coordinators who no longer work at *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*, using the term Palestinian feels most suitable to give legitimacy to the students' identities who I was not able to include in this study as well as allude to the ongoing oppression of the Palestinian people. Furthermore, the label "Palestinian" came up in almost every interview making its relevance noteworthy and impactful. To be inclusive of the students who may not identify as Palestinian, I made sure to only refer to Jewish-Israeli students as such and not as simply Israeli as the clarification that they are *Jewish-Israelis* creates space for the existence of non-Jewish Israeli identities.

understanding of a phrase or concept fell short, I used an in-interview form of “Member checking” (Birt et. al 2016) to clarify the meaning or value of an aspect of their testimony. This process also served to confirm the accuracy of my translations of Hebrew phrases into English.

Data Processing

After transcribing and translating parts of the interviews into English, I analyzed the data in MAXQDA using an open coding scheme along with In-Vivo coding, Attribute coding, Evaluation coding, and Values coding.² Each of these thematic techniques is constructed to pinpoint different aspects of the interviewee narrative to represent the perceptions, beliefs, and values that the interviewees ascribe to their experiences. This qualitative coding scheme cultivates a systematically reproducible reading of the interviews and the meanings that the interviewees give experiences.

Analysis

Early Years

“Why didn't you teach me Arabic?”

-Adina, Participant Alumni, Shenkar College

Many of the participants in *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* grew up in homogenously Jewish communities with varying levels of awareness for the missing representation of Palestinians in their day-to-day lives. This awareness, or lack thereof, was a precursor to many of the participants' joining *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* as their first chance to engage in dialogue, learning, or partnership with a Palestinian. Growing up in Northern Tel Aviv, Adina had little to no

²See: Saldaña “The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers: Second Edition”, Sage Publications, (2013)

encounters with Palestinians before going to college. The daughter of an Iranian Jewish mother and “Sabra”³ father, Adina used to beg her parents to teach her Farsi or Arabic. To her dismay her parents never taught her either language, creating a rift between her and her Mizrahi family. When she looked for language learning in school, Adina’s only option aside from the standard Hebrew and English curriculum, was French. By 12th grade, Adina had developed a sense that a part of her education was missing. In a course on government and citizenship, she recalls drawing comparisons between the current state of Palestinian resistance to the Israeli government with how the early Zionists resisted the British mandate through acts of terrorism. Adina’s heritage and disposition led her to question the surrounding infrastructure and education system which propagated a narrative of an exclusively Jewish state and show empathy to the supposedly oppositional narrative. In reflecting on the waves of violence which have routed Israel-Palestine since the 1st intifada in the 1980s; Adina chose to empathize “they use [terrorism] because they wanted to achieve... [a] country they wanted to achieve (a) place that they believe [was] owed to them” (Adina). Yet, regardless of her awareness of the Palestinians plight for nationhood, Adina did not come into contact with any Palestinians until attending Shenkar College just outside of Tel Aviv.

At Shenkar College, Adina finally had the chance to learn alongside Palestinians and searched for a structured opportunity to engage in intercultural learning. While she felt curious and comfortable to ask the two Muslim men in her course questions about their faith, she observed a stark separation between these two students and the rest of her peers. This division perplexed her. In search of diverse learning opportunities, Adina found *Ma’ayan Bamidbar*; “it sounded very nice to teach, not to teach because... they know Hebrew, but to [to join] to be a

³ Jews born in Israel

part of his, ah not journey but... just to practice a language. So, it sounds very nice. And I very I wanted to, to learn basic, basic words basic sentences” (Adina). Joining *Ma’ayan Bamidbar* gave Adina a structure, a mission, and the opportunity to get to know a peer who Adina observed as being socially ostracized. Her ambition for Arabic learning was rather straightforward, getting an initiation into a language which could familiarize her with Mizrahi cultural tradition. Adina’s motivation for joining *Ma’ayan Bamidbar* is representative of many of the interviewee’s reasons for joining the program, a mix of intercultural engagement, helping a peer on their academic path, and the chance to learn Arabic from a native speaker.

The motivation to learn Arabic from a native speaker was relevant to almost all of my interlocutors. *Ma’ayan Bamidbar* offered them this opportunity. The Jewish separation of Arabic language from Palestinian culture is conversely evident from an interlocutor who had a positive experience learning Arabic in High school, describing his teacher as overly eccentric and somewhat outrageous.

Jacob is an Ashkenazi Jew in his mid-20s studying social sciences at Ben Gurion University. He grew up in a homogenously Ashkenazi Jewish city along the Green Line, north of Jerusalem. While overall he had a negative experience with *Ma’ayan Bamidbar*, his positive experience of learning Arabic in high school informs our understanding of Adina’s narrative by representing what happens when Arabic is taught effectively;

My favorite teacher ever was my, the second Arabic teacher (I) had. And it was because she was a little bit nuts, like... in a fun way... She would play like, like Lebanese music, and like dance in the classroom... And, yeah, I learned a ton. I was pretty good at it.

Throughout high school and the thing... that you get from the, from the books, and from the attitude...you [are] really supposed to learn it in order to get to intelligence, like, are

you familiar with A 200? that's the unit that... specializes in intelligence. And there's like a specific unit in... where all, the Arabic majors go, and you're supposed to be like a listener... So you really get pushed to that direction. There's sometimes there'll be soldiers like coming into the classroom, they sort of do like a fun class, but it would very much be... this is what you do when you get over to the military and it's gonna be so much fun'

-Jacob

Jacob is exemplary of how even when Arabic learning in high schools is engaging and representative of local communities, military involvement tarnishes the learning by shaping the class as preparation for becoming an intelligence officer in the Israeli Defense Force. Jacob's experience of high school Arabic learning is the essence of the "Know Your Enemy" doctrine. This dynamic renders high school Arabic learning widely ineffective to prepare Jewish students to be able to empathize with their Palestinian peers upon entering university as it positions the functionality of the language as a tool for military service. Jacob's testimony exemplified the estrangement of Arabic learning from relating to his peers, expressing minimal empathy for his peers who were inordinately policed for protesting against the war in Gaza during May of 2021. Additionally, military involvement in high school Arabic courses transforms Arabic from intercultural collaboration to a tool for national defense. Between Adina and Jacob's accounts of high school Arabic learning, or the lack thereof, we can derive a general understanding of overall absence of contact and familiarity that Jewish-Israeli young adults have with Palestinian people, culture, and language.

University Divisions

"A transparent line"

-Maor, Participant Coordinator, Hebrew University

When Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians are integrated in universities, there are intense social and practical divisions which implicate the universities in the broader social segregation. Hebrew University holds a particularly interesting position in the range of Israeli university settings as many of the Palestinian students come from East Jerusalem.⁴ The divisions between Jewish and Palestinian students at Hebrew University are often even broader than other institutions due to limited access to Hebrew language education that Palestinian students have before attending university. Additionally, prior curricular differences stifle intercultural exchange or connection. Intercultural engagement at Hebrew University is extremely complex and relationships are precarious. To delve into the charged environment, we need an expert perspective.

Maor is a currently a graduate student studying applied social sciences and law at Hebrew University on the Mount Scopus Campus. Maor grew up in a wealthy, all Jewish, predominantly Ashkenazi, suburb of Tel Aviv. Maor was in an intelligence unit in the military which built a linguistic foundation in formal, written Arabic, *fuscha*. He then went on to work at, “a youth prison in Israel, we only have one here, which 70% of the population of inmates in there are Arab” (Maor). This role instilled in him the ambition to learn Arabic in order to better engage with the imprisoned youth. When he decided to enroll in university, he had a distinct desire to get involved in social action, help Palestinians in need, and improve his conversational Arabic; “when I arrived here, I heard of this project, and I really wanted to continue improving in spoken

⁴ The demographic make up of the Hebrew University campus was assessed and corroborated by Israel News articles (Haaretz, Hasson, 2019), Interviewees, and Golan Agnon, 2022.

Arabic” (Maor). For Maor, *Ma’ayan Bamidbar* was simply an opportunity to continue enhancing language capabilities in an alternative context.

To frame Maor’s commentary on *Ma’ayan Bamidbar*, is it necessary to contextualize where he studies. Professor Golan-Agnon, a law professor at the Mount Scopus campus, describes the campus as a fortress and settlement in East Jerusalem. Golan-Agnon connects the construction of the Mount Scopus campus with Israel’s “punishment for the other side, declaration of ownership, acts of protest, or part of a strategic view based primarily on land acquisition and Judaisation of the area” (Golan-Agnon 2021). Hebrew University’s Mount Scopus campus exists as not only a political statement but as a political tool to separate Palestinians in East Jerusalem from the Old City of Jerusalem. It is undoubtedly one of the most politically charged academic spaces in Israel-Palestine, with many Palestinian students commuting from highly controversial neighborhoods and territories.

Maor originally joined *Ma’ayan Bamidbar* as a participant, enthusiastic to enhance and inform his years of learning Arabic from a Jewish standpoint with language exchange with a Palestinian peer. To Maor’s dismay, he felt that his partner was similarly enthused, only participating in the program to fulfill credit requirements. While Maor was discouraged by his experience in peer mentorship, he believed in the mission of the project and continued on to be a project coordinator. He expressed the contextual importance of *Ma’ayan Bamidbar* in a passionate reflection;

This project is about allowing Jewish and Arab students here to meet because we go to the same university. But there's a transparent line between those two groups, which is not to be past like you know, the places where Palestinian students sit and you would never approach and there... There is nothing, too, that connects those two groups. It’s very

clear Palestinian students go with Palestinian students and Jewish students go with Jewish students. And a lot of it is because of language”

- *Maor*

The contextual framing of the Mount Scopus Campus politicizes the social divisions as extensions of the broader segregation in Israel-Palestine, there are minimal prior inter-group connections. Maor partially attributes the separation between students to a lack of means for casual interaction.

The invisible line permeates academic settings and even enters the classroom. Many interlocutors recounted students sitting by ethnoreligious group in class. Jacob at Ben Gurion University lends us a view of the academic implications of the social divisions. Describing a sociology lecture, Jacob emphasized the lack of Palestinian voices in the social discourse.

Jacob: we pretty much don't like do anything together. There's this girl to [Zara], which we're talking like once or twice. But other than that, like we don't really interact, like we would sit in class talk about, say the Israeli Palestinian conflict with like, what are essentially Palestinians in the class that they would feel to like embarrassed or like, I don't know, to, I can only think about why they wouldn't participate, because that's what would happen. And the like the lecturer would like, point that out, like “we are essentially talking about people with while they're in class and they can respond, but they choose not to. And so I'm not going to make them talk. But people, please note this”...

Lev: Was there any... ever a conversation where, like, maybe Arab Palestinian or Bedouin students did speak up?

Jacob: See, I'm trying to remember... I don't even remember them, like opening their [mouths], essentially, like, they're pretty much sit in silence, and they copy from whatever the lecturer is saying...

Jacob was acutely aware that his Palestinian classmates' voices were being silenced but could not truly understand why they would not or could not participate. While he had engaged in a few minor interactions with one Palestinian classmate, the interaction fell short of establishing a perspective or narrative to understand why his classmates choose to not engage in class conversation regarding social issues which directly pertained to their lives. His hypothesis that maybe his classmates were too embarrassed to participate evokes his distinct lack of insight for understanding their position. Jacob's lack of insight or empathy for his silenced peers, as well as placing the blame on the Palestinian students for the clear structural inequality in the classroom further emphasizes the complete disconnect between Jewish students in understanding the complex situations their Palestinians peers navigate in Israeli academic contexts.

These descriptions of Hebrew University and Ben Gurion University demonstrate that there is a deficiency of structured opportunities for Jewish students to engage with Palestinian students socially or academically on campus. For almost all of my interlocutors, *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* offered a structure to learn, support, and get to know a Palestinian peer over the course of an academic year. While the individual experiences ranged from falsifying progress reports for the project's course credits, to becoming best friends who discuss anything from social life to politics, it is certain that *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* provides the opportunity for intercultural engagement in an otherwise socially and academically segregated environment.

Popping the Homogenous Bubble

“The main reason I decided to go on this project, because I didn't feel that exposed to a large part of our population, which didn't feel right.”

-Yaela, Participant Alumni, Ben Gurion University

Many interlocutors wanted to learn more about their Palestinian peers' lives and culture after becoming aware of social segregation between ethnoreligious groups. While language is the medium for learning and mentorship, many Jewish interlocutors joined *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* in search of cultural learning and to expand their perceptions of their Palestinian peers. *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* provided a safe setting for participants to break out of their prior social networks and connect.

Yaela is an Ashkenazi Jew from the central district of Israel. She grew up without any direct contact with Palestinians. While she did study Arabic in high school, she lacked perspective to understand the cultural significance of the language;

my teacher was always talking about the Arab population in Israel and in Jerusalem and things like that. And I was like, I've been to Jerusalem like three times with my class, nothing more, and I don't hear [Arabic] and I'm not used to it. Later on. I made friends who do live in these places... they're used to [Arabic]. So they have they've had much more exposure... And I realized that I started to pay attention to that.

-Yaela

Due to extreme residential segregation, Yaela had minimal contact with Palestinians growing up. It was not until after leaving her localized homogenous bubble that she realized the extent to which Palestinian culture and Arabic language pervaded Israeli society. Yaela, along with the

majority of my interlocutors, came to understand that Arabic could be a tool for intercultural learning and connection.

When Yaela joined the army, she was assigned to an intelligence unit which led her to intensive Arabic language training and eventual usage in the field. This experience tied together the social and militarized conceptions of Arabic speaking and problematized Arabic as the language of the enemy. Upon leaving the military, Yaela enrolled at Ben Gurion University, studying biology, and quickly realized that she lacked knowledge about Palestinian culture or her Palestinian peers. As Yaela succinctly expressed “I decided to go on this project, because I didn't feel that exposed to a large part of our population, which didn't feel right”. Yaela's discomfort with the lack of intercultural interaction due to geographical segregation the led her to *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*, where she was paired up with a charismatic classmate, Max. Yaela and Max quickly became friends over “some very disgusting things in math. And we bonded in and he was one of my first friends in in the [degree]”. Participating in *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*, helped Yaela deviate from the social academic norm and connect with a Palestinian peer. Yaela and Max went beyond language learning and became study partners leading to them spending increased time together and becoming close friends, meeting each other's roommates, families, and continuing to meet in a social context following completion of the program.

Interlocutors had a keen understanding of the cultural implications of learning Arabic. Many of them came to *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* specifically to learn more about Palestinian or Muslim culture from a personal standpoint. *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* offered them an opportunity to invest time and energy in learning about their Palestinian peers' culture.

Mentorship becoming friendship

“We... became good friends. Yeah, like, beyond the fact that she's Muslim. And I'm Jewish”

-Shelly, Participant Alumni, Hebrew University

Participating in *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* leads to a wide variety of outcomes, one of which is having new intercultural connections and friendships with otherwise disconnected peers. Shelly grew up in a small agricultural village North East of Tel Aviv. Early on, she began to wonder why there was no contact between her village and the neighboring Palestinian village. Her interests in venturing to the other village were stymied by her parents who claimed there were “security issues” (Shelly) which prevented inter-village exchange.

While serving in the military from the age of 18-20, Shelly worked as a counselor at a boarding school for children with criminal records. This assignment brought her into contact with a diverse set of teens, ranging in religious background from Muslim, Druze, Jewish, to Christian. Yet, Shelly was in the role of a superior, far from engaging on equal footing supervisor and diminishing her capacity for cultural learning. Nonetheless, this experience strengthened Shelly’s desire to learn Arabic as she was readily exposed to the diversities of people inhabiting Israel and saw firsthand the importance of having conversational language proficiency as a tool for relating to people from different ethnoreligious groups.

Upon arriving at the Hebrew university campus, Shelly saw the same social segregation that Maor recounted. She felt uncomfortable breaking the invisible boundaries but felt a desire to meet her Palestinian peers as they shared physical spaces but did not directly interact. At the beginning of her 2nd year, studying international relations, Shelly enrolled in *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*. The first group orientation meeting was held over zoom due to the nationwide lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Shelly was paired with Aisha, a Muslim student from East Jerusalem,

and they scheduled a separate time to begin the one-on-one tutoring. While Zoom tainted their first interactions with impersonal distancing, Shelly and Aisha quickly clicked:

We met on Zoom. And it was like a bit bleak. Like uncomfortable. But... she's so so nice... she's... really enthusiastic about the process... and I... can say that about myself as well. So, it just we... just hit it off. I don't know like why. But yeah, I really [wanted] to learn Arabic. So, I think um she found it like very she really liked it. And she really [loved] teaching me. And she like she always pushes me because it's really... it's uncomfortable speaking a language that you don't know like fully yet, it's very embarrassing. And she pushes me to do it.

-*Shelly*

Shelly describes how Zoom and the Covid-19 Pandemic altered her early interactions with her partner.⁵ Nonetheless, Shelly expressed that She and Aisha hit it off. Shelly perceived that Aisha took great pleasure in teaching and familiarizing Shelly with Arabic and Muslim culture while Shelly helped Aisha revise her writing with academic vernacular. Through this interchange, Shelly and Aisha became close friends and lessons became conversations about familial tradition and religious practice. Aisha decided a good way for Shelly to learn Arabic would be for Shelly to hang out with her friends on-campus, thus beginning to break down the invisible barriers. Through these interactions and blossoming friendship, Aisha and other Muslim students on campus became humanized and individualized to Shelly. Labels which were stigmatized in her youth became reimagined in friendships, identities, and rich cultural practice.

⁵ Unsurprisingly, every interlocutor who participated in *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* during the national Covid-19 lockdowns referenced online meetings as a barrier to cultivating personal relationships and making the process of not just *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* but school in general burdensome.

In May of 2021, political tension began to rise and riots began breaking out in Jerusalem. Shelly and Aisha did not argue or feud over political or ideological differences. Instead, they regularly checked in with each other to make sure they and their families were safe:

We didn't talk like, "what do you feel like", stuff like that, but we really made sure that we are safe. So, every time she would ask me, "how are you? How is your family? Are you safe?" And I asked her "how are your family safe?" Like, we make sure that we are safe.... Because I really don't care what she thinks. I really want to like make sure that her family is safe. And [the] same for me. Like she always [wants] to make sure that everything's okay with me... because like, I assume sometimes we have differences but like, what does it help?...

-Shelly

In a period of intense violence, Shelly was more concerned for Aisha's safety than wanting to express anger or frustration at the ongoing terror. Shelly finishes with an expression of hopelessness, "what does it help?" Many interlocutors expressed the sentiment that sharing broad ideological feelings about the immediate ongoing violence in Israel-Palestine was useless and divisive. The interlocutors who did recount engaging in such a discourse, shared that it led to divisions and breaking of friendships. While these interlocutors recount of caring for their partners safety and avoiding talking about the political situation may have been met with resentment from their Palestinian partner, the fact that the Jewish Israeli university student even displays empathy and worry for their Palestinian peer demonstrates the value of structured learning opportunities for integrating university campuses.

Yet, many interlocutors' hopelessness associated with the seemingly insurmountable political conflict is augmented by a belief in grassroots activism and the importance of P2P

engagement to build personal connections between groups. Shelly expressed *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*'s mission from a personal standpoint, reflecting on how her relationship with Aisha deconstructed her prior stigmatization of Palestinians;

When you see there's a person in front of you. It makes everything like in a perspective, like, it makes everything [seem] different. When you see there [are] like human beings, a very nice human being in front of you. And the fact that I know more about her life and her struggles and she knows about [me] and my struggles, it's, it's kind of like bringing us together. And I think it will change the way we look at things forever

-Shelly

Shelly's reflections demonstrate that getting to know Aisha humanized Palestinian communities. Additionally, the mutual interchange vitalized an empathic connection, tuning her into Aisha's needs and struggles. Participating in *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* gave Shelly a framework to meet and learn from a Palestinian peer. This interaction altered the social landscape around her and led to her meeting and becoming friends with many Palestinian students. Shelly maintained connection with Aisha after completing the program and their friendship continues to grow.

While Shelly may have had an idealistic experience of P2P engagement, she is very conscious of the immense complexity and precarity of the Israel-Palestine peacebuilding movement.

It's really hard because it's really complicated. Yeah, such a complicated topic. Um, there's so much to do I swear there's so much to do there like everything every aspect I think there's something to do. Even the educational system I really, I really think it was good to combine like Muslim and Jewish kids like why not like why is it such a problem or give more like educational like programs... we're not supposed to be scared of them.

They're human beings... like not all men want to kill and I wish [that] like the Arab,... will not be [afraid] of us, they can look at us, like I wish it was like, just a normal environment. But such a complex thing. So- so much to do.

-*Shelly*

While Shelly is discouraged by the complex layers of social and political inequity which lead to extreme intercultural fear and animosity, she also has hope for the future of Israel-Palestine, emphasizing that “we are not supposed to be scared”, a sentiment that the status quo is unnatural. Shelly articulates that the artificial demonization of the other is faulty. Moreover, she sees the potential for education to be integrated, thus causing the divided groups to learn together and thus learn to live together. This reflection and Shelly’s hope for the future of the Israeli education system mirror her own experience. From growing up separated to experiencing intense stigma and fear of interaction, to learning with and from a Palestinian, to becoming close friends with her partner, Shelly underwent an intense ideological shift. *Ma’ayan Bamidbar* is the actualized microcosm of Shelly’s dream for Israel-Palestine.

Shelly’s experience and ongoing close friendship with Aisha, as well as her introduction into social interactions with other Palestinian peers evokes Melucci’s (1988) theory of collective identity and emotional recognition. Shelly learned about and legitimized Aisha’s “struggles,” humanizing Aisha and helping Shelly cultivate an awareness for and sensitivity to the hardships that Palestinians face. Identifying with a collective and the struggles that the collective experiences, primes an individual for social mobilization for political social movements.

While many of the interlocutors did not experience the same profound transition as Shelly, half of the alumni I interviewed claimed to have a close connection with their partner, evident in having highly personal conversations and/or still being in touch following completion

of the program. The majority who did not show signs of close connections had casually positive interactions with their partner, evident in descriptions of casually positive lessons with their partner and a feeling of fulfillment upon completing the program. *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* is successful in creating a learning space for Jews to begin empathizing with the struggles of Palestinians. Through empathy, Jewish participants can conceptualize an inclusive collective identity which primes them to contribute to social action and advocate for a shared society and Palestinian rights.

Angry Silences

I had trust issues, like how can I be friend [to] her after this?

-Doron, Participant Alumni, Ben Gurion University

The war in May of 2021 between Israel and Hamas, along with the surrounding riots and violence, tremendously impacted student relationships in *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*, disrupting casual friendships and creating ideological obstacles between partners. Some participants simply did not talk to their partner during this period. Social media played an important role at this time, dehumanizing interactions and creating rifts between partners.

To understand how an extreme series of events impacted *Ma'ayan Bamidbar's* social processes, I want to focus on a series of interactions which occurred during this harrowing period in a particular campus setting. At Ben Gurion University in the major southern city of Beer Sheva, there were a series of student demonstrations and protests from both Palestinian students as well as counter protests by Jewish Zionist students. Jacob recounted watching these protests occur and even seeing stones being thrown by the Jewish students at observers and other

protestors. Police quickly intervened, disproportionately focusing on the free-Palestine demonstration, and dispersing the protestors. Ben Gurion University's campus was intensely politically charged in May of 2021 and the following months.

“How can I be a friend to her after this?” Doron was one of my interlocutors from Ben Gurion University. Doron bonded with his partner in *Ma'ayan Bamibdar* over the course of the year only to have a rift created between them when the campus became heavily politicized last May. Doron's “trust issues” developed after his partner posted a comparison of the current situation to the holocaust on social media. When Doron came across his partner's post, he reached out to her to understand more about her opinion and to express his own feelings about the issue. While they were able to meet and talk civilly, the war and subsequent depersonalized discourse created an unbridgeable rift between Doron and his partner. When students were pushed to the extremes in political allegiance, it was rarely possible to overcome ideological differences and retain a close connection.

Contrastingly, Yaela had engaged in political conversations with Max throughout the year, leading to the war in May not causing a major rift, but rather accentuating the fact they had unbridgeable ideological differences. Yaela experienced an added layer of complexity due to her controversial and confidential experience in the army. While they still maintained a friendship following the completion of *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*, Yaela expressed that she holds herself back, not fully engaging with Max due to their contrasting opinions on the national political situation. “I try to hide the fact that I'm as proud to be Jewish and Israeli [when] I am [with] him because it does cause fights. Or laughs [not] fights, but like, angry silences?” (Yaela). Yaela's pessimistic avoidance and discouraging relationship with Max is caused by terrible national ethnoreligious relations. This dynamic represents one of the major limitations of *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*. While

participants can foster mutually beneficial relationships, there is still a major gap between grassroots activism and nationally scaled progress. For students like Yaela and Doron, who are open to intercultural engagement and equality, conflicts like the war in May of 2021 or the recent upswing of terrorist attacks in 2022 destroy any chance of political exchange between groups.

Yet, even though these students felt that their relationships with their partners was greatly hindered through political or ideological divisions, the fact that the relationships even existed is a testament to *Ma'ayan Bamidbar's* capacity to create a structure for interactions between Jewish and Palestinian students which continue to exist after the end of the program. As one interlocutor reflected on the process of peacebuilding;

You hope... it [starts] in small steps, I think that is peace that you're talking about is like beginning with us this small citizen to small people here. And exactly those connections that I made with those friends, you know, everyone has his own agenda and his own political belief. And yes, we not always agree. And sometimes, like I even thought to myself, 'Oh my God, that's what she thinks, like, why do I need a friend like that? And then I said, No, there is more than that. There is a reason why she is my friend.' And I think [that] understanding it may be one... process to peace.

-Sharon, Participant Alumni, Levinski college

This belief in the power of grassroots activism and the long-term power of person-to-person connections was present in nearly every conversation I held with anyone associated with *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*. Sharon developed these feelings through having personal connections with her Palestinian peers. While ideological or political rifts still remain, the opportunity to meet for peer mentorship created a framework to personalize her perception of her Palestinian peers. *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* creates opportunities for Jewish students to become engaged with people to

people encounters, gain empathy for their peers, and instill a conviction in the necessity of inter-cultural engagement in the process of creating a shared society.

Asymmetry

The asymmetrical nature of Jewish and Palestinian partnerships hinders many P2P peacebuilding initiatives. The fact that Jews and Palestinians come to *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* from immensely different environments is a precarious dynamic which the program's management traverses cautiously. The overall doctrine of the program is written to be distinctly apolitical in group contexts, which to Maor's frustration, felt like a whitewashing of Palestinian identity and a silencing of the Palestinian struggle. Yet, the managers expressed that they navigate this dynamic with extreme care and precision. Through interviews with the current manager, Shira, and the founder and prior manager, Golda, it is clear that the managers want to create spaces for the students to have political conversations within the peer mentorship structure. Underlying the program's framework is the belief that language and culture are innately political, and that learning in an integrated context is a political act as it challenges the status quo of segregation. Participants are encouraged to learn and practice language skills using narratives from their own lives, along with contemporary materials from newspapers and current media. This pedagogy helps students learn language through culture, makes the partnership personal, humanizes, and proactively generates empathy. Palestinian students are also given the reigns over teaching Arabic, allowing them to control the narrative and process for themselves. Using a personalized curriculum, *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* integrates ethnic identity into language learning generating an innately political learning environment which works to integrate universities.

By creating a one-on-one forum for interaction, *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* avoids putting students in large group dialogue sessions, personalizing the inter-peer conversations. In doing so,

they avoid the pitfalls of group discourse discussed by Halabi (2004) in studying “the school for peace approach” for intercultural dialogue. Halabi demonstrated that when people are in groups, inter-group discourse is transformed and polarized. In groups dialogue settings, many voices are silenced while others are intensified as a function of intergroup asymmetries and identity alignments. *Ma’ayan Bamidbar* aims to address this dynamic by not including explicit political discourse in group meetings. This tactical choice also makes the program more appealing for a wider audience. Even still, during the war in May of 2021, some program coordinators were proactive in creating safe spaces for dialogue and reflection. *Ma’ayan Bamidbar* attempts to strategically account for the innate asymmetry of Jewish and Palestinian partnerships by facilitating a pedagogical structure which allows for individualized interaction.

Ma’ayan Bamidbar is effective at creating spaces within university contexts when Jewish students can develop empathy for Palestinian students. Through bringing Jews into contact with their otherwise socially distanced Palestinian peers, the program works to integrate campuses. By positioning the program within the students’ routine, on their college campuses, *Ma’ayan Bamidbar* immerses integrated learning into the normal academic environment, avoiding issues with post program re-entry.

Conclusions and Discussion

“You can’t do it all”

-Golda, Founder of *Ma’ayan Bamidbar*, Hebrew University

When dissecting the intricacies of the current state of Israel-Palestine, one must decide how and where to focus the discourse. In the mess of occupation, segregation, tense mixed cities, and ethnoreligious oppression, some universities shine as potential havens of the progressive movement for Palestinian equality and shared society. However, the factors which segregate

Jews and Palestinians outside of university contexts taint academia and split apart students by ethnoreligious group. This research demonstrates that peer mentorship is a viable method for stimulating long-term social integration on college campuses. Through a yearlong partnership in mutual learning and teaching, Jewish students are able to learn from and empathize with Palestinian peers. By creating a framework to engage with their otherwise stigmatized social peers, *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* allows for students to come together and engage in a natural student activity; learning. As language and culture are intertwined social phenomenon, learning Arabic from a Palestinian peer is integrated with learning about Palestinian culture. Through this process, Jewish students are led to understand, if they do not already hold the view, that their Palestinian peers live complex lives filled with religious and cultural nuance. This realization humanizes their peers and instills a belief in grassroots processes for change. In doing so, the Jewish student is brought into the collective identity for humanism and the movement for a shared society via the creation of empathy for their partner.

To be sure, there are a tremendous range of roadblocks which prevent a Jewish student from fulfilling this process. Some interlocutors, (Jacob) were only in the program for the course credits, some (Maor) simply do not mesh socially with their partner, some (Adina) experience distancing as a function of prior experiences in the army, and some are driven away from their partners by hyper politicization. However, even if interviewee testimonies to the success of the program lay outside normative experiences for participants in the program, the installation of a structure which can facilitate potential interactions for Jewish and Palestinian students through peer mentorship has its merits in the fact that the majority of interlocutors had no prior personal interactions with Palestinians, let alone interactions as peers. In creating opportunity through a structured yet flexible partnership that is immersed in student's lives, *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*

accounts for the limitations to prior P2P peacebuilding initiatives which struggle with the asymmetry of identities and the re-entry post program into segregation. Data from interlocutors provide evidence that *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* is succeeding at its mission and mandates the integration of peer mentorship models as a tool for the integration of university campuses.

It is important to note that *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* is only a discrete contributor to the peacebuilding movement in Israel-Palestine. The notion that there is a tremendous amount of work to be done via a multiplicity of channels to achieve long-term peace and a shared society is explicitly acknowledged by many interlocutors'. Golda, presented a realist perspective in response to criticism that *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* does not do enough to combat social inequality between Jews and Palestinian relative to other peacebuilding programs:

But at the framework that [Ma'ayan Bamidbar staff] gave to themselves, they're doing their best, and they're [making] massive changes. And the fact that they're [Ma'ayan Bamidbar staff], they're working in order to promote more equality, or more shared spaces... in Israel, doesn't diminish the importance of other organizations that fight the occupation, but does not also say that what [Ma'ayan Bamidbar staff] doing is bad.

-Golda

Golda's perception of the multi-armed approach to peacebuilding evokes the conception of a collective identity which spans social movements and leads to the manifestation of different means of grassroots activism. Individual projects attempt to focus on smaller issues and build peace and equality from the ground up. *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* contributes to this movement using a method that could potentially benefit other contexts.

Potential Risks

The limits of sampling and frames of analysis of this research create potential risks for drawing conclusions from the data. The extreme extent of ongoing oppression and segregation in Israel necessitates treating interviewee testimony to the success of inter-cultural encounter with caution. While interviewees may claim to have created personal connections with their partner, as the research did not encompass the Palestinian partners testimony, there is no way to validate the Jewish participants claim to having created such a tie. Moreover, as the interview content focused on the experience of the program there are minimal means to validate if or how the interviewees extended their empathy for their partner to other Palestinian peers or Palestinians they happen to encounter outside of university. Yet, as the scope of this research is to understand the processes of *Ma'ayan Bamidbar*, the conclusions that the program is succeeding at creating a space for Jewish university students to encounter Palestinian university students is justified by the simple progression Jewish students accounted for of having little to no encounter with any Palestinians to being able to meet and learn from a Palestinian peer.

Additionally, as I was unable to include Palestinian voices in this research frame, there is a risk that the program has adverse effects on the participating Palestinian students. Therefore, a longitudinal, inclusive study is necessary to delve into how Palestinians experience participating in P2P peer mentorship programming.

Limitations

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic drastically impacted the organizational processes which is centered on creating new personal connections. The Covid-19 pandemic intensely altered many interlocutors' experiences. Lastly, my own language capability, or lack thereof, limited my participant pool as I did not engage directly with the Palestinian narrative or any Jewish students

who had no English-speaking capacity whatsoever. The latter of these limits is less significant as participants still offered a wide range of experiences.

This research was limited by having restricted sampling to one timeframe of participants. As I only interviewed Jewish Alumni who were one year out of the program, a longitudinal study which includes interviews with current participants as well a range of alumni from different times frames would broaden the validity of the conclusions of this research. As discussed in the methodology, I interviewed alumni at the optimal point in the develop trajectory of the program, as there are more alumni over time, there will be more opportunities to study the developmental effects of the program.

Future Research

The findings of this research mandate further analyses of peer mentorship programs, the curriculums used in these P2P programs, and a longitudinal study of the participants from these programs. As the program began in 2018, longitudinal research with participants with varying timeframes for their participation is warranted to understand the short term and long-term effects of participation. While the population sample for this study was sufficient to explore different narratives and experiences that Jewish Israelis had participating in *Ma'ayan Bamibdar*, a broader population sample centered around Palestinian identities is necessary to get a comprehensive understanding of the program and the impact of participation. Additionally, there is potential for a cross-discipline analysis of peer mentorship and the activation of social movement activists for political action. Specifically, to see if alumni of *Ma'ayan Bamidbar* continue to participate in a diverse set of life-long efforts to create a shared society in Israel-Palestine. As the growth of the movement for a shared society is ongoing, it is necessary to continue evaluating the legitimacy of a variety of peacebuilding practices and methodologies. Just as there have been longitudinal

studies following participants of “coexistence” programs for Jews and Palestinians (Shroder & Risen 2014), this research demonstrates the importance of a longitudinal study to see how participation in *Ma’ayan Bamidbar* impacts alumni in the years following participation.

Inspired by the ongoing work in the US in critical race theory and racial equity, a comparative study of reconciliation initiatives in the US and South Africa with encounter programs like *Ma’ayan Bamidbar* through a critical race theory lens would broaden the analyses of interviewee testimony and inform academic analyses of P2P peacebuilding. Palestinian and Israeli P2P peacebuilding efforts can be analyzed through a lens of historical justice to help analyze the impact of intercultural work in Israel-Palestine.

For future researchers to use a mixed methodology could produce more broadly representative sampling and account for a comprehensive quantification of the range of interviewee perspectives and experiences. Additionally, to engage with the potential risk of interviewee bias and the limits and restrictions of individual experience, collecting observation data on the peer-to-peer meetings is worthwhile. Such analyses are important to ensure both the internal and external validity of conclusions drawn regarding the pedagogical and peacebuilding frameworks used in *Ma’ayan Bamidbar*.

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Appendix:

Participant data table:

Name	Gender	Role in Program	University	University Region	Hometown
Golda	F	Founder/Manager	Hebrew U	Jerusalem	Jerusalem
Shira	F	Manager	Ben Gurion	Southern District	Ramla
Maya	F	Coordinator	Hebrew U	Jerusalem	Ramat Hasharon
Nina	F	Coordinator	Hebrew U	Jerusalem	Jerusalem
Maor	M	Coordinator	Hebrew U	Jerusalem	Ramat Gan
Barak	M	Coordinator	Hebrew U	Jerusalem	Ramat Hasharon
Liora	F	Coordinator	TAU	Tel Aviv	Haifa
Kyla	F	Participant Alumni	Hebrew U	Jerusalem	Jerusalem
Yaela	F	Participant Alumni	Ben Gurion	Southern District	Central District
Adina	F	Participant Alumni	Shenkar	Tel Aviv	Tel Aviv
Doron	M	Participant Alumni	Ben Gurion	Beer Sheva	Tel Aviv
Emet	M	Participant Alumni	Ben Gurion	Beer Sheva	Hod Hasharon
Adi	M	Participant Alumni	Hebrew U: Rehovot	Central District	Jerusalem
Sharon	F	Participant Alumni	Levinski	Central District	Rishon Letzion
Jacob	M	Participant Alumni	Ben Gurion	Southern District	Modiin
Zoe	F	Participant Alumni	Bar Ilan	Central District	Rehovot
Meital	F	Participant Alumni	Ben Gurion	Southern District	Modiin
Kira	F	Participant Alumni	Ben Gurion	Southern District	Eilat
Shelly	F	Participant Alumni	Hebrew U	Central	Central District
Shaul	M	Participant Alumni	TAU	Tel Aviv	Ramat Gan
Ariel	M	Participant Alumni	Oranim	Northern District	Acre
Neta	F	Participant Alumni	Oranim	Northern District	Nof Haglil

Key: TAU = Tel Aviv University. Hebrew U = Hebrew University.

Interview guide sample: Participants:

Introduction:

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. I really appreciate it.

For a quick refresher, I am a graduate student at the University of Chicago studying sociology. I am researching-how you feel Ma'ayan Bamidbar has affected your life. If there is any question you don't understand due to language, I am happy to rephrase it or switch to Hebrew. If there is a question you don't want to answer, or you need to stop at any point just let me know.

I am going to record our conversation. If you want me to stop recording just let me know. I am only recording so I can accurately capture your ideas and responses. This conversation is completely confidential. I am the only person who will have access to and control over this recording. In writing up this research, your identity will remain anonymous. I may use snippets of this conversation but they will be void of any information which could possibly be traced back to you.

Before we start, do you have any questions for me?

Let's begin

1. Tell me about where you grew up?
2. How do Jews and Arabs interact in your region (insert Um-al fahm, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv Central district, or Desert, southern district, depending on where the participant is from)
3. Tell me about your university classmates
4. Tell me how you decided to learn Arabic
5. in the program, tell me about your first meeting with your partner
6. And as the program went on, talk to me about your progression through the program
7. Help me understand what it was like in the program during the conflict last May?
8. And this year, when there were tensions rising in sheikh Jarrah, what was going on there?
9. What is the goal the Maayan Bamidbar's?
10. what did you tell your family about this experience?
11. When you talk with your friends about your experience in Maayan Bamidbar, what is that conversation like?
12. If you were to change something about Maayan Bamidbar what would it be?
13. What comes to mind when I say, "peacebuilding"?
14. What do you want to do after university?
15. What is something you wish all the Jews in Israel would agree on?

