

Ilana Meallem & Mutassim Abu El Hawa: Arava Institute Alumni Keeping the Promise

By Seth Morrison,
Friends of the Arava Institute Board Member



The smiles of Ilana Meallem and Mutassim Abu El Hawa can light up any room. Recently, those smiles – and the vital message of the Arava Institute – lit up the studios of CNN International. I can proudly say that what you see in that broadcast is what you get when you meet these two engaging Arava alumni in person. Hearing their experiences first-hand made me even more committed to the work we are doing for this unique institution.

(PROMISE continued on page 2)

Arava Alumni Report to UN



Institute Alumni Roey Angel and Suleiman Halasah prepare to speak at the United Nations.

“Water Security and Climate Change.” This was the subject of an Arava Institute report to this year’s UN global conference titled “Climate Change: How It Impacts Us All.”

Israeli Roey Angel, Palestinian Dana Rassas and Jordanian Suleiman Halasah, along with Dr. Clive Lipchin, Arava Institute’s Direc-
(UN continued on page 4)

Stars Shine for the Arava Institute



Mandy Patinkin brings up Arava Institute Alumni Rebecca Fox, Mutassim Abu el Hawa, and Ilana Meallem for his encore in Bethesda, Maryland.

When Mandy Patinkin sings there is – quite literally – nothing like it. Bending the notes of a plaintive Yiddish plea, he can carry your spirit aloft; a gentle falsetto, uniquely his own, can pull at your heart like a soft bow across a violin string.

This past December, Mandy – along with his acclaimed piano accompanist, Paul Ford – brought his Yiddish repertoire concert, “Mamaloshen,” to three very special and intimate benefit concerts for the Arava Institute. Mandy, a veteran of the Arava/Hazon Israel Bike Ride,

and a member of the Friends of the Arava Board of Trustees, traversed the country – from Newport Beach, CA and Denver, CO., to Bethesda,

MD to volunteer his special talent and time.

As moving as his singing was the expressive message of this Tony and Emmy Award-winning star: “The Arava Institute is the most practical solution to the peace process that I have come across to date.”

Each event began with presentations by Arava Institute alumni from the Middle East and the
(STARS continued on page 2)

“I find the Arava Institute the most practical solution to the peace process I have come across to date.”

- Mandy Patinkin

“Taking students from cultures that are raised to hate each other and bringing them together to work for a common goal is brilliant and earnest and simple..”

- Sarah Silverman

STARS continued from page 1

United States.

Moving from musical magic to brilliant, biting satire, comedienne Sarah Silverman joined the cast of her Comedy Central show, "The Sarah Silverman Program" – and special guest star, Roseanne Barr – in a night of "Comedy Without Borders" on the Los Angeles campus of the University of Southern California. This exciting November 29 event also featured singer/songwriter Dan Bern, whose music can be heard in the recently released film, "Walk Hard."

Sarah, whose sister Rabbi Susan Silverman currently lives at Kibbutz Ketura, said of the Arava Institute, "Taking students from cultures that are raised to hate each other and bringing

them together to work for a common goal is brilliant and earnest and simple. It's the kind of long-term thinking that, here in its small grassroots beginnings, will greatly affect the big picture. I am proud to be a part of it."

As with the Patinkin concerts, the audience had the opportunity to learn about the Institute through a short documentary video and the personal experiences of two Arava Institute alumni, Ilana Mealem and Mutassim Abu el Hawa.. The evening's success was made clear when the alumni stories received applause equal to that of the wonderful comedic talent.

The commitment and support of these generous talents not only brought much-needed funds to the Arava Institute, they significantly raised

our visibility and awareness to the public. Our deepest gratitude goes out to Mandy, Sarah, Roseanne, Paul, Laura Silverman, Jay Johnston, Brian Posehn, Steve Agee, Dan Bern, Bob Gold, the Arava alumni and those who opened their homes for Mandy's concerts.

PROMISE continued from page 1

Mutassim is from East Jerusalem, where he had little positive contact with Israelis. His family, observant Muslims, were more than a little surprised when his mother suggested he continue his environmental studies at the Arava Institute; a place where he would learn to live and work with Israelis. Says Mutassim, "You can imagine my surprise when I found I would be sharing a room with an Israeli Jew."

He now treasures his Arava experiences and is today applying them in his work with the Israel Palestine Center for Research and Information, focusing on water rights issues and development of urban public gardens.

Ilana grew up in London, in a Sephardic family that escaped Egypt. She saw her brother victimized by anti-Semites. After making Aliya at 18, she served in the Israeli Air Force, then took a degree in marine biology. The Arava Institute came to her from a conversation with a stranger she'd met on vacation. The rest, she says, is history. "Through an Arava Institute field trip, I learned about the extremely degrading living conditions of Israeli Bedouin tribes. It was *my* life-changing moment."

Since graduating, Ilana has learned Arabic, lived with the Bedouin, and is currently working on a major bio-gas energy-generating program that will greatly benefit those Bedouins' lives. Such is the renown of her work that, along with fellow graduate, Palestinian Mazen Zoabi, she was invited to the prestigious annual meeting of Nobel Laureates in Petra, Jordan. There, they were charged by Jordan's King Abdullah and author/activist, Elie Wiesel, to establish the region's first Middle East Youth Forum.

This month Mutassim will marry in East Jerusalem, the wedding attended by many Institute Alumni, including his dear friend, Ilana. In the grand scheme of things, it's a small step; but the ripples of hope that emanate from that step are promising and profound.

See Ilana and Mutassim's CNN interview at www.friendsofarava.org.

North American Student Profile: Dori Chandler



(Reprinted with permission from the Carolina Center for Jewish Studies)

Dori Chandler is used to late nights in the library, the stress of midterms and final exams, and the intensity of academic life at Carolina. But this academic year, studying at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, located in the Arava desert, she expects an entirely new set of challenges.

"I hope this experience will give me the tools to challenge myself and others to think about how we treat the earth, how we treat each other, and what legacy we are leaving behind for future generations," Chandler says.

Heady words for a college sophomore, but that's the kind of idealism that fuels Israel's Arava Institute. Students from all over the world, including Israelis, Palestinians, and Americans, come to study and live together for an extended period of time. The goal is to build long-term relationships between Jewish and Arab students; teach environmental leadership and peace-building; and encourage activism in the Middle East and beyond. As they say at the Institute: "The idea that nature knows no political borders is more than a belief. It is a fact, a curriculum, and a way of life."

Chandler and her fellow students will live in dormitories on a kibbutz (Kibbutz Ketura) and eat all of their meals in a communal dining room. The academic course of study

focuses on sustainable agriculture, air quality, biodiversity, and environmental policy, though the subtext of peace is always on the agenda.

"There are many teachings in our Jewish tradition that are meant to instill knowledge and awareness about the natural world," says Chandler. "This is because how we treat the trees and the animals is a reflection of how we treat each other. I hope that I will learn about other traditions' similar beliefs and find a way to reconcile them into one common goal for love, peace, and hope."

A long-time activist and student-leader in the environmental movement, Chandler has known for years that she would study abroad in Israel. At Carolina, Chandler studied early Judaism and the archaeology of Palestine with Jodi Magness and traveled with Magness's class to visit the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit in Charlotte, North Carolina.

In her advanced Hebrew classes, Chandler and her fellow students attended weekly Israeli film nights and regularly heard guest professors and community members tell their stories in fluent Hebrew. All of that preparation in the language has been a great help.

"Learning how to shop and order food in another language, meeting up with friends from the US and Israel, praying at an assortment of synagogues, and being able to volunteer in the community, have all been extremely rewarding experiences," Chandler says. "I have even run into a number of University of North Carolina graduates studying or working in Israel, which makes me feel right at home."

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Make your contribution to Friends of the Arava Institute online today by visiting
www.friendsofarava.org.**

Israeli President Peres Visits the Arava Institute

"The Arava Institute has been an important force for regional cooperation in the Middle East." These were the powerful words of acknowledgment and support from Israeli President Shimon Peres following his October 26, 2007 visit to the Institute.

Surrounded by students just beginning their Fall Semester – the largest enrollment in the school's history – this amiable world leader took time to speak personally with many of the young environmentalists, teachers and staff. In a speech to all, he reiterated his deep support: "[The Institute] is needed to create real partnerships within this region...



Israeli President Shimon Peres, a holder of the Nobel Peace Prize and an architect of the Oslo Accords, stops to speak with students during a welcoming ceremony at Kibbutz Ketura.

to promote the common interests of Israel and its neighbors."

Reframing The Relationship Between Arabs and Jews:

Excerpts from David Lehrer's Welcoming Address to President Peres



David Lehrer, Director of the Arava Institute, took the occasion of President Peres' visit to announce a vision for the Institute and the Middle East.

"The Arava Institute strives to be the premier environmental study and research program in the Middle East. For over ten years, we have brought Jews and Arabs together to study the environment because we believe that nature knows no borders.

"We have clung to our vision of an alternative Middle East; your vision, Mr. President, of the New Middle East. A Middle East where Jews and Arabs don't fight with each other over the rights to the land, but a Middle East where Arabs and Jews fight together to protect the land that we both love.

"The Arava Institute is reframing the relationship between Arabs and Jews. But it is no longer enough that we find a way to live in peace with each other. It is time the Middle East recognizes that it is part of a global community; that we share responsibility for the growing environmental crises, and that we must be part of a global solution. It is time the Middle East ceased being the source of tension, instability, terror and wars, and became the source of solutions to heal our planet.

"The Arava Institute is partnering with the Hevel Eilat Regional Council

and our Partnership 2000 Community, the Jewish Federation of Greater Toronto, in a grand vision worthy of the New Middle East. Under the leadership of our Council Chair, Mr. Udi Gat, this region aspires to become the Silicon Valley of Renewable Energy and Energy Conservation.

"At the center of this initiative is the establishment, here at the Arava Institute, of a research & development center [where] Israelis, Jews and Arabs, Palestinians, Jordanians, students and professionals from around the world will come to study and advance the cause of fossil free energy, sustainability, and solutions that will slow climate change.

"We teach students from all over the world to listen to each other's narratives and, despite their differing narratives, to work together to save our planet. The R&D Center for Renewable Energy and Energy Conservation, along with other important environmental research, as well as academic and alumni activities, will provide our students with a common language for dialogue between the peoples of the region, and the opportunity to contribute local solutions to the global issues of our time."

Israeli Supreme Court Sides with Arava:

Landmark Ruling Revokes Blanket Ban on Palestinian Students

In our Spring 2007 issue, Board Member Karen Fierst reported on the Arava Institute/Gisha petition to the Israeli Supreme Court to rescind the blanket ban on Palestinian student visas. The ban, which contended that Palestinian students were a threat to Israel's security, was invoked by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) some three years ago.

At the petition hearing on December 18, 2006, the Supreme Court found the ban unreasonable and gave the IDF sixty days to articulate criteria for admitting qualified Palestinian students to study in Israel.

Despite the ruling, this past fall, seven prospective Palestinian students were unable to begin their studies at the Arava Institute when their permits were denied by the IDF, which had never responded to the Court order. The Court again ordered the IDF and its General Security Services (GSS) to appear on November 1 with the criteria, and that all study requests and security checks be reviewed on an individual basis. The Court also ordered the IDF to revise their submitted criteria and allow for a wider range of cases to be reviewed.

Victory is Sweet

Every semester since the Second Intifada began, there has been a waiting list of highly talented and eligible Palestinian students whom the Institute has rigorously qualified. Every semester, those students' residency applications went to the IDF for individual security checks. The blanket ban meant no responses and no permits.

Since the November 1 ruling, all seven student applications were resubmitted to the IDF. Several have received approval, and those students are getting ready to begin their Spring semester at the Institute.

You can read Karen Fierst's original article in our Spring 2007 issue available in the New Archive section on the Friends of Arava website at www.friendsofarava.org.



A ride so nice, this year we're doing it twice. Bike for the environment from Jerusalem to Eilat in May or November 2008. Sign up today by visiting www.israelride.org.

UN continued from page 1

tor of Environmental Policy and Research, were invited by the UN to speak at its 60th Annual Non-Governmental Organization Section in Department of Public Information.

Dr. Lipchin spoke on the serious need for a joint water commission. He was followed by the alumni who addressed water issues of the Middle East based on the Institute's research findings and academic efforts.

Joining the Institute's representatives at this important international event were Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, the World Council of Conservative/Masorti Synagogues and the International Council of Jewish Women.

The Arava Mission Realized

The diverse backgrounds of the alumni presenters further demon-

strated the Institute's success in developing environmental leaders willing to work across historical and cultural backgrounds to confront the Mideast's ecological challenges.



Dana Rassas addresses the UN Conference.

Roey Angel recently completed his masters degree in the Arava Institute's program with Ben-Gurion University. He is now enrolled as a doctoral candidate at the Max Planck Institute in Germany. He was part of a joint Arava/Palestinian research project examining river restoration in Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Dana Rassas received her first degree in Political Science at Brigham Young University before begin-

ning a career with the Jordanian Ministry of Planning and working on several environmental issues that deal with water treatment and shortages. After completing her studies at the Institute, she accepted an offer as Palestinian coordinator for Strategic Affairs at the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI). She now works at the US Consulate in Jerusalem, and is a member of the Women's Earth Alliance.

Suleiman Halasah worked for more than two years as a control engineer with the Jordanian Ministry of Water before attending the Arava Institute, where he is completing his masters degree on solar energy. Suleiman also works with Wadi Araba Power Co./Arava Power Co., a Jordanian/Israeli venture that utilizes and promotes solar energy for power generation.

For regular Arava Institute updates and a complete archive of news stories, visit www.friendsofarava.org

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Inside this edition:

A major Supreme Court Victory, an appearance at the United Nations, a visit from Israeli President Shimon Peres, and much more!

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