



GESHER LE-ARAVIT / BRIDGE TO ARABIC

Gesher Le-Aravit (Bridge to Arabic) is a grassroots Arab-Jewish project and a unique social change model, developed by four teachers in Jisr A Zarqa, the poorest Arab village in Israel. The project offers Jewish Israelis from all over the country to learn the Arabic language and culture in an Arabic-speaking environment. To this day, more than 250 Jewish Israelis visited Jisr A Zarqa to learn Arabic and to participate in a rich cultural program. For the community, the project creates employment and sustainable livelihood for more than ten families. Thus, Arab-Jewish dialogue is both a learning experience and a contribution to socio-economic prosperity of the village.

"I am feeling grateful for the existence of such program. The option you offered me, to be welcomed in an Arab village and to communicate with the people, chases the fear away in these horrible days. It is something to lean on." – Dalit Unger, a student in Gesher Le Aravit, 14/11/15

The Location

Jisr A Zarqa (Bridge over the Blue), the only Arab municipality that remained by the Israeli Mediterranean seashore after 1948, is registered as one of the poorest localities in Israeli official statistics. Its literacy rate is among the lowest in the country while violence and unemployment are among the highest. The village inhabitants are seen as having the lowest social status by both Jewish and Arab societies.

The village's 14,000 citizens only recently received a single bus route, which takes many of the women to work in the more established Jewish and Arab villages, Kibbutzim and neighbouring towns. Although Jisr's houses are clearly seen from the Haifa-Tel Aviv Highway 2 that passes just a few meters away from them, physical access to the village itself has not been made easy by the Israeli authorities. There is no access from the main road; one has to go through a set of interchanges and access roads in order to get into Jisr A Zarqa.

As Jisr A Zarqa is set on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, next to a nature reserve and built on the remains of an ancient Roman settlement, it has a full-scale touristic potential. With an Arabic language and cultural study centre, it can supply a unique opportunity to learn and practice Arabic for all levels and to contribute to economic prosperity of the village.

"This experience is special for me, as I get to meet (Jewish) students that genuinely wishes to learn my language. I am not only teaching Arabic but also learning from them about their culture, their thoughts and feelings with much respect on both sides" – Fatina Ammash, a teacher in Gesher Le Aravit, 27/11/14

Background and Rationale

The escalation of violence in recent weeks is enabled by decades of segregation and inequalities among Jews and Arabs in Israel, strengthened by the absence of a viable peace process. It is clear that the change is not expected from above – it must come from below, by ordinary people seeking to live in peace and dignity.

While many Arab citizens speak Hebrew, Arabic language and culture remain out of reach for most Jewish Israelis, often generating feelings of fear and intimidation. If dialogue among Jews and Arabs takes place in the linguistic and cultural terrain of Hebrew, it preserves inequity and alienation of Jewish Israelis from the Arabic language and culture, thus limiting the potential of a dialogue. **Gesher Le-Aravit** offers an unmediated way to learn and experience Arabic through everyday life interactions in Jisr A Zarqa.

Practical work

Through the year of 2015 we have independently managed to launch a new study program, build a steady group of genuine followers on our Facebook page, advertise our courses, draw new students year round and extend the villagers' involvement in our enthusiasm and the project's benefits.

Meet our teachers in the videos on our Facebook page: [Fatina](#), [Hasib](#) and [Miriam](#) presenting the studies in Hebrew. Also available are pictures of our activities: a [cooking workshop in Arabic](#) the [class](#), one of the [tours we conduct](#) as part of the program, and [one more tour](#) (all in basic Arabic, of course!)

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