

The Guide for Living in the Village

Ron Amir's finishing project in photography, which he did in the village JasarA'Zarka turned into a unique friendship with its residents, leading to seminars and courses he has hosted for teenagers and now – to a new exhibition.

Liora Luplian

“Statistically speaking, this is the – or second to – most poor village in Israel. This is the only Arab village across the Israeli coastline which residents were not evacuated because their Israeli neighbors wanted them to keep working for them in cleaning and agriculture. Northbound is Kibbutz Ma’agan Michael, one of the wealthiest Kibbutzim in Israel, and southbound is Caesarea, whose residents built an eighteen-foot tall wall around it five years ago in order to prevent theft crimes and to maintain real-estate value. To its east lies the coastal highway (route 2), built practically on the village as it was cheaper than building it on the muddy soil further to the east”. This is how Ron Amir describes the village JasarA’Zarka, which residents, homes and landscapes stand in the center of the photographs featured in his exhibition starting this Thursday at the Midrasha Gallery.

Something that Develops Slowly

The connection between Amir and the village was established many years ago. “Originally I come from Kibbutz Yehiam in Galilee, an area with many Arab settlements and villages”, he says. “After my mandatory military service I worked in Ma’agan Michael and that’s how I came to know Jasar A’Zarka. It’s a beautiful village and I loved hanging around it, standing by the fishermen’s beach, talking to people on the street. Eventually I started to study at the Midrasha of Arts and continued to occasionally visit Jasar until, at some point, I started taking pictures there.

“When the matter of my final project came up at school, about six years ago, I decided to do it in Jasar and decided to start by wandering the beach, which is still considered a public space, right on the borders of the village. I asked the families there to align for a family photo. As I shoot, I usually promise to bring a copy of the picture to the subjects, so after that I started wandering the village – looking for the families whose pictures I’ve taken. Since I had an actual reason to wander around the village I started to bond with some specific families and the project started to move from the public space to the private one. Eventually, the final project focused on four families who allowed me to take pictures in their homes. It was important to me to focus on several families in order to avoid from creating a familial typology but rather create pictures based on a certain connection, on serenity. That’s something you develop slowly, bit by bit”.

The exhibition also shows pictures of landscapes, meetings and events taking place in the public space. Where were those taken?

After I finished my studies, I kept on taking pictures in the village. Photographing a single site suited me, as I felt obligated to the subjects of my pictures. An important part of the process is that I wander around the village, meet more people, walking around with my digital camera and take their pictures,

print them and hand them out. While I stroll around the streets I allow myself a freer and more open kind of photography, unbound”.

“At some point I opened up a portrait photography studio for a big class at the Youth Center”, Amir says. “People came and got their portrait picture for a minimal price. In exchange for the space the Youth Center provided, I conducted weekly photography sessions with the Young Leadership class at the Center. For me, it was just part of my continuous, accumulative project. I was interested in the reasons they came to have their picture taken, in how to take the pictures, in their gestures, their clothes, and their body language. Another photographic series was the Rooftop Project – environmental photography which included the inside and the outside of the village, converting the regular view of the outside visitor into an inside view, and it always had some figure or human presence”.

Water Doesn't Mix

Did you feelings towards the village change over the years?

“I grew a stronger desire to be more socially involved. Two years ago I started instructing a photography course for 10th grade students and over the summer we presented an exhibition in the village school featuring the course's first graduates' works. This year I'm teaching the course for the second time and it means I go to the village at least twice a week. Connections and friendships are obviously created over time. Some of the photographs in the exhibition were taken in a “Solel-Boneh” construction site. One of the people in the picture, a very good friend of mine whose name is Haled, used to work there as a security guard and a bunch of his friends were gathering around him. In one picture you can see four of them standing around a bonfire. Whenever I look at this picture I feel like I could be any one of them”.

How do you explain the special connection with the villagers and your will to take the pictures specifically there?

Unrelated to photography, I have an innate urge to interact with people. Call it curiosity. The first step you take in such a different environment makes you feel amazed at so many new things. Afterwards I changed my observation point and began looking for our similarities – in fashion, in the things we hang around the house, in the young men who, although living in the village, respond to the outside world. The reason I'm interested in photography is the little victories, those small moments of joy in life, the theatricality of it. Photographing this village was not done as it was in any other stereotypic Arabic village, but it is something much more complex. Certain elements may be common, but it goes way farther than this”.

And still, your observations are that of a stranger. How do you avoid the patron point of view?

I think that, by this stage, we have a mutual relationship filled with respect on both sides. The name of the exhibition – “Barzach” – refers to the meeting point between the potable water of the rain and streams with the salty sea water. The connection is made, but the two types of water don't mix. There is something very accurate about this image.