



Mike (left) from Kibbutz Lotan, shows Bedouin villagers at Wadi el N'aam how to mix earthen plaster for the new clinic.

CENTER FOR CREATIVE ECOLOGY, KIBBUTZ LOTAN

# Building Bridges of Clay, Mud & Straw

Jews and Arabs learn natural building in the desert . . . and much more

Kibbutz Lotan consists of 50 adults and 60 children living on 143 acres in the fragile desert ecosystem in the far south of Israel, 30 miles north of Eilat. In the last few years one of our community's service projects has been to train Israeli Bedouin Arabs in natural building techniques. We have also, when political conditions permitted, hosted natural building seminars for Jewish and Arab youth, including Palestinian and Jordanian teenagers.

Ecological sustainability is the central theme of both programs. We live in a tough neighborhood here in the Middle East, and for us, sustainability has a double meaning. The first meaning of sustainability is to utilize the Earth's local resources in such a way that future generations will have quality of life. The second is to develop outlooks and ways of life which will enable

BY MICHAEL LIVNI,  
WITH MARK NAVEH  
AND ALEX CICELSKY

all people of the region to live together without violence—and even, hopefully, in peace and harmony.

Our medium for introducing the double message of sustainability is alternative building, using strawbale building, earthen plasters, and various industrial wastes such as plastics, tires, and tin cans. An additional important theme is conserving water—since water is a key resource in our area.

We cooperate with two other non-government organizations (NGOs) in these projects. One is Bustan, a partnership of Jewish and Arab eco-builders, architects, academics, and farmers who promote social and environmental justice in Israel/Palestine, with whom we teach local Bedouin villagers natural building skills ([www.bustan.org](http://www.bustan.org)). The other is Friends of the Earth of the Middle East, which brings together Jordanian, Palestinian, and

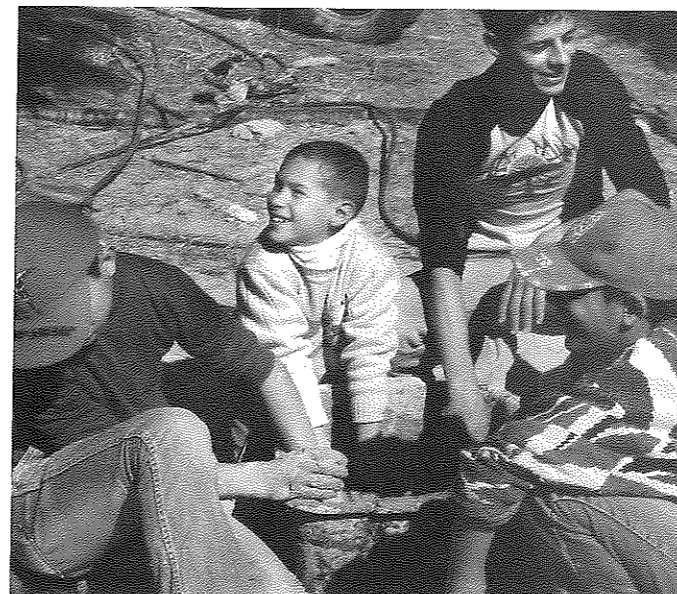
Israeli environmentalists, with whom we host Jewish and Arab youth seminars ([www.foeme.org](http://www.foeme.org)).

The Bedouin way of life, like all forms of life in the desert, has traditionally consisted of a sparse population with a subsistence economy living over a large area. The impact of modern life in the Middle East has threatened traditional Bedouin culture throughout the region, especially in Israel. Proactive Israeli government public health measures have created a population explosion among the Bedouin, and modern Israeli agriculture has expanded into the desert. And while the Israeli government has built townships for the Bedouin, their culture is not readily adaptable to this way of life. Some Bedouin have established

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alternative villages more suited to their traditional values, however, and these are often located in marginal and polluted areas, where the government cannot or will not supply them with any necessary infrastructure, such as housing or access to water, electric power, or facilities for medical care in their locality.

Working with Bustan, we have held a series of "Building with Earth" workshops on our kibbutz for the Bedouin of the Wadi el Na'am, a village not recognized by the Israeli government, and which is situated in a polluted area south of Beersheba in the northern Negev desert. These seminars take place in the context of a supportive Jewish community—and the kibbutz experience is an eye-opener for the Bedouin. The learning seminars here are a first step. Bustan offers the next step, by helping the Bedouin identify their needs. In this case, members of Wadi el Na'am felt they needed a clinic in the village. Kibbutz Lotan



Arab and Jewish schoolboys mix earthen plaster at Lotan's Friends of the Earth workshop.

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## Good Works and Traditional Jewish Culture

In some contemporary Jewish thought the idea of Good Works straddles two different concepts which, ideally, complement each other: *G'milut Hassadim* (acts of grace) and *Tikkun Olam* (world mending and transformation).

*G'milut Hassadim* is understood to mean an act of loving kindness without expectation of material advantage or recompense. We are to engage in acts of loving kindness to the other because, like each and every one of us, the "other" is created in the Divine Image. "And God said: We will make the human in Our Person and Our Image..." (Genesis 1:26).

*Tikkun Olam* involves an ongoing process of transforming the world (the Divine Creation) into an ever more perfect (Divine) state. The idea relates to the prophetic ideal of social justice and the rejection of false gods (e.g. the worship of material wealth). This is an infinite task by which humankind is partner in the continuing project of Creation. "It is not for you to finish the task, nor are you free to desist from it" (Ethics from Sinai, 2:21).

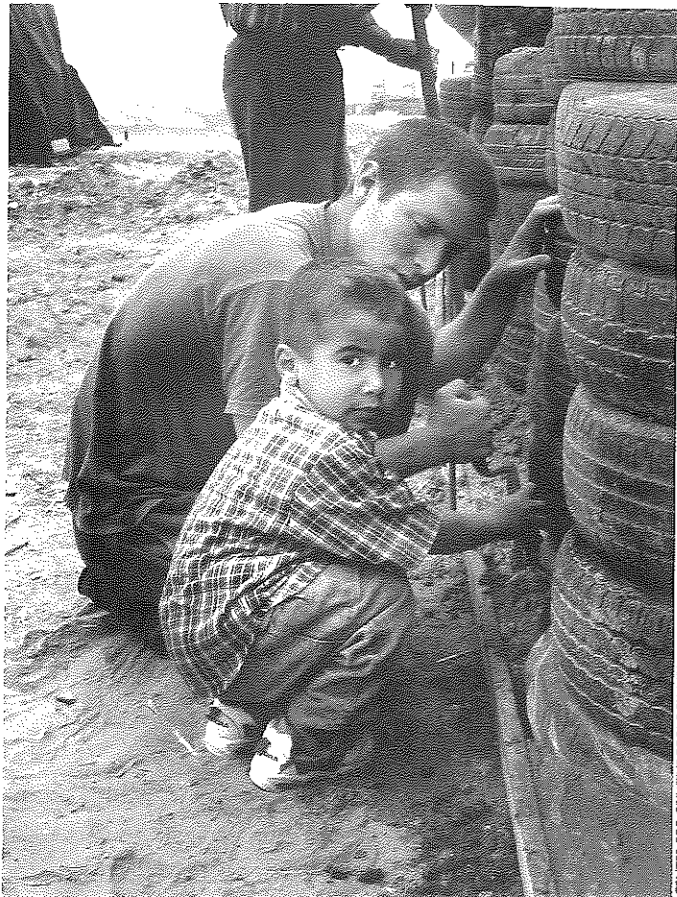
instructors worked with village members and other Jewish volunteers to build a clinic of strawbales and earthen plaster. Solar panels supply the clinic's power.

The overall aim of the project was not only to help Wadi el Na'am meet a specific need, but also to provide them with the know-how to build similar structures they might desire in the future. In all such workshops, participants must bring buckets of earth from their home locality. Thus they learn the right mix of sand and straw for making mud bricks and earth plaster with their own local earth materials.

Working with the residents of Wadi el Na'am has been especially challenging because of the ambivalence of the Bedouin towards their situation. Many are unemployed and subsist on welfare payments. They do not do not want to move to a township in the first place, as they feel it will be destructive to their values and traditions. They do not really want to stay where they are, yet they fear any alternative may be worse. Bustan also helps Bedouin in villages like this lobby the local government for municipal recognition within a non-township framework, so that their settlement and others like them will be eligible for the usual government assistance to recognized municipalities.

Last year, with Friends of the Earth of the Middle East, we held two seminars on Kibbutz Lotan, the first with 30 teenaged boys aged 13 to 17, both from Jewish and Arab schools in Israel and schools in Jordan and Palestine. The program began in the afternoon after their arrival on Lotan. We organized get-to-know-you activities and games on the soccer field. The official language was English. The Israeli Arabs frequently had to bridge to the Palestinian and Jordanian youth, whose knowledge of





A Lotan volunteer teaches one of the Wadi el Na'am children how to plaster.

English was rudimentary. The Israeli Arab youth were also central in bridging the cultural gap, thus reassuring the Jordanians and Palestinians in a social situation totally foreign to them.

On the first night we held an outdoor supper in Lotan's Center for Creative Ecology. In the evening there was a role-playing game focusing on allocating resources—in this case, water. The next morning the boys collected suitable waste from Lotan's "treasure trove" of bottles, cans, and used tires, and working in mixed groups of Jews and Arabs to build benches of

### **One of our community's service projects has been to train Israeli Bedouin Arabs in natural building techniques.**

tires stuffed with waste materials and covered with earthen plaster. In the afternoon we swam in the pool, followed by another session of relaxed learning activity. That night we took a walk to a dune in the desert and a discussion of the human impact on the desert ecosystem. On the last morning we met in Lotan's organic garden and dealt with composting methods and water-thrifty irrigation techniques. By the time of the farewell session and the feedback circle, it was clear that all had become friends. The

participants said they had enjoyed the seminar and learned from it. "This was the first time I had any real contact with Arab people," said one Jewish youth. Other comments: "Our time together really changed my opinions"; "I can't wait to get back and start on our own projects"; "I hope our connections will remain."

We held a second, similar program with Israeli and Jordanian youth. Although this program was also moderately successful, the absence of Israeli Arab youth to bridge the language gap was sorely felt.

In the context of the tensions in the Middle East, one of the few areas in which Arabs and Jews have a common interest is ecological sustainability in a small land holy to both peoples. How small? The combined area of Israel/Palestine is some 10,000 square miles—the size of New Hampshire or Vermont.

### **"This was the first time I had any real contact with Arab people."**

Unfortunately, however, we have not been able to involve young Arab and Bedouin women in these projects. Kibbutz Lotan is highly egalitarian in its approach to gender equality, so this is extremely troubling to us. Multiple wives are still the norm in much of Bedouin society. The challenges for women in Islamic society (from our point of view), are well known. We did, however, host a one-day seminar for Grade 10 students of a Bedouin village school in which both boys and girls participated.

Another downside is the "ad hoc" nature of our outreach efforts. Current conditions, political and financial, preclude our establishing a systematic program with real follow-up and follow-through. So we "cast our bread upon the waters." Indeed, in the case of the youth project involving Palestinians and Jordanians, we were requested to keep their participation low-profile, with no mention of specific localities of origin and no photographs that would identify any participants.

Unfortunately, instances of this kind of cross-cultural educational outreach by a Jewish community are relatively uncommon in Israel. Such projects require willingness and trust on behalf of the surrounding society of both Arabs and Jews.

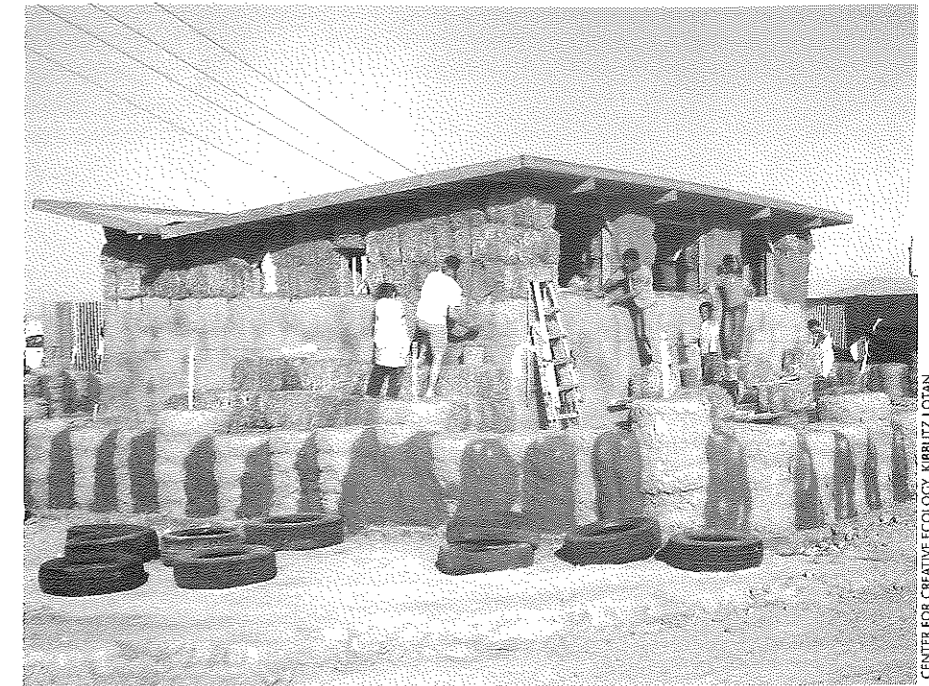
A prominent sign in Lotan's Center for Creative Ecology, with a quotation from ancient Talmudic Rabbinic writings, summarizes the universal message of sustainability for Arabs and Israelis of any religion: Jewish, Christian, or Muslim (please forgive the gender bias and anthropocentric orientation): "When the Holy One, Blessed be He, created the first Man, He took him to all the trees of the Garden of Eden, and told him: See my works, how handsome and fine they are: everything I have created, for you I created. Make sure not to despoil and destroy My world, because what you spoil there will be no one to repair after you."

Do such modest efforts as our have a real impact on the inferno of hate and conflict that characterizes our region? An ancient Jewish tale tells us that the entire world stands constantly on the scales. Each one of us, and every action of each and everyone of us, can tip the balance—and every hour is an hour of decision.

*Michael Livni grew up in Vancouver, B.C. and has an M.D. from U.B.C. He has lived in Israel for 43 years and at Kibbutz Lotan since 1986, where he has been active in establishing ecotourism on Kibbutz Lotan.*

*Alex Cicelski, who grew up in Rye, New York, is a founding member of Kibbutz Lotan. He is planning manager of the kibbutz and an expert in alternative building methods.*

*Mark Naveh grew up in Australia and studied marine biology and ecology. He has been on Lotan since 1986, and currently heads environmental education in Lotan's Center for Creative Ecology.*



One of Kibbutz Lotan's natural buildings.

## **About Kibbutz Lotan**

Of the 265 kibbutzim in Israel today, Kibbutz Lotan has a unique combination of four characteristics.

1. **Kibbutz Lotan is collective** (income-sharing), not privatized. Nowadays only 25 percent of Israeli Kibbutzim remain collective. In the last 20 years, many have become either partially or wholly privatized—meaning that members receive differential salaries and buy goods and services available in the kibbutz, and many own their own independent businesses. Because we are a collective, Kibbutz Lotan can mobilize some of its very modest collective resources to help others (*For a detailed discussion of the "Kibbutz movement in Historical Perspective" see www.chavruta.org.il, ICSA Lectures 2004*).

2. **We are a non-coercive religious kibbutz** associated with the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism (Reform Judaism). In Israel, Reform Judaism strives to integrate the idea of the Jewish state with democracy. This means equal rights and equal opportunity for all minority groups. It is the social and religious orientation of Kibbutz Lotan that leads to our commitment to helping others and social justice based on the prophetic ideals of Judaism. In this context, we believe that all humans are created in the Divine Image. We also see the ideal of peace, *Shalom*, as an ultimate religious value. "By three things does the world endure: by truth, justice and peace" (Ethics from Sinai 1:18).

3. **We're affiliated with Global Ecovillage Network (GEN)**, which expresses our commitment to sustainability. We strive to "till the earth and to preserve it" (Genesis 2:15). Our commitment to sustainability is not merely utilitarian: i.e., sustainability for the sake of our future and that of our children. We try to see "leaving a light footprint" as a religious value per se, relating to our responsible stewardship of Creation in the Holy Land.

4. **Our Vision Statement embodies our outlook in a strategic program of action.** "Where there is no vision, the people become unruly" (Proverbs 29:18). Founded in 1983, we are now 110 residents (60 being children). Another 25 residents rent houses here and buy community services but do not necessarily have a commitment to the intentional aspects of the community. We average one inch of rain per year. All the settlements in this area pump fossil water—ultimately a nonrenewing resource.

We are dependent on economic activities within the kibbutz, which in some cases constitute a compromise with our ecological values. We have not yet found ways to survive economically, educate our children, and provide a degree of self-fulfillment for our members without compromises. We have some hired foreign labor. We have a dairy operation that presents an ongoing ecological challenge.

Kibbutz Lotan is not wealthy—indeed we have yet to reach the minimum threshold to pay income tax, and ecotourism is still marginal in our economy. In the eight years since we focusing on the link between Judaism and ecology, we have developed a small organic garden utilizing principles of permaculture, and, more significantly, developed expertise in alternative building methods. In addition, because we are on the main flyway of migratory birds between Europe and Africa, many of our projects relate to enriching biotopes for the birds and developing facilities for birdwatchers. [www.kibbutzlotan.com](http://www.kibbutzlotan.com).