

In the Water, Everyone is Equal

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By Anders Melin

The conflict has been raging for over half a century. Israel and Palestine are like two brothers; brothers that are sprung out of the same core and host religions and nations that share the same origins. But in spite of these commonalities, the dispute is still ongoing, with no promise of a near-end resolve. On the other side of the globe, in the heartland of the United States, in a little house with a blue door, resides a cross-section of this conflict. But unlike in the Middle East, its inhabitants live in peace and friendship. On neutral ground, in a nation that was built on diversity, these people were brought together to jointly pursue shared dreams and goals; dreams that run deeper than ethnical differences and goals that are most easily attained by helping each other. On the field, in the gym, and in the water, they are allowed to forget about all political or ethnical antagonisms that exist outside the arena. Bonds are tied that bridge all prior differences, because in the water, everyone is equal.

If we live together? Yeah, that's a funny story. You see, our house is like a micro version of the Middle East; we got the Israeli and the Palestinian separated by no more than a thin wall which they both have nailed their flags onto, and on the other side of the house lives the Swede, holding the fortress down. No landlord who reads the newspapers would let an Arab and a Jew live together without a neutral third party present at all times.

This is the paradox that has been my living situation for the past two years. It is a funny story and a perfect ice breaker which all three of us put to use frequently. Thanks to the intense news coverage of the Middle East in American medias, most people quickly pick up on the uniqueness of the situation, raise their eyebrows while laughing, and ask how that works out for us. The conversation usually moves on from there. But on rare occasions, the listener stops for just a short second, gives it just a tad bit more thought and soon realizes that the factors that bind us together and ultimately add up to a stronger bond than the forces that attempt to separate us, are surprisingly trivial. But as I said, this does not happen very often. *So it is a Swede, an Arab, and a Jew... man, your house sounds like the beginning of a joke!* And we are back on square one.

I first met Yaniv Shnaider one late night in August in 2009. Having spent the past year at the University of Missouri, the institution to which I had just moved, he took me under his wings from day one, making sure that my transitional period passed smoothly as swimming season started. A strong friendship quickly evolved, and we thrived in the water. I got to know the humble yet fierce athlete who had moved to the United States after finishing up three years of mandatory military service in Israel to continue his successful career as one of the nation's top swimmers. Born and raised in Jerusalem, he had experienced the concrete result of the Israel-Palestine conflict and told me several times over about when his family spent days in the bomb shelter his dad had built, trying to evade the raging conflict. Every time he goes home, he stays with his mom who now resides in one of the Israeli settlements built on ground that the Palestinians claim as theirs. Therefore, for him, the conflict is constantly present. Although not a devout Jew, he radiates patriotism for his flag and nation comparable to what many coarse Texans feel for their stars and stripes.

No more than six months later, our trifecta was completed as Jowan Qupty enrolled at our institution and joined the varsity team. Both Shnaider and Qupty live in Jerusalem, have trained for

the same coach for years, carry Israeli passports, and have competed in international arenas under the Israeli flag. But in spite these commonalities, Qupty frequently experiences discrimination due to his Arab descent. Having to go through special security checks each time he returns to Israel is now routine for him. Not even when travelling with the Israeli national team could his shirt, spelling "*Israel Swimming*" on the back, exempt him from scrutiny, while his Jewish teammates, including Shnaider, could always walk through without any problems. The storm truly unraveled in the past summer as Qupty brought home the gold in the 200m breastroke at the Israeli National Championships, becoming the first person of Arab descent to ever claim such a title. Domestic as well as international medias quickly picked up on the significance of the story, and Qupty became a political weapon, stirring up a lot of emotions through the numerous interviews he gave.

"I really try to stay out of it. I am an athlete, not a politician, and we both know my focus is in the water. But of course I will not keep quiet about the fact that our national anthem only pertains to the Jewish part of our population," he told me in September, shortly after we had reunited from our summer endeavors, while showing me articles from local Israeli newspapers. I listened to him, but failed to realize the true magnitude of the situation until a few days later, as I was called up by one of my fellow countrymen who also attends university in the United States. He had seen the name of my institution and the face of my roommate on a news poster – at a New York airport.

The recent political events that have taken place in the Middle East have added an extra dimension to the situation. Shnaider greeted me with one of his brightest smiles when we met in the locker room shortly before afternoon practice on Tuesday October 18th, proudly announcing to me "They have released Gilad! Tonight we are having a beer!" The trade of one Israeli soldier, held captive by Hamas for over five years, for 1,027 Palestinians detained in Israeli prisons may seem like a ridiculous equation to anyone but the patriotic Israelis. Qupty quietly shook his head when I asked him about it later that evening, but agreed that "it's good that all those people get to see their families again, both the Israeli and the Palestinians." At the same time, he was closely following the developments of Palestine's application for membership of the United Nations. I recall the resigned expression on his face while we watched the webcast of Barack Obama's speech on the subject, in which the president delicately maintained his stance to use the nation's veto in the Security Council. On our way to practice later that day, Shnaider, on the other hand, quietly mumbled something about nothing pertaining to democracy could be carried through in Palestine as long as extremists keep bombing their own cities and people.

Despite their obvious differences of opinion, they rarely speak their minds in public. I find out simply because I ask, and often have to do so multiple times. It is almost as if they are reluctant to talk about it other than with their families and friends. I wish to believe that they both have athletics to thank for that; because as we plunge into the water, every externality becomes irrelevant. In this foreign element, everybody trains side by side, yard after yard, disregarding of the handful of nationalities, religions, and races that our team represents. As intensity gradually picks up and bodies are pushed to their limit, the focus eventually shifts from wherever it was to a complete presence in the moment, physically and mentally. Nothing else matters, and it is in these moments that we bond. Not through words, but through the shared experience. It is life stripped down to its purest form, and each time it serves as a reminder of the values on which athletics reside; respect, excellence, and friendship. In United States college swimming, we are not measured by where we are from, but by what we have achieved; not by where we have been, but how much further we can get. My roommates quietly set aside political spats, realizing that a shared love for electronic music, European beer, women, and a joint pursuit of great achievements bridge their numerous differences.

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