



April 13, 2021

Resisting the closure of the only Jewish-Arab shared space in the Naqab

Since its foundation, the Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality has strived to facilitate shared Jewish - Arab spaces in the Naqab, physical as well as intellectual, in an attempt to foster tolerance and educate on diversity. Being one of the pillars of NCF's mission, a shared society is essential to achieve full civil rights and equality for all those living in the Negev/Naqab. It is important that we carry out such work due to the State of Israel's failure to protect and fulfill its human rights obligations, without discrimination and embracing the diversity of all its citizens in the Negev/Naqab. The Be'er Sheva Municipality, complying with right wing pressure, has forced us to evict our shared space, Multaka-Mifgash.

We believe that no conflict can be truly resolved without the participation and cooperation of all the communities involved, and for that the encounter is essential. Based on the principle of Arab Jewish cooperation, we work to enable and share the voices of the different communities: being the facilitation of documentation workshops for Bedouin women in unrecognized villages or the participation of Bedouin representatives in UN forums on indigenous rights, minorities and so forth. NCF has been the only grassroots group to enable a joint shared space, promoting community led initiatives in the South.

NCF's staff members, volunteers and broader community are promoting human rights every day, working in a hostile context, mainly directed by actors that are strongly attached to conservative and discriminatory views towards the non-Jewish minorities. We have seen throughout the years the reinforcement of tougher eviction policies, displacement and home demolitions, for instance the peak number of home demolitions of Bedouins, rising to 2,586 homes and plots during the pandemic 2020. Unfortunately, the legal system and enforcement bodies have tended to implement tougher eviction policies for displacement and urbanization of a minority constituted by 260,000 people. Our silencing and the closure of our space is a withdrawal from international commitments of the State, it aims to shrinking our space of co-resistance.

For the past 15 years, the Negev Coexistence Forum developed joint activities of Arab-Jewish collaborations in our space we called *Multaka-Mifgash*. Encounter, in Arabic and Hebrew. Our home was a public shelter owned by the Be'er Sheva Municipality- that served as a community center, a gallery, a place of encounter that generated knowledge on diversity, religion, intercultural dialogue on the roots of the conflict, poverty, international relations and cooperation with other countries and organizations. The *Multaka* used to be the physical reference for Bedouin residents from the unrecognized villages that wanted to raise their voices and start a struggle for recognition, against eviction and displacement, for proper infrastructure and education. They would come to the Multaka and find an *other*, willing to listen to their hardships on how to connect running water to their local school, for instance. It was home for everyone wishing to learn and discuss, a true public space.



Our own story of eviction started in 2014, when the Be'er Sheva Municipality began to try and limit the scope of our events and discourse. It was clear that we were dealing with autocratic institutions when we received a threat to get evicted if we did not comply with their censorship. For the first time for any NGO being hosted by them, they have decided to intervene with the content of our cultural events, demanding we host only "non-controversial" events. Human rights, we learned, are controversial.

We witnessed when the Jerusalem Municipality acted for the closure of *Barbour Gallery*. We knew then, that this was a story bigger than just us and our municipality.

When we refused to accede to the requests for censorship, the municipality petitioned the district court requesting our eviction. Subsequently, we appealed to the Supreme Court that ruled that the municipality is not allowed to interfere with the content transmitted in its properties, and hence prevented the eviction of the *Multaka* from the shelter in 2018. However, immediately afterwards, in January 2019, we received the Municipality demand for property taxes, for 7 years of activity at a business rate retroactively. Something no other group working in public space was ever asked to pay. They demanded an outrageous and impossible amount of almost half a million shekels. While other non-profit organizations in Be'er Sheva are exempt from paying property taxes, the Negev Coexistence Forum was forced to negotiate and reach an agreement. In order to avoid paying the fine, the organization was forced to commit to evacuating the shelter. And finally, last week we left the *Multaka*.

NCF's community is well aware that this is bigger than just our story, and that we must not succumb to the pressure of far-right figures, as the Be'er Sheva municipality has succumbed. Because if we did, we could not only risk losing our right to freedom of expression, but we would give up our belief that human and civil rights are for all. We will continue to stand up, speak up and express ourselves, honoring the beauty that lays on diversity and solidarity.

Hence, we decided appeal to our community and launch a fundraising campaign. The goal of NIS 100,000 will allow us to rent property to reopen the *Multaka*. We have decided to not cave to the political persecution of the Be'er Sheva Municipality because human rights are nonnegotiable and so is joint Jewish-Arab cooperation.

For any questions or comments, please do not hesitate to contact Elianne Kremer at intl.advocacy@dukium.org