

# JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

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## Steel Drums Help Bridge Arabs and Jews

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### MULTIMEDIA



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Twenty middle school students — 10 Jews and 10 Arabs — play steel drums in the Peace Drums Project. The group will perform in the Philadelphia area on April 17 and 19. Amid the ongoing violence in Israel, Arab and Jewish teens are coexisting by making music together.

In 2015, local percussionist Harvey Price and Delaware Churches for Middle East Peace formed a steel drums project with Jews and Arabs from Israel called the Peace Drums Project.

Beginning April 10, the group will be touring America. Among its stops will be the Abington Presbyterian Church on April 17 and Congregation Rodeph Shalom on April 19. The concerts are free, but people are asked to make a donation.

“When the kids get together and play, you don’t know who’s Jewish and who is Arab,” said Price, an associate professor of percussion at the University of Delaware.

The co-chairs of the Peace Drums Project are Rabbi Michael Beals of Congregation Beth Shalom in Wilmington and Rev. Gregory Knox Jones, the senior pastor/head of staff at Westminster Presbyterian Church, also in Wilmington.

Price, of Center City, has been an educator and a musician since 1999. He spoke to the *Jewish Exponent* about the history of the steel drums and the formation of the group.

Steel drums were invented in Trinidad in the World War II era. The roots can be traced to the African slaves who were placed on the island by Spanish and French plantation owners as early as the 16th century.

Through his connections to musicians and teachers in Israel, he began searching for students to create a steel drum band. The project started in 2012 and, after raising \$80,000, they bought steel drums from Trinidad and had them shipped to Israel.

Price then formed a partnership between the Mar Elias Educational Institutions in the Galilean village of Ibillin and the Leo Baeck School in Haifa.

The group is comprised of 20 middle school students — 10 Arab and 10 Jewish — who practice together once a week. They began performing a year and a half ago.

“Through playing and rehearsing, the kids formed a great bond,” Price said.

Price texts, emails and Skypes with the children, but also has visited them several times. He said the cultural differences are irrelevant; it’s the music that brings them together.

Most of the students had never seen steel drums, let alone played one.

“One reason I love this instrument is you can take someone with zero musical background and teach them very quickly about how to play music in an ensemble,” Price said.

While the students have performed a handful of concerts in Israel, it was always his goal to come to America. For many, this will be their first time in the U.S., and everyone is looking forward to it.

One of those students is Dror Sefer-Cohen, 13, of Haifa.

Sefer-Cohen, who has played the piano and ukulele for more than six years, said that because of his musical background learning the steel drums was a “piece of cake.” He enjoys playing the drums and has made many new Arab friends.

“I found [steel drums] fascinating,” he said. “I really wanted to learn how to play it, since I like music so much.”

One of his classmates is Amelia, 13, a California native now living in Haifa. Amelia, who had no music experience, said that not only has she enjoyed playing the drums, but participating in the project has made her a more mature person.

Interacting with Arabs is nothing new for her. When she was younger, she went to an Arab-Jewish summer camp and told the *Exponent* that religion never matters when socializing.

“The reason I got involved with the program is because I wanted to make new friends, interact with Arab children my age, get to know them as true friends just like any other friends of mine and playing the steel drums with them is beautiful,” she said.

“I love the steel drums music,” she continued. “And when I work together as a team with my new Arab friends to play the songs on all the different positions, I feel like there is no other conflict going on around us because we’re working together.”

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