THE WAR AND THE FUTURE OF JEWISH & ARAB-ISRAELI RELATIONS
Mike Prashker

While Hezbollah’s missiles are hitting both Jewish and Arab-Israeli communities, it is already clear that the war is placing still more strain on relations between Israel’s Jewish majority and Arab minority.

Many Jewish and Arab-Israelis, even colleagues in the “co-existence” education community, seem shocked at how differently we view the war. Not content with arguing over the facts and their interpretation, we even argue about the way we should respectively feel. But it is well known that collective memories and distinct historical experiences powerfully shape the way in which we understand the world. So we should not be surprised or dismayed.

Jewish and Arab-Israeli citizens generally view the war very differently. Many Israelis remain insensitive to the genuine pain and fears of their fellow citizens. Jewish-Israelis need to appreciate that Arab-Israelis are inevitably torn by the fighting between their State and their People. Many Arab-Israelis have family in Lebanon and this war, like those that preceded it, arouses their most painful memories and deepest fears.

But many Arab-Israelis have either not felt or demonstrated empathy for the genuine fears of most Jewish-Israelis. Arguments about Israel’s far greater military strength as compared to Hezbollah, fail to recognize the primal Jewish “expulsion-holocaust” nerve that Sheik Nasrallah and his Iranian backers, intentionally or otherwise, have touched. Arab-Israeli complaints of fatigue after almost 60 years of bearing the weight of painful Jewish history and living under the stubborn shadow of suspicion, might be understandable, but are unhelpful.

Understanding the fears and anxieties of Jewish-Israelis does not of course mean that Arab-Israelis cannot condemn the war, which is the legitimate democratic right of every Israeli citizen.

We all need to do better at acknowledging and accommodating each others’ now intimately interwoven traumas. If we cannot do so, Israeli society could fragment. The Balkan experience and, ironically, the Lebanese one, are unfortunately both relevant.

While the guns are firing, everyone involved in building better Jewish-Arab relations needs to operate in a damage-control mode. We need as much dialogue as possible within our community, to listen to each other much more and judge each other far less.

Once the guns fall silent, we will need to work much harder to construct a shared civic consciousness that is meaningful for all Israelis – something that we are yet to achieve. We will need to address the underlying causes of the deep tensions that the war has highlighted and aggravated. Young Jewish and Arab-Israelis, who live and learn separately, will need to be educated to overcome mutual ignorance and prejudice, to become more comfortable with their fellow citizens.
The deep social and economic inequalities fatally highlighted by the lack of bomb-shelters in Arab-Israeli communities, will need to be addressed. The levels of economic disparity between Israel’s rich and poor that have already eroded solidarity between Jewish-Israelis are even wider and more corrosive between Jewish and Arab-Israelis.

Jewish-Israelis will need to finally come to terms with the fact that fully 20% of their fellow citizens (and a third of all school students) are Muslim, Christian and Druze. Political and public discourse will need to belatedly change to include and thereby dignify all Israel’s citizens.

Such a newly inclusive civic awareness and reality can be crafted in ways that need not threaten, but can rather reinforce, Israel’s unique status as national homeland to the Jewish People. Alongside achieving equal rights and opportunities for Arab-Israelis, practical steps could be taken that would themselves go a long way to addressing deep alienation. The instigation of a “Citizens’” day to celebrate the diversity of Israeli society and the development of a civic service corps as an alternative to military service for Arab-Israelis could be two such positive steps.

And finally, as this war is so tragically highlighting, we all need to hope and work for regional reconciliation. While not a prerequisite to sustainable co-existence, such an accommodation, along with all its blessings, will make normal civic relations between Jewish and Arab-Israelis far simpler, by reducing mutual fears and extracting Arab-Israelis from between the rock and the hard place that they currently inhabit.

Mike Prashker is Founder and Director of MERCHAVIM – the Institute for the Advancement of Shared Citizenship in Israel.