

Israeli Arab tennis champs bring sport and coexistence to Jewish summer camp



Fahoum Fahoum teaches tennis to kids at Camp Ramah in Canada (courtesy photo).

this story is by

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Nadine Fahoum teaches tennis to kids at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires in 2012. Photo by courtesy of Camp Ramah in the Berkshires

Fahoum Fahoum at Camp Ramah in New England. Photo by Courtesy of Howard Blas



As the summer winds down, kids are coming home from

American [Jewish sleepaway camp](#) and telling their parents all the new things they've done. Some will report finally having swum in the deep end of the pool, others that they read Torah or led prayers for the first time. For children who attended some of the Ramah camps, the list also includes their first-ever meeting with an [Israeli Arab](#).

The Palestinian citizen of Israel they met was either Nadine Fahoum, or her brother Fahoum Fahoum. Both are top-level tennis players who have represented Israel internationally and played Division I tennis in the United States.



Ramah, the camping arm of the Conservative Movement, has invited Nadine and Fahoum to teach the sport at its camps in New England, the Berkshires and Canada for the past two summers.

"It was about my teaching tennis, but it was more importantly about exposing the kids to all of Israel," said 22-year-old Fahoum, who spent a week at one camp north of Toronto and two days at another in Palmer, Massachusetts. "Having me there helps them complete the picture."

"Some kids didn't even know there were non-Jews in Israel," noted Nadine, 23, who spent a week in Wingdale, New York.

The siblings are not new to the subject of coexistence. Raised in a Muslim family in Haifa (their mother, Wafa Zoabi, is a lawyer and their father, Anan, owns a bakery), they both attended the prestigious Reali Hebrew School from first through twelfth grades. Nadine recalled that they were the only Arab students at the school, while Fahoum remembered there being one other Arab boy, a Christian.

They were also the only Arabs among the young tennis players they trained with and competed against at the Israel Tennis Center in Haifa, at least in the early years before the ITC's Coexistence Program began.

Fahoum caught the tennis bug at age seven when he came with his father to pick up his sister from practice one day. Now entering his senior year at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Connecticut, he was the highest ranked male junior tennis player in Israel by the time he turned 14, and remained among the top five for the next four years as he competed on the junior national team at tournaments in France, Italy, the U.S. and other places.

He even fought for the right to represent Israel at tournaments in Egypt and Jordan.

"The International Tennis Federation was not sure I should come play for Israel against players from Arab countries. But I appealed and won. I have the right to play for my country," he emphasized.

Nadine, who is beginning an MA program in international education at New York University this fall, was the top female junior tennis player in Israel from the time she was 12 until she was 18. She played for Israel at the World Championships and European Championships, and also at the youth competition at Wimbledon. Her first job after college was working for the Israel Tennis Centers Foundation.

Noa Raz, tennis coordinator at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires, was one of the Haifa players who moved up through the ranks with Nadine. She was thrilled to see her former teammate arrive at Ramah. Raz hadn't seen Nadine since she left Israel to play tennis at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, and then later at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina during the time that Raz was doing her army service.

Raz believes the campers related well to Nadine for several reasons. "First, she's been in the U.S. for a long time, so it's easy for the kids to connect with her," Raz said. "Also, it's easy of the kids to talk about the tough

subjects with Nadine when they already see that she and I are friends and that she speaks Hebrew with the mishlachot [visiting Israeli counselors].”

“The first thing kids always ask me when they meet me and find out I am Israeli is, ‘Were you in the army? Did you kill an Arab?’ They think that Arabs are bad, so when they get to know Nadine, it really opens their eyes,” Raz said.

“I found it sort of surprising that an Israeli Arab would come to Ramah,” 14-year-old Jared Boretsky admitted. A Jewish day school student from Montreal, he got to know Fahoum a bit as they chatted on the way to Camp Ramah in Canada’s tennis courts. “This is a Zionist camp and there are lots of Israeli counselors and special Israel and Jewish celebrations, so I didn’t initially think that it would have been interesting for him.”

On the tennis court during lessons and in discussion groups that took place elsewhere, Nadine and Fahoum fielded a variety of questions from the kids. The campers wanted to know what it was like for them to have gone to a Hebrew school and to have been the only Arab students. They were curious about whether they were religiously observant Muslims or not (the Fahoums are not). They asked how it felt to represent Israel around the world.

“I told them that I was very proud, that I played on everyone’s behalf and that we can live together in peace,” Nadine said.

“The older ones asked me about my identity and my political views, and about what I think the future of Palestinian-Israeli relations will be,” Fahoum added. He doesn’t put much stock in politicians and explained to the kids that he is personally working toward a social solution.

He’s focusing on developing Arab-Israeli relations through sports, and spending time at Ramah fits in well with his plans.

“Camp Ramah is doing a great thing by being open-minded and willing to listen and learn,” Nadine said. “It’s a big deal for a Zionist American Jewish camp.”