TAHAEL HARRIS has lived in Lod for two years, with her husband Yedidia and their two children, Yaela and Roi. In July, we met with her as part of Mizrachi USA’s Leadership Solidarity Mission to Israel and spoke with her about her experience during the violence.

Tell us about the Jewish community in Lod and the “Garin Torani” you are a part of. What was it like to live in a “mixed” city with Jews and Arabs living together, before the May riots broke out?

For many years, Lod was seen as one of Israel’s least developed cities, with high poverty and crime rates. Twenty years ago, two families decided to form a Garin Torani, a group of religious families who would move to Lod to strengthen the Jewish community here. The Garin Torani has since grown significantly, now numbering a few hundred families. The community has a warm, small-town feeling and is in a fantastic location, only a few minutes from Tel Aviv, Ben Gurion Airport, and Israel’s main highway Route 6.

Lod is 70% Jewish and 30% Arab, but our neighborhood of Ramat Eshkol is the reverse: 70% Arab and 30% Jews. In general, we have excellent relations between the two communities. There is an understanding that the communities operate differently, but we have been excellent neighbors.

For me, living in the same building as Arabs has taught me a lot about their culture. I arrived with many stereotypes, but now I know the culture firsthand, which has been very eye-opening.

What was it like to be living in Lod during the riots?

On Monday evening, May 10th, the riots began. That afternoon, we’d held an event in the cultural center, and we had greeted the Arab women there as usual; everything felt normal. We were caught off guard and never imagined that we would ever be scared simply to leave our homes.

On the first night, the rioters burned the local Beit Midrash of the pre-army Mechina, and crowds of young Arab men burned cars and threw stones at Jewish homes. On the second evening of the riots, there were Arabs in our

"Jews from all over came to secure the streets to protect us."

As Hamas terrorists launched thousands of rockets at Israeli towns and cities this past May, Israeli Arabs rioted in Lod, part of a wave of Arab violence throughout Israel. During nightly rampages, the rioters firebombed Jew-owned cars and buildings, including a synagogue.
neighborhood throwing rocks and fireworks, but there was a siren because of a rocket fired by Hamas.

It was surreal – we had to decide what was riskier; running to the shelter, but possibly being exposed to the Arab rioters, or staying in our home but unprotected from the Hamas rockets.

We decided to go to the shelter, and we met Arab families there – or more accurately, half of the Arab families.

The women and children were in the shelters, but the men weren’t there, and I can only guess where they were.

We couldn’t look each other in the eye – we had nothing to say to them, and they had nothing to say to us.

Because it was Ramadan when the Arabs fast each day, the days were calm. But the riots kept getting worse in the evenings. It was a lonely time, as we felt abandoned by our Arab neighbors, who didn’t even reach out to ask if we were okay, and abandoned by the police, who were too slow to deal with the rioters.

The riots became more severe, as the rioters progressed from throwing rocks to firing guns. After three days of rioting, we decided that I would leave with the children to Yerushalayim, while Yedidia would stay to help secure the neighborhood.

How has the Jewish community of Lod worked to rebuild since the riots ended?

During the riots, we felt like we received a massive hug from Am Yisrael.

People from all over the country sent cakes, games for kids and whatever we needed.

Jews from all over came to secure the streets to protect us.

After the riots, we have been focused on the mental health of the community.

Children, parents, individuals – so many people saw horrendous and shocking things. People have had their cars and homes burned, so we are also focusing on rebuilding and fixing what needs to be restored.

We have even tried to welcome new residents to the community to build and strengthen our presence here.

Some people are coming to live here for a year, just to help strengthen the community. We also hope that the Arabs who move here will be those who reject the violence.

This area will continue to be a mixed neighborhood, but we want to ensure it will be a neighborhood where people will live in peace together.

Going forward, do you think it will be possible to rebuild relationships with members of the Arab community of Lod?

It is not easy at all. Do we now need to start sending our children with security guards when they walk in the street? The Arab community is diverse, with many different groups and views. Our community wants to work together with our Arab neighbors, but at this point, the feelings are still raw.

I am optimistic, as we remember that it was only half a year ago that we did have good inter-communal relations. I think that we need to regain our basic sense of security and feel comfortable again, and only then can we begin to rebuild relationships.

Another critical goal is strengthening the moderate Arab voices within Lod. There are many Arabs in Lod who want to live peacefully and side by side with us, and we also understand that being an Arab in Israel means living as a minority, something we must be sensitive toward. It is complicated, it will take time, but I am confident about the future of Lod as a diverse city and about the ability of Jews and Arabs to live in peace around Israel. As the Israeli saying goes, “The eternal people are not scared of a long journey.”