

Don't Walk Away: An Entreaty from Jewish and Arab Israelis

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Our message is as simple as the black letters, Hebrew and Arabic, on our plain white tee shirts:

“We walk together.”

Jews, Muslims, Christians.

Three hand-drawn birds flutter around those words printed on the front. Another bird flies through the same inscription on the back, adding these words in the two languages:

“Hand in hand.”

Since early July, Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel have been walking together twice a week along a converted railway path in Jerusalem lined with plane trees and yellow street lamps. We stroll on the promenade from Beit Safafa, an Arab neighborhood, to Gonen, a Jewish neighborhood. A slow night draws about 100 of us, better nights draw as many as 250. We are 70 to 80 percent Jewish Israelis and 20 to 30 percent Arab Israelis, including some Muslim walkers who gather their strength to join us after the 16-hour Ramadan fast. Some of us chat, sing, hold hands, even tell jokes. Others shuffle along, not talking much.

We meet at the Max Rayne Hand in Hand Bilingual School, a Jewish-Arab school, after the Iftar, the break-the-fast meal eaten during Ramadan. Then we head into the cool breeze, trickling down the school stairs onto the pedestrian walkway like passengers boarding a long train.

In June, three young Jewish Israelis were abducted from the West Bank and killed, and after a two-and-a-half-week search their bodies were found in a ditch. Days later, a Palestinian teenager from East Jerusalem was abducted, beaten, and burned alive in an apparent act of revenge. Relations between Jewish and Arab Israelis deteriorated at an alarming pace, and the air grew thick with racism and aggression. Meanwhile, the rocket attacks on Israel kept coming, and combat in Gaza grew fiercer.

It is a sad reality that most Jewish and Arab Israelis have only superficial relationships with one another. They interact casually in public and commercial spaces, such as malls, hospitals, offices, universities, and parks, and sometimes at work. But they have little or no social interaction. Jewish

Israelis are even less likely to know Palestinians who live in the West Bank or Gaza. And those kinds of friendships can be hard to come by. I only got to know Palestinian women who live on the other side of the separation barrier after I joined an Israeli-Palestinian breast cancer support group. There I met Ibtisam Erekat of Abu Dis, whom I now call dear friend. Other friends from the group hail from Ramallah and from Beit Hanina, a Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem.

In the absence of firsthand knowledge, mutual trust, and meaningful connections, people tend to turn inward toward their own and away from those they perceive to be different. They go to a place where even talking about friendships with “those people” during wartime poses a threat to their sense of group cohesion. From that point, it is a short distance to travel to where Other equals Foe.

And so it happened this past July. Slogans such as “Death to Arabs” and “No Arabs, no terrorist attacks,” amid other hateful language, flooded Israeli social media sites. Over the course of two days, around 32,000 people, some of whom were Israeli soldiers, “liked” a Facebook page named “The people of Israel demand revenge.” Some members of the group shot selfies with racist mottos scrawled on their fingers, forearms, and torsos, toting guns pointed to shoot or smiling with arms around friends, holding sheets scrawled with racist slogans. Menacing postings to Arab members of the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, abounded. Organized groups of Jewish thugs started roaming the streets of downtown Jerusalem, hunting for Palestinian Israelis to harass and pound. The remarks of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu didn’t help matters much. Shortly after the bodies of the three Israeli teens were found, he responded by quoting a line from Haim Nahman Bialik’s poem “On the Slaughter” at a government meeting: “Vengeance for the blood of a small child, Satan has not yet created.” He tweeted those same words, adding: “Neither has the vengeance for the blood of 3 pure youths who were on their way home to see their parents who will not see them anymore.”

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