



Burning of Churches in the Jewish State? Impossible!

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Is it really happening? Are we actually witnessing the burning of churches and mosques on a regular basis in the Jewish state? Impossible! It can't be happening!

Jews, who have suffered so much persecution and pogroms in their own history could not possibly do such things. Jews--whose Torah clearly teaches them to be kind to "the stranger", the minority in your midst, for "you were strangers in the land of Egypt"--should not be able to even imagine themselves as people who could burn churches or mosques indiscriminately.

But it is happening! During the past 3 1/2 years, 43 churches and mosques have been vandalized.

And what is even more amazing is that not a single culprit has been caught, arrested or brought to justice! Whoever is doing this has apparently outsmarted all the security forces in the state of Israel! They are geniuses and succeed in covering their tracks in every case!

I asked a politician whom I met at a conference a few months ago to explain this to me, and he said quite clearly that "it is all politics". Is this possible? Are all of our political and legal authorities not doing what they should on this matter for internal narrow political considerations?

It is widely known that there are Jewish extremist groups who are behind these acts of violence. I have heard former head of the Security Services in Israel, Carmi Gillon, say more than once that the perpetrators of these hate crimes are well known to the security services. They know where they sleep, whom they talk to on the phone, where they live, and what they do during the day (but apparently not at night). But there never seems to be enough proof to arrest them and prosecute them!

If the culprits were Palestinians, they would certainly have been caught, arrested and sentenced a long time ago. But the new "Jewish underground" is outsmarting our security experts!? Really?

In addition, it is widely known who the extremist rabbis are who give blessings to these vandals by preaching and teaching hatred in their yeshivahs and in the books and essays which they write. But they too are not arrested for incitement, since there is not sufficient proof that their sermons and essays have led directly to violence! A case is pending with the Israeli Supreme Court to bring these rabbis to justice for incitement, but the Supreme Court justices apparently are not finding enough "evidence" once again.

When will this all stop? When will the leaders of the state of Israel stop simply denouncing these acts after they happen and giving lip service to the need for the culprits to be brought to justice? When will they actually do something about it?

The Vatican and much of the Christian world is very upset with the leadership of the state of Israel, after the burning of large parts of the Church of Loaves and Fishes at Tabgha last weekend! They are enraged morally and diplomatically, as they should be.

But are the Jews of the world enraged?

Where is the leadership of the Jewish People--in Israel and abroad--on this issue? Are they raising their moral, religious voices loud and clear on this? If so, we are not hearing them on this in Israel. Aren't they embarrassed that such hate crimes can go on for so long in the Jewish state, a state that they once wanted to be "a light unto the nations"?

Imagine if this kind of vandalism had been done consistently over more than three years to synagogues in any country of the world. Jewish leaders everywhere would be speaking out. Why don't we hear their voices when it comes to the repeated vandalism of churches and mosques in the Jewish state? Is there something overtly or covertly political in their silence?

I belong to a coalition of 50 Jewish and interreligious organizations in Israel called the Tag Meir ("Light Tag") Forum. We have been combatting these hate crimes committed by Jewish extremists for the last three and half years. Every time there is an attack, we are there the same day or the next day to offer empathy and solidarity and to say that this is not the Jewish way. We lobby in the Knesset and organize educational programs against racism. We believe that we represent the overwhelming majority of Jews in Israel on this issue.

But we have not succeeded yet in convincing the authorities in Israel to take swift and real action against the culprits of these crimes. This will take more of a public outcry.

It is very difficult for me and my colleagues in Israel to understand the lack of action by the security , political and legal leadership in Israel on this issue. Not only is this tarnishing the moral image of the state of Israel in the world , but it is just plain wrong. It is antithetical to basic Jewish teachings and it should be stopped right away. No more excuses. No more lip service. Justice must be done. Period.

Rabbi Dr. Ron Kronish serves as the Founding Director and now as Senior Advisor of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel. As of January 1, 2015, ICCI is a department of Rabbis for Human Rights. Born and raised in the U.S., he has lived in Jerusalem for 35 years. Educated at Brandeis University (B.A.) and at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (EdD), he also holds rabbinic ordination from the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion. He has written many op-eds, blogs and articles in newspapers and magazines in Israel and the U.S., over the past 40 years. A book of essays which he has edited, entitled Coexistence and Reconciliation in Israel--Voices of Interreligious Dialogue, will be published in May 2015 by Paulist Press in the U.S.A. In addition, he is now working on a book on The Other Peace Process--Interreligious Dialogue, Education and Action in Israel. Rabbi Kronish lectures widely to audiences in Israel, North America and Europe on topics related to Peace, Coexistence, and Interreligious Dialogue.

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