



Combatting hate crimes with a Jewish humanistic response

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Last week, I visited an injured Israeli Muslim bus driver in the town of Abu Gosh, just west of Jerusalem. Abu Gosh is a friendly Israeli Arab town, which has many wonderful restaurants visited by secular Israelis on Shabbat and holidays, and which runs two great music festivals a year. Many of the people whom I have known for years in Abu Gosh are actively involved in the Association for the Promotion of Tolerance and Coexistence in the Judean Hills, a non-profit organization in the area.

The young bus driver, age 24, named Mohammed, was beaten up, spit on, cursed and had his smartphone broken, while driving his bus from Jerusalem to Bet Shemesh (30 minutes west of Jerusalem). The event took place at 4 a.m. His attackers were Jewish youth wearing black kippot on their heads. The police came to his aide, and took him to the emergency room at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem, but they did nothing to arrest the culprits who attacked this innocent man simply because he is an Arab.

My visit to meet and express solidarity with this young man's plight was organized by the *Tag Meir Forum*, which organizes tens of these solidarity visits, usually to Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank who have been attacked in hate crimes, often under the motto of "price tag". This is a slogan used mainly by ultra-orthodox super nationalist Jewish youth, sometimes known as "hilltop youth", especially in the West Bank but also inside Israel, to exact revenge against innocent Palestinians — Muslims and Christians — for no good reason other than xenophobia and a desire to cause trouble for the state of Israel, since many of these youth have become ant-state anarchists.

The *Tag Meir Forum* is a coalition of more than 50 Jewish groups — Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and Secular— which has for the past 8 years been combatting hate crimes against innocent Palestinians or Jews throughout Israel and the West Bank. I was among the founders of this group in 2011, during Hanukkah and therefore the name "Tag Meir" ("Light Tag"), since we wanted to spread light in Israeli and Palestinian society, as against all the darkness that was (and is) prevailing. I served on its steering committee for five years, when I was still the director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel. Through my involvement with the Tag Meir ("Light Tag") Forum I have spoken at many of their demonstrations against hate crimes in Israel, and I have visited many Palestinian and Jewish homes and institutions in which people had been injured or even killed, and property had been vandalized. Recently, I rejoined the group that makes solidarity visits to people affected by this wave of hatred plaguing Israeli society.

Based on the biblical commandment "You shall love the stranger, since you were strangers in the land of Egypt," the purpose of these solidarity visits is to show the humanistic, empathetic, compassionate qualities of Judaism, which are at the heart of our religion, as opposed to the extremist, fanatic and chauvinistic characteristics which have sadly become the dominant ones of the hard core right-wing nationalist/fundamentalist Jewish community, which still represents a small minority in Israel, although it tends to get a lot of media attention since it is violent (and the media loves violence!). Every time that I have been involved in one of these visits, I have witnessed how much the injured people appreciate our efforts and are gratified to meet Jews who care about our common humanity.

A group of us from Jerusalem, Neveh Ilan, Mevasseret Zion, Ashdod and Rehovot met Mohammed and his father in a coffee shop on the main street in Abu Gosh which is known as *Derech Hashalom — the Way of Peace*.

They were very happy to receive us. Mohammed told us what happened to him the previous Saturday night. One of the most shocking parts of his story was the fact that when he was attacked, there were about 40 people on the bus and no one got up from their seat to help him! When we learned that he had filed a complaint with the police, but that he needed a lawyer, Dr. Gadi Gvanyahu, chairperson of the *Tag Meir Forum*, offered him the assistance of a lawyer, an offer which was gratefully accepted.

Jews from all over Israel will continue to present the humanistic side of Judaism whenever innocent Muslims, Christians or Jews are attacked wantonly, as long as this disturbing phenomenon persists in our society. We are often joined by like-minded Christians and Muslims who share our common values of treating the stranger kindly and fairly, at our solidarity visits and our public demonstrations. These actions provide some hope in an ongoing situation that often appears to be only dark and dismal. In the end, we believe that our Jewish values will prevail over the ones that have been distorted and amplified of late by the extremists.

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