

Occupied Territories: 'Come to Israel and See for Yourself'

Recently, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie made news when, speaking at a gathering of the Republican Jewish Coalition, he used the term *occupied territories* to describe what's otherwise known as biblical Judea and Samaria, or more commonly and sometimes pejoratively, the West Bank.

Having grown up an easy bike ride from the governor's residence in New Jersey and having lived there for the last decade before moving to Israel, things that happen there are still close to home. This was especially the case when Christie talked about the place I've chosen to make my home since 2004.

Apparently, the incident wasn't just about his use of this term, but how he behaved afterward that added fuel to the fire. Christie certainly has a history of dismissing critics, which may or may not be good politically, but it's his M.O.

So, when confronted immediately after his remarks by Mort Klein, a long-time Jewish leader who addressed the governor about the use of the phrase, rather than addressing the question posed to him, Gov. Christie simply acknowledged that he had seen Klein shaking his head when he made the comment. Klein repeated his question. Christie repeated his observation of Klein shaking his head.

All this raised questions about Gov. Christie's pro-Israel credentials or beliefs. Truthfully, I don't know what's in Gov. Christie's heart. I have invited him to my home, and maybe we'll have a heart-to-heart talk someday. But in the meantime, I am not prepared to pre-judge.

What I do know is that it's just as possible that Christie is indeed very pro-Israel, and not only is his use of the phrase *occupied territory* not mutually exclusive to that, but he just may not know any better. He wouldn't be the first.

Over the years, I have had the unique privilege of hosting many guests in my home, my community and the surrounding Judean mountains just miles from the center of Jerusalem. I have hosted everyone from self-hating Jews to pro-Israel Christians and everything in between. I even had the opportunity to host a Muslim diplomat from another Middle Eastern country. In all cases, visits like these do tend to educate and change the perspective of those visiting, sometimes for the better and sometimes not. But visiting and seeing the reality is very different from what's portrayed in the world media.

What's also interesting is that while not universal, even some of the most pro-Israel guests are grossly lacking in knowledge about reality and history here that's so essential to begin to understand the complex realities. This is not an indictment, just a reality. Many use language that's similar to those who are the most anti-Israel without an awareness of the nuances involved.

I never think to question these guests' deep, sincere and unshakable commitment, despite language they may use but they just don't know. So I help educate and open their eyes. Not to indoctrinate, just to explain.

Use of language that's pervasive among those who fight and fault Israel at every turn displays a wider failure of pro-Israel PR and organizations that advocate for Israel to counter the insidious and inaccurate narrative of the Israel haters. I am not saying that there's not a legitimate other narrative but that when it's based in lies and hate, it's not legitimate, accurate or honest. Sadly, that's much more the rule than the exception to the rule.

For guests who don't know, I sometimes use the phrases *Judea and Samaria* and *West Bank* interchangeably, not to make a point, but to increase understanding. Depending on the circumstances or the baggage and perspective of the people I am with, the same information can be presented in the identical manner yet construed in very different ways.

For example, if I speak about, and show guests, my corner of the West Bank, they tend to leave with a deeper understanding of its many complexities and a history. But their view usually winds up vastly different from the understanding of the West Bank that's commonly presented in the media.

At the same time, if I use the biblical term *Judea and Samaria*, the epicenter of the land that God gave to the Jewish people, to describe the same story while showing the same sites and landmarks, guests also leave with a deeper understanding. However, based on a lack of knowledge and common misinformation, guests sometimes leave with a deep appreciation for the Jewish connection to Judea and Samaria but still occasionally ask: "What about the West Bank?"

Lack of understanding is lack of understanding. I come across that too often. I don't judge, and I try to educate. So I can't pre-judge that Gov. Christie is any less pro-Israel than another because he used a pejorative term that suggests Israel and the Jewish people have no legal, moral, religious or historic basis for being in Judea and Samaria, the West Bank or anything else. He may just not know the difference.

I hope he will come visit. I hope others will join him or visit on their own. I hope that all those who have a heart for Israel will take time to be educated and that those who stand with Israel will make it a priority to help in this mission and not to judge the use of a word or phrase that may be inopportune, grossly wrong or even offensive.

I also hope those without the inclination to be pro-Israel

will come visit as well, bringing an open mind but leaving preconceptions and baggage at the gate of my community.

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