

Arabs and Jews: Kisses and Coexistence

Living in the land of Israel, in the biblical region Judea and Samaria, there are many aspects of daily life for which I am grateful to God and for His giving me the privilege of living here, fulfilling His prophecy.

Because the more common, and much less biblical, name for Judea and Samaria is the West Bank, I am often asked about my personal safety and that of my family. I am asked about the overall state of affairs here (there's always something in the news), given that many of our neighbors are hostile—including no shortage of terrorists—and the sense that overall, Israel is a dangerous place to live, much less visit, even for Christians who understand this is the only land whose deed is in the Bible and its significance for Jews and Christians.

Often when having these conversations, I am surprised to hear parallel dreams about coming to visit and see the land, but people fear to do so. I shouldn't be surprised, because I am well aware of how Israel is portrayed in the media. But living here and experiencing the reality of life here, the difference between what's reported and what's real are often so vast that the only way for people to understand is to come see for themselves.

During these conversations, I explain the reality, not denying very real issues that exist and the fears I have as a father and husband, and I invite people to come visit and see firsthand. Whether you've been to Israel yet or not, allow me to use this opportunity to share with you some of the reality on the ground and invite you to come see for yourself.

As many Israelis do, I have deep and warm relationships with many Israeli Arabs not noted here. However, one relationship

that is noteworthy is the man who is the closest living person to me as a father figure. He is a Christian Israeli Arab, and his children are like my siblings and my kids' uncles and aunts.

However, in writing about these experiences, I am writing about relationships between Israeli Jews and non-Israeli Palestinian Arabs, both Christians and Muslims.

This was sparked by a recent wonderful interaction I witnessed at a local grocery store serving and employing both Israeli Jews and non-Israeli Palestinian Arabs. Being in the West Bank, that makes the Israelis who work or shop there "settlers," as depicted in the media often in a disparaging way. Yet there are many personal interactions that take place daily there that are testimony to the reality that peaceful coexistence is possible, that "settlements" are not an obstacle to peace, and that raise doubt to the wisdom of certain policies and beliefs that call for an altogether separation of Jewish Israelis from non-Jewish Arabs.

While waiting on line to check out, I saw the clerk from the adjacent register stand up and walk to the grocery cart of the woman who was bagging her groceries in front of me. What struck me is the clerk was kissing the baby of the woman checking out, cupping the baby's face and kissing her all over as the baby enjoyed a cracker.

In Israel, it's not uncommon to see total strangers approach and even embrace kids they don't know and then offer parenting advice. In the U.S., this might be met with a call to the police, but here it's quite normal, or at least not abnormal.

What was remarkable in this instance is that the store clerk was an Arab woman, and the baby she was nearly kissing to death was an orthodox Jewish "settler."

On another occasion, I had an incredibly open and warm conversation with another Arab clerk with whom I shared hopes

and wishes, as well as photos, for our kids' future to be one of living in peace.

Many other examples abound. Once I needed a new tire and went to the local garage. Mohammed apologized profusely that he only had one tire for me to choose from, offering to give me a temporary one and come back the next day when he'd have another for me to select from as well.

Just outside my community, there are four Arab businesses: a hardware store, two car washes and an auto body shop. All advertise exclusively in Hebrew to Israeli Jews, "settlers," and when doing business there, one is greeted warmly and with excellent customer service that makes these places frequented by my neighbors and gives them a good living with mutual respect the rule.

We may not love each other, but we do rely on one another. I explained this to a visiting U.S. diplomat once, that if we were to be separated from one another by a fence, they would lose their livelihood and the negative social ripple effect would be profound.

Within my community, there are an abundant number of Arabs who come to work here, so much so that I joke on any given weekday there are more Arab men here than Jewish men because the Jewish men typically commute to jobs in nearby Jerusalem.

Two such men are the gardeners who tend to our lawn and several fruit trees. Whenever they come to care for the lawn, they know they are welcome for coffee and cake that my wife will gladly serve them, as I did myself this week. They appreciate our hospitality, and we appreciate their hard work.

In 2010, I hosted a church group from Nevada. I invited the mayor to escort us some of the way. While overlooking an adjacent Arab village, he showed our guests how we were in the midst of connecting our water supply to theirs. Water is precious in Israel, and every liter shared means far more than

the value of the water itself.

As we stood there, two young Arab men approached the group and addressed the mayor directly in Hebrew, expressing a familiarity one has when talking to someone you already know. This took place during the building freeze, done as a way to nudge the Palestinians back into negotiation with us.

The Arab men wasted no time complaining to the mayor that they hated the building freeze, that they wanted to work, and that it was hurting them and their families economically. Mind you, the mayor was the mayor of an Israeli "settlement," and the building that the men wanted to be doing was building houses and infrastructure in our community. Is that an obstacle to peace? Hardly.

There's the instance I witnessed of heavily armed Israeli soldiers helping to push a stalled car of an Arab woman off to the side of the road, soon joined by two Arab men to help. The media would have a hard time explaining, much less reporting on this as it didn't involve rock throwing, stabbing or rubber bullets being fired or something else to blame on the occupation.

Adapting the timeless philosophical question, if Israeli and Arab coexistence happens but there's no media report of it, does it really happen? The answer is, unequivocally, yes.

Many other examples abound. These are a fraction of personal experiences I have had. I could write a book if I included my neighbors' experiences as well. If it had only been about kissing a cute baby, perhaps it would be an anomaly. But it's not. Coexistence, where given the chance, exists and can flourish.

Will peace come from that? I don't know. But I do know that peace without coexistence cannot happen. And too much of thought seeks to separate the two, divide Jews and Arabs, and does not begin to comprehend how one is reliant on the next.

If you've not been to Israel yet, please start planning your trip. If you have, it's probably time to recharge your batteries and come back. That's why I am organizing a special, uniquely subsidized trip to Israel, especially for pastors and heads of ministries, to see for themselves and then be able to lead a group of their own.

If you are interested or wish to share this with your pastor, please be in touch directly at *FirstPersonIsrael@*. But either way, do come visit, please be in touch, and come see for yourself.

With hugs and kisses from the "West Bank."