

Persecuted Christian Recounts Holy Land Drama

"This is a holy land—you have no business being here." "You're a bad man." "You are dirty." "You are a demon."

I wish I could say that when I heard these words, my first response was to love the six men who were walking, just feet behind me, spitting the insults. But indignation and anger were welling up inside, and the biblical injunctions to pray for and bless those who persecute you offered only momentary comfort.

The men following a friend and me in the Jerusalem suburb of Mevasseret Zion were supporters of Yad L'Achim, a far right-wing group of ultra-Orthodox Jews who oppose Christians in Israel. The group is known for the aggressive and often questionable tactics they use against people who follow Christ, whom they derisively call "missionaries." The six men had all attended a protest outside the home of a Jewish couple the group had so identified.

There the 20 protestors had swarmed 16-year-old Donna Lubofsky, whom they said had converted to Christianity under the tutelage of Naama Kogen, the accused "missionary" along with her husband Serge Kogen. A woman at the protest called the girl a bad daughter for rebelling against her parents and said she was "breaking their heart."

It didn't matter that the women didn't know Donna or her parents, and that Kogen said she never tried to convert the girl. It didn't matter that Donna said she was still a traditional Jew, or even that police and a court found no reason to charge the Kogens with trying to convert a minor.

As I was walking away from the men, I was astonished by the reactions of others. When I approached a man in a car to ask

for directions, the six men surrounded me and began shouting, then told the driver not to help me. Eventually the man was so terrified he refused to speak to me. My friend and I made it to a mall only to find one of the members of the group waiting for us at the entrance, arms crossed, gloating. My friend and I asked mall security personnel to help us, but they and even men who appeared to be law enforcement officers only backed away.

Every turn we took, the men countered, running up and declaring to whoever would listen that we were “missionaries” trying to convert Jewish children to the “cult of Christ.” Hebrew-speaking friends of mine called police several times, but after five calls over 90 minutes, we knew no one was coming.

My friend went into a woman’s store, and the women there became so incensed at what was happening to us that they screamed at the hard-line group. When the women were told we were “missionaries,” one shouted in English, “I don’t care. This is Israel!”

The women, by the force of their indignation, compelled two security guards to do something for us that they might have considered doing instead to the six men—they escorted us out of the mall. We were able to find a taxi and ride back to Jerusalem.

Like many who report on persecuted Christians, as I left I was struck by the “touristic” nature of the verbal abuse we had received; as an outsider I can leave the country, but I do so knowing Naama Kogen, her husband and their four children are sleeping in a home that people have threatened to burn down.