

Sending Kids to School in Jerusalem

The Perspective of a Parent

By Mohammed Alami



My children are twins who just turned 15 years old. They are the same age as the young people who have been targeted by both Israeli police and settlers during the latest clashes that started in September 2015. Since we live on the Mount of Olives, which has more than one settlement, simply watching my children go to school has been a source of worry, a disturbing and unsettling experience, even though the situation has settled down a bit lately. The news and stories that we witness almost daily, via the media and firsthand in our own lives, have deeply affected my family and me.

But let me give you some background on my life philosophy. My belief in the importance of bringing people together has led me to become the Palestinian contact person for the Council of International Programs, which aims to give professionals throughout the world a better understanding of all peoples. In this context, I have participated, for example, in a two-week peace initiative offered by the Council of International Fellowship (CIF) in Italy. Through my previous work activities I have made contact with some Israelis, and among them there are a few people whom I would consider my friends. I believe that it is important to bring young people together, and I expressed to an Israeli friend whom I have known since 1985 my readiness to start a different kind of exchange program. My idea was to provide an opportunity for our children to get to know how their counterparts live, to experience what their respective life circumstances are. I intended it to be a trial initiative that, if proven successful in promoting understanding, might be expanded. My friend liked the idea, but as



Hania Abedrabbo Rayyan homeschools her three children and, in her spare time, writes poetry.

soon as it came to taking practical steps, he was not able to accept it.

I want to reach people who believe in living together. It only takes one person to plant a tree, yet many people can benefit from the fruits. One only needs the courage to start something. And I firmly believe in the power of reconciliation. To be clear: this is not the same as normalization; it is about trying to understand each other. But

this does not mean that I am willing to accept occupation, and I know that no one on earth would ever accept the occupation.

My family and I have been deeply affected by all that has happened since October. The information on the news and the Internet has made it clear to us that young people, in particular, are being targeted. Rules are no longer valid or binding. Young Israeli police officers

can now do whatever they want. Their aggression has often been encouraged and welcomed by senior staff, and Netanyahu's shoot-to-kill orders have given them a free hand. In several cases, a girl or boy was killed and we have both eye-witness accounts as well as a video that shows clearly how the Israeli person who shot the youngster placed the knife next to the body only after the shooting. Such cases affect not only the people who were killed and their families but also the whole community, on both sides.

In October and November, I was especially worried about my twins walking to school, so I made sure to give them a ride every day, even when I did not have to continue on to work. For me the trip was an ordeal. There were cement blocks put up to make an extra checkpoint along the way to school, and cars were stopped and searched, which meant a delay for everyone. Busses were stopped and searched.

It was a tiring and time-consuming ordeal. I was often full of productive energy in the morning but had to first put in at least twenty minutes of waiting at the checkpoint before having to be searched by a usually nervous – and therefore on-edge, if not outright rude – young Israeli soldier. Afterwards I would have to deal with the regularly heavy morning traffic, so that by the time I reached my office, I would need at least another half hour just to calm down.

If I was affected in this way, how much more did the situation affect young people! I did not want my children to be stopped by police and searched, which is a scary experience any day, but especially so during this time and at their age. They would often have to take a public bus home after school since I would still be at work. The bus let them off a short distance from the house. This reality worried me every day. Settlements are close by, so there was the fear of the settlers. Soldiers

were patrolling the streets, searching people at random. The situation was very volatile. Israeli police officers were scared, often young, and armed, so when they would stop someone, it would be stressful for both. Both are adversely affected.

But the larger question is why the police need to give such a strong show of presence. My children attend a school in a Palestinian neighborhood on the Mount of Olives. Only Palestinians attend this school. Why do these students need to endure a body search on their way to school? At this age, this affects them. Why do Israeli security-service people need to park in front of the school and run their emergency lights only at the times the students enter and leave? There is no apparent reason for this, and it only serves to instill fear, given that the kids have seen on the Internet what these forces have done to their peers in recent days. This practice is unsettling, unnecessarily

so, and seems to be intended as a provocation and incitement. Moreover, the police frequently enter the schoolyard during school hours just to show their presence, their power. They even enter Maqassed Hospital that is located next to the school. And each time, they claim that someone had thrown a stone. But why do they provoke in the first place?

What is so important in this context is really, to use the image of the tree, that they are now planting another kind of tree, a tree of hate that will remain for a long time in people's memories – people on both sides. Why? Do they want us to leave? Do they want the land without people? Israelis do not seem to realize how much they isolate themselves, creating new problems along the way. And power by itself will not resolve their current or future problems. They might not realize what they are doing, but I am afraid they do know that they are nurturing hate. I can only speak for myself: the older generation will remember. How can our children forget how they are being treated?

Dr. Mohammed Alami belongs to a Jerusalemite family with a proven history of more than 500 years in the same location at the top of the Mount of Olives, the highest point in Jerusalem.



Palestinian children going to school.

IThe violence our youngsters witness, as it is perpetrated against their peers, plants a tree of hatred. Israel is most likely fully aware of the present consequences of its actions, but possibly less aware of how these actions will affect the coming generations.