

The Atlantic
December 6th 2023
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For most of my career, working as a psychiatrist in Jerusalem, I have run locked wards, serving people in distressed states who cannot remain in the community because of their need for round-the-clock care.

This life, indeed much life in Israel, feels precarious right now. The first air-raid sirens in more than a week have begun sounding in Jerusalem as I write. The comparisons between the Hamas attack of October 7 and the Holocaust reveal the extent to which our complacency has been shattered. That the residents of Gaza have it far worse is undeniably true.

My 6 year-old son drew a self-portrait depicting himself supine, a bomb descending upon him, and I got upset. I would not trade places with the families carrying their bloodied children into the emergency rooms of Gaza, with no place but the floor to rest them between the wounded and dead. Just writing these words, I cry.

And I'm outraged that Hamas could knowingly, willingly, invite this retribution for the atrocities it inflicted. The foreign reader, then, will be excused for assuming that the life of Arabs and Jews within Israel is marked by unremitting mutual enmity and lust for vengeance. Such hostile feelings are present in generous doses, but much more is happening on the ground. And the locus of positive change is often the workplace.

The Israeli public health-care system, in which I work, is perhaps the most integrated sector in the country. About half of the recipients of medical licenses are Arabs (including Druze), far beyond their percentage in the population. Graduating nurses, pharmacists, and even dentists are more likely to be Arab than Jewish. Hospital patients can expect to be treated by multiethnic professionals. And at times like these, when many Jews have been called to the war for reserve duty, the role of Arabs, who generally do not serve in the military, becomes even more prominent.

A couple of generations ago, medicine was the ticket into respectable American society for a generation of Jews, eventually opening up other possibilities to them as well. Something similar may be happening for Arab Israelis, who remain underrepresented in other professional fields, such as tech, but among whom health care is a popular career choice for ambitious and capable students.

The Israeli education system for Arabs has long been separate and unequal, in terms of both funding and results. The government has made an investment in changing this. Doing so will bring us closer not only to becoming a just society but to being a peaceful one as well. I spend my work days (and occasional nights) within this cultural tapestry. I have worked in psychiatry since 1986, when I left New York in order to make my home in Jerusalem. Two years ago, I was given responsibility for directing the most active inpatient unit in Jerusalem, at Kfar Shaul Hospital, which is located on a scenic campus on the grounds of what was once the Arab village of Deir Yassin, the site of a reported 1948 massacre of Arab villagers by Jewish (not yet Israeli) troops. The place is steeped in history, which most manage to ignore in their daily activities. Yet the staff in my ward is highly integrated. Three of the five psychiatrists are Arabs. The head nurse and close to half of his staff are Arab. About a quarter of our patients are Arab, mostly from East Jerusalem. The staff coheres. We are a workforce operating in partnership to accomplish shared goals. The warmth among workers belonging to these two tribes, Arab (overwhelmingly Muslim) and Jewish, is real and heartening. We attend one another's family weddings, and some of us share vacations. We allow ourselves to poke good-natured fun at one another's religious practices. Just recently,

when a Christian patient smuggled a quantity of forbidden ham into the ward, we thanked him for uniting Jew and Muslim against a common enemy.

My unscientific impression is that among acquaintances who work alone or only with their co-religionists, the level of fear and suspicion is higher. For example, an acquaintance in synagogue, a young man home for Shabbat from his reserve duty, spoke with me excitedly about the current situation. (I think that Judaism is more tolerant than the other monotheistic religions of schmoozing during services, but I hope not to get fact-checked on this point.) We were talking about the Hamas attack in the south and the Hezbollah threat in the north when he told me solemnly, "There is a much bigger threat looming, which we are going to have to overcome." "Iran?" I asked. He shook his head dismissively. I was stumped. "Bet Tsefafa," he explained, referring to a nearby Arab neighborhood, which is well integrated into Jerusalem. He doesn't work with Arabs in his civilian life. If he did, I don't think that he would have believed this.

A war waged between our co-religionists so nearby—traversing the distance between Gaza and Jerusalem takes a car barely an hour and a half, or a missile a minute and a half—threatens to rip apart this fragile social fabric. I was concerned that, since the outbreak of war, my hospital staff was not speaking openly about their feelings. Morning greetings had become mere formalities and were often rapidly concluded with formulaic wishes that we hear good tidings. Could we do better? With this in mind, I convened a staff meeting one afternoon where 20 people, split almost evenly along ethnic lines, sat around a table and gingerly began to talk about coming to work at a time of destruction. Participating seemed easier for Jews: They felt more confident about their place. Many remarked that coming to work was like coming to family, all of us united in the service we provide. The Arabs were more hesitant at first. They knew that outside the workplace, they bore a burden of suspicion. One managed to tell us, haltingly, about friends in Gaza who opposed Hamas but now were fleeing with their young children from the bombarded north to the uncertain safety zones in the south. Another described his doubts about returning to the gym where he regularly works out, lest he be asked to leave. Fear of reprisals by would-be vigilantes roaming the streets was a common theme. The meeting ended, but people lingered to continue the conversation (a welcome change, for me, from other staff meetings where people are impatient to disperse and get on with their work), in little animated, mixed groups of two or three. I felt that we had crossed a barrier. I learned more about the tragic hopelessness of Gazan citizens, enemies of Hamas, who had nowhere to flee. It had been so much easier not to see them. And I felt such closeness to all my staff, regardless of ethnicity. Work is where these connections, this dialogue, can develop most naturally. If we cultivate these encounters, which are already blooming in many places, while minimizing the effect of the powerful ethnic isolationists and supremacists on both sides, there may yet be hope for a better, more peaceful future.

I don't purport to speak for my Arab colleagues. As close as I feel to them, I know that their perspective in this miserable situation is necessarily different from mine. I occasionally discern that some are holding back, uncertain how far I can be trusted. And don't I weigh my words more carefully when I'm with them? The ethnic divide deepens that essential chasm separating any two people; the bombs exploding around us leave craters there. I know that far more than the occasional staff meeting will be needed for us to defuse the tensions of the Middle East, which ineluctably seep into the department. Yet I grasp onto the connections I've made and find strength in these encounters.

I will not forget how, the morning after the savage October 7 assault, stunned by the extent of the atrocities, I arrived early at work and found a senior nurse, a devout Muslim, sitting alone, puffing anxiously on a cigarette, and seeming more withdrawn than is usual for this energetic, charismatic man. He had worked for many years in the department; of all the staff, only I speak a better Yiddish than he. I sat myself down next to him, and we mournfully,

fearfully, tried to understand how this could have happened. We spoke about the evils of fanaticism, and he tried to explain to me the sacrilege against the Quran entailed by these violent acts. Hesitantly, I shared with him my fantasy: "I imagine myself abducted by these murderous bastards. And just as they are about to slit my throat, I somehow manage to convince them to allow me one call. And I dial, and you answer. And, on loudspeaker, you explain to them that they must not commit this horrific sin." He gave me one of his heartwarming smiles and said confidently, "Just call me, I will speak with them and tell them!"

For the first time since the catastrophe, I felt a vague twinge of hope.

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