

Convivencia Achieved? Jews and Non-Jews in Haifa

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By Rivka Kellner and Menachem Kellner

Convivencia is the term often used to describe the coexistence of Jews and Muslims (and Christians) in the so-called Golden Age of Spain. Jews in Haifa have not yet produced figures like Bahya ibn Pakudah, Judah Halevi, or Maimonides, nor have the Arabs of Haifa produced figures like Averroes, but, withal, Jews and Arabs do get along pretty well in Haifa. We are here to report on that.

Last Simhat Torah we were blissfully unaware of what was happening down South. We heard in synagogue that Hamas had fired a few rockets at Tel Aviv, but nothing more. Since that day, our lives have been consumed by little else. After a day or so, we were led to expect that Hezbollah would fire on Haifa, and people in my Rambam class were talking about buying generators in case the electricity went out...in the event, I do not think any of them actually

did buy a generator.

Overall, aside from the scores of thousands of refugees from Israel's North living in hotels around the city (and our attempts to help them, Menachem with laundry and Rivka with English lessons and packing toys) there was very little sense in Haifa that Israel is at war. Glued to the news, of course, horrified at our losses and the undeniable Hamas-caused suffering of Gazans, endlessly frustrated by our useless government (and all too often embarrassed by it), daily life went on much as before. This includes the remarkably good relations between Jews and Arabs in Haifa. Menachem used to joke that it is no surprise that Jews and Arabs get along in Haifa, the real surprise was that Jews and Jews got along as well. Jews and Arabs continue to get along well in Haifa, despite the war (or perhaps even because of it, on that more below), thank God, but the anger at the Haredi community grows day by day.

Rivka and Menachem wrote the above a month ago. Then the other shoe dropped. Consciously or unconsciously, we are now constantly listening for missile and drone alerts. When entering any enclosed space, be it a mall or a synagogue, we scan our surrounding for the nearest shelter. Our building, ten stories, forty apartments, was erected in the early 70's. We are therefore lucky enough to have a safe room on every floor. Our building was certainly advanced when it was built. New buildings have safe rooms in every apartment. Older buildings usually have no safe rooms and no shelters.

It turns out that we have several new neighbors on our floor. We have usually seen them bleary-eyed, confused, sporting the latest pajama attire, in our floor's safe room in the middle of the night after an air raid alert has most rudely ripped us out of our beds. More than once Menachem was caught in the middle of shaharit if the alert came in the morning; he zoomed into the safe room in tallit and tefillin (photos available on request). Our new neighbors are recent immigrants from Ukraine who probably never saw tefillin before (and do not know Hebrew or even English) --- the Tower of Babel has reached our safe room.

Having brought you up to date, as it were, we want to write about Haifa's unique spread of religions, and the way in which we all get along, despite the war, the alerts and the rockets (which do not distinguish Jews from Arabs).

On an unremarkable day (as if any day during this war can be unremarkable), Rivka got

into a cab and noticed what was clearly a Muslim prayer book. She asked if she could look at it (as a sign of respect to the driver) and, when she put it back down, she treated it like a siddur, kissing the cover. She explained to the driver that halakhah mandates respectful treatment of Jewish religious texts, and Rivka felt it appropriate to show respect to the texts of other religions. This took place during Sukkot, and Rivka wished the driver a chag sameach (happy holiday). She realized that he might have been offended since it was not his holiday, and she said as much. He replied: “Why should I be offended? It is my holiday too --- I am also Israeli.” (This is not the sort of story one will read concerning Haifa in the New York Times.) In our experience Jews and Non-Jews in Haifa get along fine. Thus, for example, our favorite neighborhood (kosher) coffee shop is jointly owned by a Jew and an Arab, staffed by a variety of people, and enjoyed by the entire neighborhood. Did we not know his name, we would not know that the Arab co-owner was an Arab (his Hebrew is certainly better than Menachem’s!). Although the coffee shop is kosher, the clientele is diverse, including Arabs of various types (although once we noticed that four of the patrons were members of our synagogue).

Our family doctor has an Arab partner, Menachem’s rheumatologist is a Muslim woman (no hijab, but she observes Ramadan, and thinks that two 25-hour Jewish fasts are harder than Ramadan), almost all our pharmacists are Arabs.

Unlike taxis in Jerusalem (or New York), getting into a cab driven by an Arab does not make Rivka nervous at all. Rivka freely engages these drivers into sometimes riveting conversations about life, politics, and weather. Despite that, it seems to Rivka that occasionally Arab “feminism” lags decades behind that of Jewish cabbies. Rivka suspects that behind the rare examples of sexual harassment to which she was subjected, lay more than “simple” sexism, but was also anti-Jewish honor-based overtone to the violence. Rivka discussed these events with a different (Arab) cabbie, who thought that she was over-reacting and should be flattered.

One of Rivka’s cabbies told her that his relatives in Lebanon were not doing well (as is the case with Palestinians there). Rivka handed him a 20 shekel note and asked him to try to find a way to alleviate their suffering. He was moved beyond words.

But neither Rivka nor Menachem ever felt that the Arabs with whom they dealt (in

medical contexts, in malls, at the beach) harbored anti-Jewish prejudice. We have no idea what people feel in their hearts, but so far as outward behavior is concerned, we have never seen evidence of such prejudice.

Rivka has been laughingly called a JAP (Jewish American Princess); she always makes it clear that she is a JIP (Jewish Israeli Princess). As such she is an expert on the many malls in Haifa. In these malls she sees Jews, Muslims, Christians, and Druze working and shopping. Recently she came across a cute little toddler who was being coaxed by his bemused mother in Arabic to get up. Rivka crouched down next to the child and in Hebrew, English and broken Arabic tried to get him to get up. The little angel smiled, got up, and gave Rivka a hug she will never forget. She put her hand on his head and blessed him--and earned a smile from the mother, who was clearly pleased.

Rivka teaches supplementary English to school children of all ages in a community Center here in Haifa. Yesterday, one of her breaks between lessons was rudely interrupted by a siren. Rivka was pleasantly surprised by the way in which children and teachers all filed down to the bomb shelter in an orderly fashion. When the mandatory 10 minutes were over, and HKBH took care of them all, and nothing blew up, class resumed as if nothing had happened. Rivka was impressed by the calm of her students and saddened that they appear unfazed by the experience. No child should be used to such an event. It was clear to Rivka that we protect our children, and do not use them as human shields.

Not long ago, Menachem stopped at a convenience store to pick up some milk. A customer with a complicated issue was there before him. The customer told Menachem to go ahead of him, since all he wanted was a liter of milk. Menachem complimented the customer for allowing an older person to get ahead of him. Mustafa (as his name turned out to be) replied: "it all depends on how one is raised at home."

Why do matters work so well in Haifa? For one thing, we have a huge number of Russian olim, strongly secular and usually very cultured, who help balance the growing Haredi presence. For another thing, our Arab population is largely Christian and highly educated (one of them, Prof. Mouna Maroun, a neuroscientist and expert in post-trauma stress disorder, was recently elected to be the university's rector). There are several varieties of Christians, several of whom we know from our years at the University of Haifa. Among the Muslims,

very few of them appear to be Shi'ites and there is a large population of Ahmedi Muslims whose religion commits them to peaceful coexistence

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmadiyya>). Rivka and Menachem were invited to their annual convocation twice, where we were given kosher food! There are also Druze, most of whom are fervent Israeli patriots, and of course Bahai

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bah%C3%A1%CA%BC%C3%AD_World_Centre). All of the Arabs in Haifa know well that they would be murdered by Hamas and Hezbollah. This mosaic of non-Jewish religions and their relative assimilation helps explain Haifa's unique success.

We do not want to give the impression that all is hunky dory here in Haifa. We both find the war enervating and feel that we are suffering from Pre-Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. We are also living through an old (once almost amusing) joke: 1/3 of Israelis pay taxes, 1/3 of Israelis do army service, and 1/3 of Israelis work for a living. The problem is that it is the same 1/3! Our shambolic government is trying to sell out that 1/3 in order to keep Haredim in the government

Convivencia between Jews and Arabs in Haifa is strong. Convivencia between those Jews who serve (and die) and contribute to Israeli society and those Jews who feel no obligation whatsoever to do so, is getting weaker by the day. That may be another cost of the war.