

Kibbutz Metzger: An enduring Arab-Israeli friendship

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On a visit to Israel last year a colleague suggested that I visit Kibbutz Metzger, a community founded by Argentinean Jewish émigrés in the 1950s. So along with my Quaker traveling companion and one other American, I hired a taxi and drove north from Jerusalem for nearly two hours to the interior of the country.

As I sat down in one of the four plain metal chairs around the small table in the trailer office of the kibbutz, I stirred my coffee slowly and wondered about the commune's simplicity. I wondered also about the journey of its people and of those in neighboring Israeli Arab villages. Dov Avital, the secretary general for the kibbutz, who had poured each of us a cup of coffee, as is customary among the people of the Middle East, was as eager to tell his story as we were to listen.

Avital explained that in 1948, many Palestinian villages were emptied and Arabs expelled during what was called "the War of Independence" by the Jews and "the disaster" by the Palestinians. Kibbutzes were established throughout areas vacated by the departing Arabs. From the very beginning, however, the founders of Kibbutz Metzger chose to relate with the people of the surrounding villages, who were Arabs. (Today Arabs make up about 20 percent of the Israeli citizenry.)

The cooperation went both ways. When the kibbutz could not locate a viable source of water, the nearby village of Meiser connected Metzger to its own small well. That action would not be forgotten. Other acts of kindness would follow over their decades of working together: they doused a threatening brush fire together; they shared sports activities and used Metzger's swimming pool together; they even formed a soccer team that competed in the regional league.

Then, on November 10, 2002, a lone Palestinian assailant entered the kibbutz and murdered three adults and two children. The mother had just finished reading her children a bedtime story. This violent act shook the kibbutz and neighboring villages, and the shock reverberated throughout Israel.

A few weeks before the murders, the Metzer board had protested Israel's plan to build a security fence through their area because it would cut through the olive groves belonging to the West Bank village of Kefin and would deprive the farmers of 60 percent of their fields. Metzer's leaders had scheduled a meeting with the Israeli Defense Ministry for November 11 to argue the case. The meeting never happened, for it was on the evening of the 10th that the assailant committed his horrible acts.

But the long history of coexistence between the kibbutz and the neighboring villages prevailed despite the crisis. The assailant was not from those villages. Said Avital, "Although the thirst for revenge is natural, we need the strength to remember our message and remain firm believers in our desire to live in peace with our neighbors." He added, "Most Palestinians are not terrorists." During shiva, the Jewish period of mourning following the deaths, many Palestinians from several villages visited the kibbutz to express their sorrow.

Even after this calamity, the members of the kibbutz continued to extend invitations to their Arab neighbors. In 2004, when the security fence was constructed, the kibbutz offered to construct a tunnel under the wall to receive sewage, to circulate the waste in their own holding ponds, and to pump the water back to their neighbors for irrigation.

I was amazed at the contrast between the Metzer experience and what I had seen over the previous two weeks in the occupied areas of the West Bank and in Gaza, a walled prison containing more than a million people. We thanked Avital for his story. Our coffee, long forgotten, remained cold and untouched, but the lesson of hope warmed our hearts.

As we prepared to catch the train from Haifa to Tel Aviv, we were captivated by the thought that in the darkest hours, humans are capable of drawing from their common well of humanity.