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The Jerusalem Center in the Community

From Suspicion and Distrust to Acceptance and Respect

Eran Hayet

It is great to be here with so many friends to celebrate this special event. When I first arrived at the Jerusalem Center in 1994 and assumed responsibility for, among other areas, the Center's security, I inherited from my predecessor a file with policies for how to deal with potential threats. Here are some of those policies:

Procedure to evacuate the building in case of a bomb threat

Procedure to deal with riots at the lower gate

Procedure to deal with ultra-Orthodox demonstrations at the upper gate

These were some of the challenges we had to deal with for years immediately after the opening of the Center. These rules indicated the uncertain status of the Church and Brigham Young University in Jerusalem for a long time after Mayor Teddy Kollek used his influence to obtain approval for a new home for BYU's study abroad program.

From its groundbreaking on August 21, 1984, the Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies has attracted mixed feelings: a combination of sympathy, excitement, and curiosity alongside suspicion, distrust, and concern from different parts of the local communities—Israelis and Palestinians. In order to reduce opposition, mainly from Jewish ultra-Orthodox groups, BYU and the Church had contracted with Israel's leading PR firm, Gitam. For years, Gitam monitored the media, looking for mentions of the "Mormons," and produced frequent reports for the Center director.

I remember that in one of the weekly meetings (probably in the mid-'90s) I suggested we stop contracting with Gitam. I thought we had established enough connections to the local community, gained a good understanding of the Israeli and the Palestinian society and politics, and

developed sufficient tools to do our own monitoring and be ready to respond as needed.

Everyone wants to be liked and appreciated. In our case, however, our reputation directly impacts our security. This goes beyond the building itself; the security benefits of being known and respected accompany our students wherever they go. As a consequence, our institutional efforts as administrators and faculty are not enough. Our students are ambassadors; the way they behave, their interactions with locals, even the way they dress matters and helps us protect their safety and our good reputation. Our students are great.

What I have learned during my years as the executive director of the Jerusalem Center is that as long as we find ways to contribute to both communities—the Israeli and the Palestinian—and we do this with a low profile (with some exceptions), and as long as the nonproselytizing commitment is honored, we'll avoid opposition and maintain our reputation as a friendly and a nonthreatening institution. Our guiding principle here is being actively neutral with regard to the current conflict. By “actively” I mean reaching out to both communities alike, and by “neutral” I don't mean acting indifferent but expressing our love and care for both sides, without taking sides, being both pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian. While this perhaps seems contradictory, it is possible if one focuses on the legitimate aspirations of both people. As I tell the students when they first land in Jerusalem, “The Jerusalem Center is located on the seam between the Palestinian and the Israeli communities of Jerusalem. It is a favored location, and we like to believe that we are a bridge between these two communities.”

So, beyond words, how does the BYU Jerusalem Center contribute to the people of Jerusalem? Let me describe some of the things we do.

We hire locally, both Palestinians and Israelis. We work hard to build good morale and good relationships among the employees. This is really a model for a harmonious workforce in a community that can be very polarized. We hope we are setting a good example.

Hiring local and diverse staff benefits both the Center and the workers: it provides stable employment opportunities in the neighborhood and fosters some deep connections and friendly attitudes toward the Center. Here's a short story to illustrate this: One day our cameras spotted three young Palestinians, their faces covered, climbing the fence and up the roof, where they stuck a large Palestinian flag. Then they disappeared back into the neighborhood. While this was an act of defiance against the police and Israeli authorities and not a display of hostility

toward the Center, we didn't want to be involved in that "game." Within minutes, one of our security guards, a Palestinian who lives in the neighborhood, crossed the street, identified the young men (remember, their faces were covered), and had them climb back and remove the flag. It never happened again.

An important part of our outreach is our Sunday evening classical music series. Our wonderful program includes forty-four concerts a year. Also, once a month, on Thursday nights, we have programs with jazz, ethnic, and lighter music concerts. We feature top local musicians (some of them are world famous), and we also provide a stage for promising young local musicians. People from all over the country attend these popular (and free) concerts. Occasionally we have some distinguished guests. Recently a former minister of defense came with his family to a jazz concert.

Quoting some feedback we have received from our patrons, "Wishing you success in your wonderful work. It is a great asset to the community," and "I just heard about these concerts at the BYU Jerusalem Center from the folks I sat next to at the symphony this evening, and I would be grateful to be able to attend." Here's another one: "The jazz concert on 12 September was excellent. I left feeling upbeat and happy!"

The closing concert of the year is always our students' Christmas concert. It is not as professional as the other concerts, but our fall semester students work very hard, practicing between classes and field trips, and their charm has made this one of the most popular and fun concerts of our program.

The Center is open for tours. About seven thousand visitors come every year to visit the building. They watch an introductory video, listen to a brief organ recital overlooking the Old City, and tour the grounds. Many visitors comment on the peace they feel here.

Our concert coordinator told me that last week a woman came for a tour but sat by the entrance and did not want to watch our hosting video. When they asked her why, she said, "Oh, I've already seen it three times. I'm an architect from Tel Aviv, and every once in a while when I feel very stressed at work, I drive here just to come listen to the short organ recital, see the view, and relax. So, I'm sitting here waiting for the organ to start playing."

We hold art exhibits that rotate every six months and feature local Israeli and Palestinian artists. A couple of years ago, we hosted the opening event and the central exhibit of a Jerusalem art festival. One of our visitors was Nechama Rivlin, the First Lady of Israel (who recently

passed away). Following her visit, she posted the following review about the exhibit and the Center on the official presidential Facebook page:

Hello everyone and Happy Holidays,

We will dedicate the second candle of Chanukah, which we will light tonight, to an exhibition that is currently on display in Jerusalem. In a rare architectural structure on the slopes of Mount Scopus, designed by architects David Resnick and Frank Ferguson, lies the Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies—or the Mormon University, as it is commonly referred to. This is a beautiful corner where you can view Jerusalem from every window, hall and balcony, and even attend a free concert every Sunday.

Since the end of October, the Jerusalem modern art festival, celebrating its tenth anniversary, has on display in the wonderful building this exciting exhibit. It is highly recommended.

We hold an annual Christmas tree lighting event. Last year about four hundred people attended a celebration of light and music, including students, our employees' families, people from the Christian community, and also Jewish and Muslim friends of the Center.

As part of our outreach to our neighbors, we have opened the Center to select events and organizations. For example, the a-Tur high school on the Mount of Olives regularly holds their graduation ceremonies in the auditorium. Two years ago, the board of trustees of the Hebrew University approached us and asked to hold their gala celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Hebrew University at the Jerusalem Center, rather than at their campus just above us. In addition, earlier this year we hosted another event sponsored by the Hebrew University—a concert for the 20th Congress of the International Association of Hispanists.

Over the years, the Jerusalem municipality, together with the Ministry of Education, has held numerous workshops and conferences for school principals and teachers in the Center. The former Mayor Nir Barakat attended some of them. Ayman Jebara is a former school principal, currently a director of a department in the Ministry of Education and a local part-time faculty member at the Center who teaches our students Arabic. Mr. Jebara tells me that the common feeling among his colleagues is that the Center, which was in the past estranged, has become a home for the East Jerusalem community in the most beautiful part of the city.

For the past thirty years, BYU has provided three full-ride scholarships per year to Palestinian students. Tawfic Alawi, the Center's associate director, and the academic associate director (currently Dr. Frank

Judd) interview and evaluate the candidates and choose some very bright young men and women who later graduate from BYU and in many cases develop successful careers back in their community.

The Center provides humanitarian aid, sometimes in partnership with LDS Charities, to programs like Helping Babies Breathe and the Neonatal Resuscitation Program and some independent initiatives. We have a volunteer couple who reaches out to different NGOs, dealing mostly with disabled and needy people. Every semester our students assemble 10,000–15,000 school or hygiene kits for distribution in the community.

In the past few years, we have shifted some of our efforts and funds to support extracurricular education and sports projects in the local community, including donating equipment to a taekwondo club and equipment to open new youth robotic centers. We also cosponsor and support the “Runners for Peace” annual race—a joint Israeli-Palestinian jogging group. We fund basic swimming lessons—or, better said, “how not to drown lessons”—for Palestinian kids in a pool in West Jerusalem (some of these kids are from a refugee camp in East Jerusalem). We’ve now held seven courses, and for me to visit the pool and help some of them adjust their goggles and to see the light in their eyes was a very special moment. At the end of each course, the kids come to the Center for a short ceremony. Some of you may know I have some personal interest in swimming; however, these are not just swimming lessons. For these kids, this is quality time combined with discipline and, more importantly, for some of them an alternative to being on the streets of some very problematic neighborhoods. These are just a few of our activities reaching out to the community in an effort to be good neighbors, good citizens, and good people.

I’m not naïve enough to think that we don’t have potential challenges. Occasionally we still encounter some suspicion and distrust, but as the following cases will show, we have the positive reputation and the needed connections and tools to deal with crisis situations when they occur.

Several years ago, we hosted a workshop for social workers. A few days before the event, the organizers told us that they might have to cancel since some of the participants were ultra-Orthodox women, who just realized that they would be coming to the “Mormon University.” We suggested that before they cancel, they check with their rabbis and ask their approval, which they did. The rabbis approved, and the workshop took place.

In 2009, we dealt with the only case that we know about where there was supposedly a breach of the nonproselyting agreement. This

was reported in a local newspaper by a rabbi, leader of an organization called Yad L'Achim, whose agenda is to monitor and fight missionary groups. This is the same organization that held the large demonstrations against the building of the Center and for which we had a specific security policy, as I mentioned in my opening. This rabbi claimed that one of the local Church members had been engaging in missionary activity. We contacted the rabbi and protested his aggressive approach but also assured him that the university and the Church were honoring their commitments. Soon afterward, we discovered that the Church's name had been removed from Yad L'Achim's long "watch list" of missionary groups. It's not that we need their approval, but it was good to finally remove this radical group from our list of challenges by simply honoring our commitments not to them but to the state of Israel.

And here is one last story from more recent days (September 10, 2018), this time from the Palestinian side. My day started with a WhatsApp message from Tawfic Alawi about a front-page headline on *Al Quds*, which is the leading Palestinian Arabic language newspaper in Jerusalem: "Settlers and Mormons Burst into Al-Aqsa Mosque." The first paragraph of the article elaborates that the Waqf (the Muslim entity that controls Al-Aqsa) reported that 230 settlers together with 72 "Mormons" burst into the Mosque compound under the leadership of ultra-right Israeli Minister of Agriculture Uri Ariel. The article went on to say that the Mormons have a center on the Mount of Olives. It also noted that one of the members of the group gave a bottle of wine as a gift to one of the policemen at the entrance, "thereby desecrating the holy place." The article also reported that the Waqf had sent a letter protesting the provocation by "the settlers and the Mormons" to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, which nominally controls the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa compound.

Tawfic concluded his message to me, "DISASTER!"

I asked Tawfic to investigate, and he did. It turned out that a few of our students (probably seven or eight) visited the area that morning and were, without really knowing what was going on, in line with the settlers and an evangelical group, both led by the far-right minister of agriculture. The settler and evangelical group was boisterous, and at some point one of the local guards asked who they were, and the only response was from one of the students who said, "We're Mormons," thinking he was speaking only for the small group of students with him. With this innocent response, the entire evangelical group was labeled "the Mormons," and the provocative, political efforts of the group was associated with "the settlers and the Mormons."

Tawfic was able to fix this by contacting the reporter and publishing a clarification that we are not taking sides. Through his contacts, he also explained the misunderstanding to the head of the Waqf, who later sent a clarification to Jordan. Based on the reputation of the Center, there was sufficient goodwill that all of these people were willing to listen. This whole event ended in a positive way and resulted in establishing a closer relationship with the Waqf. For his contribution to the resolution of this incident, Tawfic received the exceptional performance award from BYU.

One final comment to conclude: this may sound like a cliché, but everyone who has been involved with the Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies, or has even just visited briefly, says that there's something special about this place, and they don't refer exclusively or primarily to its unique location.

We hear this repeatedly.

It is mostly about the spirit of the people: our local workers with their endless care and devotion, our volunteer couples who make every visitor feel like a VIP, our BYU faculty and students with their respectful approach to the people of Jerusalem. These have a huge impact on the community. This spirit is what brought us to where we are today: accepted and respected.

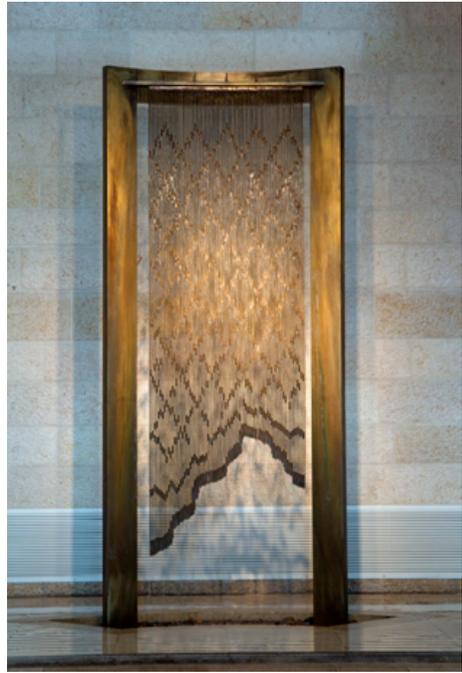
I believe, as I tell our students when they first arrive in Jerusalem, that today the Center is a very respected institution in Jerusalem (and actually in the whole Holy Land) with many good friends in both the Israeli and the Palestinian communities. I ask them to help me and my associates to be part of this ongoing effort.

On a more personal note, for more than twenty-five years I have been working under the remarkably savvy and insightful leadership of Dr. Jim Kearn and with many good people in Jerusalem and here in Provo. For that I'm very grateful.

Eran Hayet was born in 1964 and spent his early childhood in Kibbutz Ga'aton, in the northwest part of the Galilee. He lived in Chile from age seven to nine and Panama from age eleven to fifteen before returning to Jerusalem to complete high school. Following high school, Hayet served as an officer in the Israeli Air Force for five years and then studied international relations and Latin American studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. While at Hebrew University, he worked as a parliamentary aide at the Knesset. From 1990 to 1993, he was the spokesperson for the Peace Now movement. In 1994, he became the facilities manager at BYU's Jerusalem Center, and in 2002, he was appointed to his current position as executive director of the Center.



Jerusalem viewed through a grassy archway. Photograph by Mark Philbrick. Courtesy BYU Jerusalem Center.



A fountain. Photograph by Mark Philbrick. Courtesy BYU Jerusalem Center.



The forum. Photograph by Mark Philbrick. Courtesy BYU Jerusalem Center.