

# GROWING IN GOD PODCAST



## GIG155 – Jews and Arabs Are Not Enemies

Hi everyone, and welcome to our podcast today. We have a very special podcast for you. I am sitting in the office of the AMI Center, which is for Jerusalem's Biblical Studies and Research, and I have the privilege today of being with Daniel Gwertzman, who is the president of the AMI Center, has worked here for many years, and has lived in Jerusalem for many years.

What I want to address today is this idea of Jewish and Arab relationships. We hear so much on the news, especially in the US, about all the problems and conflicts between the Arabs and the Jews. But one thing that you don't hear the story of is really the fact that there are many Arabs who are Israeli citizens, and they live in the State of Israel, and they are Israelis by law and by choice. And I wanted to just give you some numbers: in March of 2023, according to Wikipedia, the population of Israel was 9.73 million. Out of that number, 73.5%, or little over 7 million, are Jews of all different backgrounds. But 21% of those individuals are Arabs, which is over 2 million individuals. So you realize that on a daily basis, you have millions of Jews and millions of Arabs living together in the State of Israel, and getting along together, having their families be in the same places.

What made this so alive to me was the other day, when we had the privilege of having Rabbi Ed Snitkoff, who does a lot with the AMI Center, take Bruce and myself around Jerusalem to tour Jerusalem. He took us on the light rail from one end of Jerusalem to the other end of Jerusalem. All day long we were getting on and off the rail, going through the shops and the different areas of Jerusalem; and you are constantly mixed with Jews and Arabs going about their lives, going about their daily business – and there is not any conflict, and there are not any problems. So one thing we realize is that what we hear a lot about in the news is really dealing with a different faction of people that we would either call terrorists, or we would call right-wing Arab groups, or those who are really not part of Israel. They may be a part of Gaza or other areas surrounding and under Palestinian Authority. But we never hear the story about Arabs living in Jerusalem and being a part of daily life in Jerusalem. So I thought it would be fun, since Daniel is so familiar with this issue and has lived here for so many years, and he observes this on a daily basis, that maybe he would have a story or two he could tell you about how the relationship with the Jews and the Arabs really is on the ground in daily life here in Israel.

**Daniel:** Good morning. First of all, I just want to start out with my experience this morning in Jerusalem. On my way to the office, I went to our health fund here, Kupat Holim Clalit, on Ben Yehuda Street, and I went downstairs to the pharmacy to get my medicine. Out of the three windows in the pharmacy, two of them were manned by Arab ladies who were pharmacists. That's one. The second thing is, when we ride on the light rail, Jews and Arabs ride together on the light rail. Jews and Arabs ride together on the bus. People ask you for directions, and it's usually very civilized, in terms of relations between people. And, if you happen to be my age, 74, sometimes people ask, "Can I help you?" you know, carrying things here. And one of the things is, I say, "Okay." People say to you, "But these are Christian Arab." No, no, these are Muslims. Okay. In our hotels, in the Jewish hotels, if you want to believe in what we call BDS, most of the people who work in the hotels, during the week and over the weekend, are Arabs. Okay,

that's the staff. And after the Covid, about 81% of the Arab workforce has returned to the hotels, because tourism is a major industry here.

The impression that people get from abroad is, this is an apartheid state. You know, I have issues with my eyes. I have had two cataract surgeries, and two of the eye specialists who treated me were Arab doctors. Okay? This is a fact. They work in our hospitals, and they work also in private practice. Some of them are heads of departments. We have Arab judges here in Israel, in the courts.

**Gary:** Yes.

**Daniel:** And this is not just, well, the Ben Yehuda pharmacy is not in an Arab area; it's right in the center of the city. So it's not a case where, "Oh, you put two Arab lady pharmacists downstairs because this is a mixed Arab-Jewish neighborhood." No. And people can come outside of an Arab neighborhood to get services from doctors in a Jewish area. They go to the hospital and they stay in the same room with Jewish patients. Unless, of course, you want a private room, which you will have to pay a lot more money for that. And generally, the relations between Arabs and Jews are friendly. During the month of Ramadan, we wish them a Ramadan Kareem, a sweet Ramadan. Okay, this is a fast month for them. And they wish us a happy Passover. And there are times when, during the intermediate days of Jewish holidays, it's difficult to get Jewish plumbers and electricians; and the Arabs know this, so they provide those services.

A lot of people would say to me, "Yes, but they are not in your religious institutions." They are. Why? Because there are certain services that can be performed on Shabbat only by people who are non-Jews, who are not limited by what we call Halakhah, Jewish religious law. So the impression that people get, that the Arabs have to walk on the other side of the street, that they don't go into Jewish institutions, I'll put it straight to you – it's a lie. Okay? And there are Arabs who serve in the Israeli army; they are not required to, by the way. So if an Arab wants to start university in Israel, they study in Jewish schools; they study in Tel Aviv University, Hebrew University, and yes, Bar-Ilan University, which is a religious university. And, they also work in high tech. Okay? So, nowadays they try and recruit in the Arab sector people to work in high tech companies also.

Jews and Arabs are coming together more often. And if you'll go in the morning and see who gets off the train in the center of town, either to go to work or to go shopping or to go to the doctor, you will see a lot of Arabs who do that too. Because no longer do they just shop in their area. Now that they can get on public transportation easily – and the light rail is very good for them, because it goes through their areas – they come and they do their shopping also in Jewish areas.

**Gary:** Mm-hmm.

**Daniel:** People who know about this will say sometimes to you, "It's very strange. I went into a Jewish institution and an Arab lady waited on me, an Arab gentleman waited on me." It's not strange at all. We work together. Now, there are some people, because of their views, that do not want to work with the Jews. Okay. All these things you hear, for example, about construction in the settlements; many of the people who do this construction work, they are Arabs! And when you travel on the roads, there are bypass roads. Some of the Arabs use the bypass roads in order not to go through the Arab section, not because of terrorism, but simply because the bypass roads are what? faster.

So, when you think of these things, you have to think of a modern society, and there are certain people who don't participate in a modern society. Some people who come here, for example, as tourists (I'll make this my last point), they suffer from Jerusalem syndrome, okay? They expect to step off the plane

at Ben Gurion Airport, which is a modern airport, and walk back into the ancient Middle East. We take them to the Jordan River, and they say, "This can't be the Jordan River." It's been the Jordan River since the Jordan River was flowing! Why? Because the Jordan River is what? a small stream. It is not as big as the Mississippi, no way; and it can be easily forded. Okay. You say, "Well, what about in the time of Joshua?" When Joshua was entering, it was springtime, which means that the snow was melting, the river was overflowing its banks. Yes, the river split, and they passed through, and the Ark of the Covenant was there. Many of these places that you read about in the Bible, they exist. You can go to Gilgal. You can go to Shilo. You can go to all of these places. And some of the places, they are located in Arab villages which preserve the names of the ancient biblical sites.

So I would say to you, come to Israel without preconceived ideas. Walk around, and yes, also try the Arab food. Those of you who have experienced falafel, stuffed grape leaves, and some of the other delicacies, it's not so bad. In fact, many Israelis eat it too. And there are Arab restaurants which are on a level with what you would call very high-level restaurants. It's not just all pita, and falafel, and shawarma. You can get very fancy and very tasty meals as well. So I would encourage you to experience all the delights of Israel, and bless the Jews, and bless the Christians, and bless the Arabs. And if you come to a Jewish hotel and you are staying in the Jewish side, you will have the opportunity to bless the Arabs; especially when you go down to the dining room, and the people running the dining room, not necessarily the chef, sometimes the chef is also, but they are Arabs!

**Gary:** Mm-hmm.

**Daniel:** And the people at the desk who receive you, in many cases, they are also Arabs. So the idea that we have apartheid here, it's ridiculous.

I wish you a blessed day. Thank you. Is that alright?

**Gary:** Wonderful. Thank you, Daniel, that is perfect. And I just wanted to end this with the story that Ed Snitkoff gave to me, gave me permission to use this. I was trying to get him here, too, so that we could all discuss this together. But Ed was telling about a story that was his personal experience when he and his family were driving late at night in Jerusalem, and they had an incident where their car broke down. Now their car broke down in an area that is known as an area of terrorist attacks; it's called Terrorist Nest by the news here. But again, this is such a differentiation, because there are terrorists, and there are right-wing factions – whether they be Christian or Jewish or Arab, or whatever – that want to create conflict. And of course, the news media eats that up, right?

**Daniel:** Mm-hmm. Yes.

**Gary:** Because that's what they want to show. But anyway, Ed and his family were in this area that is considered very dangerous. Their car broke down at midnight in this area, and they called for a tow truck, which took three hours to get there. So now they are into this area that's considered very dangerous. And Ed said, "I admit, I was nervous at the time, concerned about what could potentially happen to me there." There was still traffic on the road, and he said, "During the time we were waiting for the tow truck, there were eight cars that pulled over to the side and stopped in the middle of the night." I mean, these people could have been nervous, too. They don't know who Ed is, or his family. How did they know he's not a terrorist? But, these eight cars stopped along the road, and he said, "In these cars, when you consider all eight, there were young men, there were young women, there were families, there were older people." But these cars stopped. Each one of them got out of the car and approached Ed and his family, and asked if they could help, asked if they wanted water; "Do you want us

to sit and wait with you until the tow truck gets here? Because you're out here all alone on this road." People offered food, people offered assistance, offered to give him rides out of there, not even wait for the tow truck. So the point of the story? Every one of these cars was Arab, and they were all stopping to ask if they needed assistance and help. And Ed said, "That is the type of paradigm that you have to have about Jerusalem. Are there problems? Yes. Are there terrorists? Yes, but,"

**Daniel:** A lot of good people, yes.

**Gary:** "there's a lot of good people who are here. They want to live in peace. They want to live with their families in peace. They want to follow their religious practices without getting in the way of others' religious practices, or being disturbed by others in that practice."

So, it's a beautiful story, and what you've told us today, too, Daniel, is really a help. And I hope this is something that helps the audience out there, all of you that are listening, because it is true. And I just thought about it after Ed took us around, I thought, "Here we are, I have the same experience." I go ride on the bus; yesterday we took the bus, took the train down to Tel Aviv. We've been on the light rail all over the city from one end to the other, and it's an absolute mixture of Arabs and Jews, and other races, too. Now you've got Druze, and, you know, everybody. So, I just want to paint another picture. Like you said, Daniel, these things are really lies about the country and the people, and I hope this spreads a little bit of truth.

**Daniel:** I just say one small point. You want to see an argument here in Jerusalem, you get on a bus and ask for directions. And what happens? The Israelis among people will argue, "No, you'll get lost. He won't be able to find it. You tell him to get off, he has to walk." And there are cases where people see that you don't know your way around, I'm talking now about mainly Jews, they will get off the bus and show you how to get there. They will walk there, because they are afraid you won't find it on your own. So, when you say that the Jews are inhospitable, that's not the case. We try our best, and the Arabs always have very good manners.

**Gary:** Wonderful. And I like the thing you said also, Daniel, "Come to Israel, come to Jerusalem, experience it for yourself."

**Daniel:** Yes.

**Gary:** And you all now have a personal invitation by Daniel, the president of the AMI Center, to come and experience Israel.

**Daniel:** Taste of the land, see it, walk through it, and be blessed by it. And you should take that blessing home and share it with others. God bless you all.

**Gary:** Amen. Thank you, Daniel.