

Blessings and Curses in the Lives of Palestinian, Bedouin, and Druze Citizens of Israel

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The night of April 13 was terrifying. Iran launched hundreds of drones and missiles at Israel. Hours went by. Death and destruction could have eclipsed even the horrific Hamas terror attack of October 7. In the end, though, virtually all the explosives either landed harmlessly in unpopulated areas or were intercepted by Israeli, American, British, French, or Jordanian forces. Israelis and their supporters throughout the world rejoiced! Amidst the relief, few mentioned that one Israeli citizen was seriously wounded.

Amina Hassouna, age seven, lives in Al-Fura, one of many unrecognized Bedouin villages in Israel, primarily in the south. *The Times of Israel* explains: “Like many unrecognized Bedouin villages in the area, Al-Fura lacks bomb shelters that could have kept the girl safe. Such villages are regularly served with demolition orders as they were built without permits. However, many have existed on the same plots of land for generations, sometimes after being evicted by Israeli authorities from other areas. Securing building permits for Bedouin communities is nearly impossible and their leadership regularly accuses the state of discriminatory practices and neglect.” In fact, some three weeks after the attack, while Amina remained in intensive care, the government issued a demolition order for her own family’s home. A social media firestorm led to that order’s being scrapped, at least for now.ⁱ

Years ago, during a rabbinical convention, I joined the Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues to tour an unrecognized Bedouin village in the Negev. The Task Force is no left-wing anti-Israel outfit. Instead, it’s a coalition of North American institutions across the ideological spectrum who share the conviction that Israel’s welfare and security depend upon the wellbeing of **all** of Israel’s citizens.

That visit was disheartening. Here we were, in one of the most economically successful nations of the world, visiting a community whose citizens lacked electricity, running water, proper sewage, or paved roads, among a myriad of other issues that made it comparable to villages in some of the world’s poorest developing countries. Children traveling to school had to cross busy highways without traffic control and riverbeds that were dry when we visited but which can quickly become raging streams. NBC reports that some one hundred thousand of the Negev’s three hundred thousand Bedouins live in such villages.ⁱⁱ

I do not recall hearing, all those years ago, about the lack of air raid sirens and bomb shelters, and I believe that was before the Iron Dome. Now, we know.

Early reports indicated that fifteen Bedouins were murdered on October 7, but more comprehensive figures were much higher. Some of them were killed while attempting to defend Jewish neighbors, but at least six were killed by rocket attacks, which is not how Jewish Israelis died that day, protected as they were by sirens, bomb shelters, and the Iron Dome. At least seven Bedouins were taken hostage.ⁱⁱⁱ

Bedouins are not unique among Israel's Arab citizens, as inequality afflicts Palestinians, Druze, and Bedouins alike. Last June, Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics released a report entitled, "Gaps Between Jews and Arabs," which, according to *The Times of Israel*, "examined differences in demographic characteristics, standards of living, employment, health," and the like. It found the "average monthly gross income of a Jewish household" to be "1.6 times that of an Arab home." Moreover, "Infant deaths are over 2.5 times higher in the Arab community," with Jewish Israelis enjoying life expectancies some five years longer than those of their Arab fellow citizens.^{iv}

In February, The Abraham Global Prize Initiative held a tribute to Bedouin heroes of October 7 in Jerusalem. As reported in *Israel Hayom*, an Israeli daily owned by Miriam Adelson, thirteen individuals were honored—among them were "Ismail Al-Karnawi, who left Rahat with three other family members toward Kibbutz Be'eri in order to rescue residents from the inferno. Muhammad Abu Najah, an employee of the cleaning company at [the] Nova [music festival], [who] fought against the terrorists, called first responders, and ... stopped passing vehicles and directed them not to drive towards the terrorists. Omar Abu Abeelah was in Sderot near the police station when the terrorists stomed into the city... He heard a woman's scream and saw Odaya Suissa with her two daughters, aged 6 and 3, and her husband Dolev who was shot dead by the terrorists. Despite being wounded, Sabeelah managed to reach the girls in the car, get them out, and bring them to the police station but he ultimately succumbed to his wounds."^v

From time to time, Israel and its defenders will argue that Arab Israelis have higher standards of living than many Arabs living in Arab lands. Anti-Israel critiques from LGBTQ groups can be particularly virulent and are often rebutted by pointing to the fact queer Arabs in Israel enjoy far greater safety and rights than they would in a Muslim country. Moreover, there's a reason that virtually all Druze men and a growing number of Bedouins serve in the Israel Defense Forces. An Arab party served in the governing coalition led by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid in 2021-2022, before the election of the current Netanyahu government.

Yes, there are blessings that accompany the inequities faced by Israel’s Palestinian, Druze, and Bedouin citizens. Still, the insults mount. Among the most troubling—above all, to Druze and Bedouin citizens serving in the Army—is Israel’s Basic Law, adopted under Prime Minister Netanyahu’s leadership in 2018, to define Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People. For seventy years before 2018, Israel **was** the nation state of the Jewish people, without a law that, for example, downgrades Arabic’s status as an official language. Reuven Rivlin, a longtime Likud politician who was Israel’s president when the Nation-State Law was passed, declared that it was “bad for the State of Israel and bad for the Jews” and described [it] as part of a global pivot toward the silencing of dissent.”^{vi}

Torah frequently reminds us to treat the stranger among us as we would wish to have been treated when we were strangers in Egypt. Israel too often violates that commandment with respect to its Palestinian, Bedouin, and Druze citizens.

This week, our Torah portion teaches us that, when the children of Israel live as Torah teaches, God promises, “I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone...and no sword shall cross your land.”^{vii} By contrast, wrongdoing will lead God to “unleash the sword against you. Your land will become a desolation and your cities a ruin.”^{viii} As we saw on October 7, there are life-saving benefits when Israel’s Arab citizens feel that they belong. That point has been driven home clearly in the heroism of Druze and Bedouin soldiers over the last eight months.

When God calls Abraham and Sarah to the Land of Israel, God promises to “bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you.”^{ix} Increasingly, many of Israel’s Arab citizens are seeking to bless the State of Israel, understanding that Hamas and other terrorists, like Iran, threaten them alongside Jewish Israelis. Let us look forward to the day when Israel will be a blessing to **all** its citizens—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, Palestinian, Bedouin, and Druze, Israelis all.

Amen.

ⁱ “Demolition order issued for home of Bedouin girl hurt in Iran attack, later scrapped,” *The Times of Israel*, May 2, 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/demolition-order-issued-for-home-of-bedouin-girl-hurt-in-iran-attack-later-scrapped/#:~:text=Israeli%20authorities%20have%20issued%20—and,Iran%2C%20Hebrew%20media%20reported%20Thursday>.

ⁱⁱ Rick Schapiro and Khalid Razak, “No bomb shelters, no sirens, no Iron Dome: Israel’s long-neglected Arab Bedouins, October 14, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/arabs-living-israels-negev-desert-are-sitting-ducks-hamas-rcna120168>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. Higher numbers reported by Aaron Boxerman, “Arab Citizens of Israel Were Not Spared in the Hamas-Led Massacres,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/13/world/middleeast/arab-israeli-hamas-attacks.html>.

^{iv} “Arab Israelis have less income, die younger than Jewish peer, data shows,” *The Times of Israel*, June 20, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/arab-israelis-have-less-income-die-younger-than-jewish-peers-data-shows/>

^v Yori Yalon, “Bedouin heroes who risked their lives, died saving others on Oct. 7 honored,” *Israel Hayom*, February 14, 2024,

<https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=bedouin+heroes+october+7+israel+hayom&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>.

^{vi} “Israel’s president; Nation-state law is ‘bad for Israel and bad for the Jews,” *The Times of Israel*, September 6, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/president-nation-state-law-bad-for-israel-and-bad-for-the-jews/>.

^{vii} Leviticus 26:6.

^{viii} Leviticus 26:33.

^{ix} Genesis 12:3.