



ILLUSTRATIONS AVI KATZ

Drawing Closer

The two Palestinian policemen stand silently, silhouetted by the afternoon sun in Manger Square in Bethlehem, looking down at Shay Charka, the diminutive Israeli cartoonist. Our Palestinian host for the Bethlehem session is polite, perhaps slightly embarrassed, but firm. "They ask... if you can... take off your *kippa*," he tells Shay in Hebrew. "There is concern it could cause... trouble..."

Shay's hand hovers over his knitted *kippa*. "Well... if it's a matter of *pikuach nefesh* – life or death... I suppose maybe... if it's a security issue..."

"No, not security," the host answers quickly. "You're in no danger here. But there are, you know, sensitivities..."

"Ah, sensitivities," Shay dares to answer and returned his hand to his side. "I'm sensitive too... you invited us here, maybe you should just accept us as we are."

"Maybe we can find you a hat?" comics artist Uri Fink offers. "You'd look good in the policeman's cap, with the Palestinian flag on it."

The officer doffs his hat with a smile and proffers it to Shay. "Here, you can have it. And yes, I understand everything you've been saying!"

Shay squares his narrow shoulders, saying, "Let's just go in," and turns towards the entrance. We, his cartoonist homeys, follow. And it was with his knitted *kippa* that he stood by his cartoons, spoke to and was applauded by an audience of Palestinians,

who elsewhere would have taken him for a West Bank settler.

It all started, I suppose, a year ago, when I heard Jean Plantu, the great French cartoonist, at the Cartoon Festival in Jerusalem. He told the audience of famous cartoonists from around the world, about how he had brought Yasser Arafat and Shimon Peres to sign the same drawing – the first document jointly signed by leaders from both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a year before the Oslo agreements. I told the story in an Upfront here in the November 2005 issue of The Jerusalem Report and sent Plantu the article with my portrait of him.

Plantu was delighted and asked if I would be interested in a project he had initiated with Francophonie Israeli cartoonist Michel Kichka, Palestinian cartoonist Baha Boukhari, and other colleagues from Europe, America and even Africa and Asia. The program was launched in 2006 with an exhibit and symposium at the United Nations in the presence of then-secretary general Kofi Annan, who let the artists know how seriously he takes them: "Cartoons have a special role in forming public opinion because an image has a stronger, more direct impact on the brain than a sentence does, and because more people will look at a cartoon than read an article," he declared. So if we are going to unlearn intolerance, we need to engage cartoonists in the discussion."

Throughout 2007 Plantu's group displayed their cartoons and spoke publicly in several European capitals. And for June 2008, they had planned an exciting program. The cartoonists would converge on Jerusalem first of all, where one copy of a group exhibit about conflict and reconciliation, and war and peace would be shown and the artists would meet the public and the press. The next day, everyone would move on to Ramallah, where another print of the cartoons would hang and the cartoonists would talk to a local crowd and conduct a "master class" with children in a nearby refugee camp. And on the last day of the program yet another copy of the exhibit

would be shown at Holon's newly established Cartoon Museum.

Plantu asked me to send him a selection of illustrations I have done for The Report that relate to the project theme, and he was particularly taken by the dove-hands painting, which I did back in the mid-90s to illustrate a joint call by Palestinian and Israeli professors to hurry up and finalize the Oslo peace process. This image has since garnered a lot of mileage: It was adopted as a symbol by a peace dialogue group called "Encounter" and stickers bearing the image found their way to the bumpers of relief trucks in the war-torn Balkans; and I personally gave a print to the late Palestinian leader Faisal Husseini in Jerusalem's Orient House. Plantu asked my permission to use the graphic as the symbol of the exhibit. I agreed, of course.

A couple of weeks later, he got back to me apologetically. Some of the Palestinians involved didn't agree to the use of the image, because the Magen David was too blatant. Plantu made a drawing of his own, which made a more subtle reference to the sides in the conflict – his dove holds a pencil striped blue and white, and red, black and green. "This shows we still have a way to go... and many drawings to do!" he wrote. But my image was blown up to poster size and greeted visitors to the exhibit opening at the French Cultural Center in East Jerusalem.

Saladin Street, north of the Old City, is crowded with small, run-down shops, but hiding behind stone walls is a 19th-century



Up Front

villa, which houses the Chateaubriand Center. There's not much room in the building but the grassy yard was hung with prints on clotheslines, with works by Israelis Michel Kichka, Shay Charka, Uri Fink, Daniella London-Dekel and myself; Palestinians Baha Boukhari and Khalil Abu Arafah; George Bahgory from Egypt; Izel Rozental from Turkey; No-Rio from Japan; Jeff Danziger from the U.S.; Patrick Chappatte from Switzerland; and Plantu and Pierre Wiaz from France.

And there was Ali Dilem from Algeria, too. Dilem's very presence was something of a breakthrough. His entry, facilitated by the Peres Center for Peace, was the first ever of an Algerian national, travelling on an Algerian passport, to Israel. One can only hope that his return home was uneventful; Dilem has already been imprisoned for annoying the authorities and has a *fatwa* (Islamic religious ruling) sentence of death hanging over his head from fundamentalist organizations. (Algerian cartoonist Brahim Guerroui was gruesomely murdered by terrorists in 1995. They returned his severed head, his mouth stuffed with cartoons.) Cartoonists, journalists and the public – mostly from the French-speaking community – wander the grounds looking at the cartoons, getting acquainted, interviewing, explaining, arguing. The center of attention is the glamorous Senegalese-born French Secretary of State for Human Rights, Rama Yade, but a cartoon of mine sparks a hot debate, too. I had drawn the "Hunting Season" illustration to accompany a Moshe Negbi Viewpoint in The Report about the light sentences handed out in Israel to Jews who kill Arabs. The Arab artists couldn't believe we could get away with such a critical image in the Israeli press. Boukhari says his cartoons have caused newspapers to be closed 17 times, sometimes by the Israeli authorities, sometimes by the Palestinians. We Israelis found ourselves explaining that we are expected to criticize the government – it's part of our job description.

Well, of course, it's not quite that simple, later elaborate in the Q&A session. When Yitzhak Shamir succeeded Menachem Begin

back in 1983, I did a cover painting for the English-language magazine Newsview, a closeup portrait of the new prime minister with a tiny Ariel Sharon (the then-disgraced defense minister of the 1982 Lebanon war) peeking out of Shamir's eye. The Foreign Ministry promptly cancelled all their subscriptions to Newsview, which until then had been displayed in every Israeli consulate in the world. The sudden loss of readership



drove Newsview out of business, and Israel had to do without an English-language news magazine until The Jerusalem Report came along seven years later.

That evening at a French Consulate reception for the cartoonists, Abu Arafah, a resident of East Jerusalem, was very slowly, and with obvious difficulty, trying to get used to talking to his Israeli colleagues – he had spent over a year in Israeli jails. But Boukhari from Ramallah, who has been dialoguing with Israelis for years, had to get home before dark because the Israeli authorities had issued him a visiting permit valid only for the daytime – if found in Jerusalem after dark, he could have been arrested.

The next morning we all were to have traveled north to Ramallah to be present at another opening of our show and to have a cartooning master class with children in the al-Amari refugee camp. But we are informed that the Israelis are not welcome. The organizers tell us the Palestinians had decided there was too much tension. Ramallah-based Boukhari insists that the disinvasion could only be the doing of the Israeli authorities who would not let us into the Palestinian territories. Whatever the reason, the internationals and Palestinians do go to Ramallah and do have their session

with the schoolchildren. But when they move on to the cultural center, they find that the Palestinian organizers have dutifully hung all the drawings – except the Israelis' drawings, that is. Unfazed and undaunted, Plantu pulls out another full set of prints and a roll of tape and, wearing his eternal smile, proceeds to hang all the Israeli artwork alongside the others. No one removes them.

In the afternoon, the Israelis pile into a van at the American Colony Hotel in East Jerusalem to travel to Bethlehem. The drive south takes minutes, but passing through the security wall and checkpoint made the quick ride feel as if we were passing into another world.

Still, once the Charka kippa incident is overcome and we move on into Manger Square and the Bethlehem Peace Center – which in previous incarnations had been British, Jordanian and Israeli security headquarters – the locals embrace us, and the conversation and the open question-and-answer sessions with the audience is lively.

Algerian Dilem is typically enthusiastic, calling out the names of his Israeli colleagues to warm applause. Uri Fink gets up and says that in school he had elected to learn French – "they had better comics" – but he would never forgive the Israeli school system for not forcing him to learn Arabic, so that he couldn't understand anything Dilem had said. "But I agree with every word!" he adds.

With only one more day left to the program, the cartoons move on to the Holon Museum of Caricature and Comics. This time Abu Arafah doesn't join us – not because of a permit problem, but because, he says, the trip deep into Israel's heartland was "still a bit much" for him. But Boukhari, Dilem, Bahgory and the others proudly add their autographs to a wall in the museum, signed by every cartoonist who has ever visited there.

Plantu is determined to involve more cartoonists in this project and to prove that cartoons can promote understanding around the world. The next Cartooning for Peace program is planned for Doha, Qatar, in September.

Will the Israelis be able to attend? And, if so, will Shay be able to wear his kippa? We don't know yet. Or, as Plantu says, "We still have a way to go... and many drawings to do."

Avi Katz