

Between the Gilboa and Jenin

*An Israeli-Palestinian tourism initiative presents:
the pit into which his brothers threw Joseph*

The Gilboa Regional Council and the District of Jenin in the Palestinian Authority have been cooperating recently in the development of tourism projects. A tour organized this week on both sides of the Green Line makes it clear how simple, obvious and natural this is.

The Gilboa roadblock on Route 60, near Moshav Gan Ner, looked like an ordinary border crossing point in a normal country last week. The tour bus in which a group of leaders of the Lutheran Church in the United States was traveling was stopped there for only a few minutes. From there the bus continued to downtown Jenin, where we were joined by Abdullah Barakat, deputy governor of the Jenin Governate of the PA.

Barakat greeted us warmly, and gave the driver instructions for arriving at the village of Burkin, three kilometers west of Jenin, where the Church of Saint George, considered one of the oldest churches in the world, is located. From there we drove on to see the impressive ancient viaduct at Lama. The tourists took pictures, the children waved hello, the guides explained the history of the area in fluent English and the relaxed atmosphere seemed entirely natural to everyone.

This tour in the area of a Jenin is another link a continuing collaboration initiated by Daniel Atar, head of the Gilboa regional council, and Qadura Musa, the district governor of Jenin. Most of the joint efforts are in the area of economics and trade and this is a first tourism initiative, aimed at developing joint visits to the Gilboa and Jenin. Israelis are not permitted to visit Jenin, so the target audience is tourists from abroad.

To the group of Lutheran leaders from the U.S., all this looked almost obvious. They were far more excited by seeing the lines so familiar to them from the Bible come alive before their eyes, than they were by the peace-seeking reality they were witnessing. Joseph's pit, for example, with the fields and flocks of sheep around it, looked to many of them exactly the way they had imagined the biblical Holy Land. What could be more exciting than that?

At lunch on the outskirts of Jenin, Atar said: "Our joint aim is to bring tourists from all over the world and to help develop and advance the economy in the region. This is a unique model, which proves that with joint work and mutual interests and projects, it is possible for Palestinians and Israelis to live in coexistence and peace."

Musa, the Jenin governor, added that all of Palestine, not just the Jenin district, is open to tourists from abroad. The PA, he says, is following closely the cooperative efforts with people from the Israeli side of the line. He said he was happy for the cooperation, which is economically beneficial to both sides, but added that he regretted that there are still Palestinian prisoners in detention in Israel, and that the settlements weigh on further progress toward peace.

"We want a strategic peace, without force, under international law. This is our vision," said Qadura Musa as he turned toward the photographer and shook Daniel Atar's hand.

One hundred thousand tourists a year – that is the joint aspiration of the two local leaders, and suddenly it looks so very simple. Possible and obvious.