




Volunteers holding roses in Safran Square in Jerusalem on Sunday, June 5, 2016. Credit: Elhanan Miller

With flowers and Ju Jitsu, Jews and Arabs reclaim a troubled holiday in Jerusalem

'Every year, people from the outside come and ruin our city, leave, and we remain here to pick up the pieces.'

Elhanan Miller

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A dozen people sat on a patch of grass in south Jerusalem Sunday afternoon, listening quietly to the story of Roni Hirshenson, who lost his soldier son in a Palestinian suicide attack two decades ago.

A somber contrast to the [loud Jerusalem Day festivities taking place downtown](#), Hirshenson's presentation was one of some 50 activities organized by "[a Different Day in Jerusalem](#)," a grassroots movement geared at giving the annual Jerusalem Day celebrations a less nationalistic, more tolerant character.

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Established by government decree in 1968 and enshrined in law three decades later, Jerusalem Day marks Israel's capture of East Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-Day War, and the "liberation" of the Jewish holy sites of the Western Wall and Temple Mount in the Old City.

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Celebrated annually some three weeks after Israeli Independence Day, Jerusalem Day has become a heated point of contention between Jews and Muslims as its key event – the flag march – passes through the Muslim Quarter of the Old City en route to the Western Wall.

“We come with a different voice to Jerusalem Day,” said Doubi Schwartz, co-chief executive director of the Parents Circle, a non-profit that brings together Israeli and Palestinian bereaved families to publically share their experiences, who arrived with Hirshenson. “We’re here to express our pain over the continuation of the conflict and over the price we pay for it. Even here in Jerusalem, people believe we can do things differently.”



Doubi Schwartz: 'We come with a different voice to Jerusalem Day.' Credit: Elhanan Miller

In previous years, the mostly national-religious teenage participants of the flag march would shout anti-Arab and anti-Muslim slogans as they marched through the crowded Arab neighborhood, waving large Israeli flags. Police shortened the parade and restricted the length of the flagpoles for fear of vandalism this year, reacting to an appeal by Israeli NGOs to Israel's Supreme Court on Sunday to reroute the parade. Its correspondence with the start of Ramadan has sparked fears of physical violence on the eve of the holiest month in the Muslim calendar.

Michal Shilor, a Jerusalem activist working with the Jerusalem Intercultural Center on Mount Zion, said the initiative for a Different Day in Jerusalem arose from a sense that Jerusalem Day habitually attracts overt displays of racism and violence, "especially by people who don't live in the city."

"Every year, people from the outside come and ruin our city, leave, and we remain here to pick up the pieces," Shilor said. "We've decided to give Jerusalem back to the Jerusalemites."



Michal Shilor: 'Many people have come up to thank us for giving them an opportunity to mark this day in a way they couldn't have in previous years.' Credit: Elhanan Miller

The activities of the experimental a Different Day in Jerusalem ranged from public debates at Zion Square to a workshop on “the connection between Ju Jitsu and the acceptance of the other.” Most events, like the alternative family parade to the old train station, were open to the public; while others, like a sign language workshop held by the Kol Israel Haverim Arab-Israeli School for the Deaf, were on limited attendance.

“Many people have come up to thank us for giving them an opportunity to mark this day in a way they couldn’t have in previous years,” Shilor said.

At Safra Square, just outside City Hall, a group of volunteers holding bouquets of red

peace, Raz Kaveh, a 20-year-old law student at Hebrew University, said he had no problem with the flag march per se, only with “the verbal violence” accompanying it. Meanwhile, Gil Moshkovits, a member of Kibbutz Pelech in the Galilee, heeded the call of anti-racism group Tag Meir to hand out flowers to Arab residents along the route of the parade.

“Rather than be a day of pure joy, Jerusalem Day is used to stick a finger in the eye of anyone who isn’t us,” Moshkovits said as he walked toward the New Gate, leading into the Christian Quarter.

“Giving out flowers is an act of solidarity with the victims of violence and incitement,” he said. “It’s an act of showing humanity in a place where humanity is lacking.”



Gil Moshkovits ready with flowers at the New Gate to Jerusalem's Old City on Sunday, June 5, 2016. Credit: Elhanan Miller





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