

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

May 2, 2012 at 9:56am

The story of one man, one clash in complicated Israel

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

SAFED, Israel -- Abraham Faraj, once an Israeli soldier who, for a time, was the driver for future prime minister Gen. Ariel Sharon, was selling juice -- orange and pomegranate -- from his little sidewalk stand here in this northern Israeli town.



His mood was good at seeing tourists. He was laughing, pointing this way and that at his wares, even offering samples.

And then the sirens blew.

It was Holocaust Remembrance Day, when at 10 a.m., all of Israel stops in silence for two minutes to remember and honor the six million Jews of Europe who perished at the hands of Hitler's deputized murderers.

Well, not *all* of Israel stops, it turns out. The ultra-orthodox -- who spend their time praying, studying Torah and not participating much, if at all, in the civic state of Israel because it would mean dividing their loyalties between it and God -- make it a point to ignore, sometimes ostentatiously, the two-minute observance.

So as the rest of us, including Faraj, stood still, one ultra-orthodox young man, wearing his traditional black pants, white shirt and wide-brimmed black hat, continued walking purposefully in our midst. Down the walkway he went in front of Faraj and the rest of us, with considered inconsiderateness. Then he turned around and walked back up the slope.

When the sirens ended, he broke into a high-decibel jeremiad in Hebrew, which was translated for me this way: "You hypocrites: You don't pray all year long but now you stop for two minutes. You should study the law all year long."

Faraj boiled over, exploded. He leaped from behind his juice counter and, shouting and waving his hands, began to run after the man who had offended him and, he thought, all six million dead Jews of the Shoah.

The man quickly disappeared around the corner and someone yelled at Faraj to stop while another calmed him. When he did stop, panting hard, he spit -- spit right where the man had stood when he harangued the silent, motionless crowd.

Slowly, Faraj's breathing returned to normal and he returned to his juice stand.

The drama was over. And Faraj, in response to my honoring him by asking his name so I could write about him by name, gave me a free glass of pomegranate juice -- appropriately both bitter and sweet all at once, not unlike Israel itself.

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What I and others witnessed here was just one more indication of how complicated Israel is today.

So the tension one sometimes feels here is not limited to the long-running Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Within Israel itself, Jews often are divided internally, though "internally" perhaps is the wrong word in that it suggests a singular whole entity.

Divisions within Judaism in Israel are not new. Indeed, when speaking of Judaism at the time of Jesus, it's more accurate to talk about Judaisms, though in the end, most Jews around the world, even if they would not identify themselves as part of the Zionist movement, are essentially united about the importance of Israel as a Jewish homeland.

In the times recorded by the early books of the Bible, there are accounts of how this land also was divided geographically among the 12 tribes of Israel, with 11 of them getting different parts of the country and one of them being designated as the priests.

I don't mean to suggest that these divisions among Jews in Israel are somehow all defining, but it is important to know that both Israel's friends and its enemies can easily misread and misjudge the land and its people (as no doubt I have done even here) if it is assumed that all Jews agree on everything.

Ask Abraham Faraj. Ask the ultra-orthodox man who made Faraj's blood pressure go all 200-over-100 on him. Or just come and look and listen, remembering that we Americans are perhaps equally divided and at times even more bitterly so, leaving us no room to judge.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog for *The Star's* website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*

. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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