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THE ROAD TO THE WHITE HOUSE

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Heard the one about the Kassam...?

By RAY HANANIA

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Israelis and Palestinians know what a final peace agreement will look like. We just don't trust each other to get there safely.

Palestinians insist Israelis are disingenuous about peace and will never return to the 1967 lines or anything close to it. Israelis insist that Palestinians talk peace but are really out to to achieve a one state solution and destroy Israel.

Humor is not the answer to the conflict, but it can go a long way to restore trust.

Toward that goal, I launched "The Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour," performing in Tel Aviv, and East and West Jerusalem last January.

We just completed our second Israeli tour, from Haifa to Beersheba, for Israeli audiences. We also performed for Palestinians at East Jerusalem's Ambassador Hotel.

If you need your hope re-charged, you should have been there. The audience response was phenomenal. It wasn't just the laughter. It was Israelis coming up to us afterwards and saying that while they may disagree with some of our views, making them laugh restored the hope that they thought disappeared long ago.

Palestinians said the same to the Israeli and Jewish performers.

Joining me were Charley Warady, an Israeli, and two converts to Judaism, Yisrael Campbell and Aaron Freeman, who is African American.

Our routine goes something like this: We're called the Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour in Israel.

Three Jews and an Arab from North America. Or Ray Hanania and the three hostages in the West Bank. Of course, in the Gaza Strip, we're just called The Four Hostages, I explain to audience belly-laughs.

A stand-up comedian in Israel, Charley discovered we grew up in the same Chicago neighborhood before the 1967 War. He didn't hesitate when I asked if he would appear with a Palestinian.

Seems like a no-brainer, right? I mean, what's the problem with Palestinians and an Israelis appearing on the same stage?

There are consequences and rejection on both sides. Five Arab American groups that had booked my act mysteriously cancelled in the two weeks after the first tour.

Arab Americans perform with Jews - but with Israelis? It's a taboo.

Some Arabs call normalization "surrender."

It's ridiculous, of course. Palestinians are directly linked to Israeli society. Maybe Palestinian Americans feel guilty because we live in



The Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour at ZOA House in Tel Aviv. From left: Yisrael Campbell, Ray Hanania, Aaron Freeman, and Charley Warady. Photo: Courtesy

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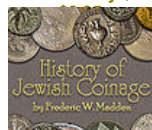
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Western comfort while our people live under a brutal and oppressive military occupation.

I know how oppressive it is as a traveler and as someone who owns land in East Jerusalem near Bethlehem in an area of the West Bank that's been annexed. My rights are non-existent under current Israeli policy.

But if we can achieve peace based on compromise, my rights would be recognized and compensated fairly.

It is the same on the Israeli side. Many Israeli comedians refused to perform with me, fearing they might undermine their careers.

But Palestinians and Israelis hunger for change. They want to trust each other. Laughing together restores that lost hope. When we laugh together, we can live together.

We don't pull our punches. Audiences laugh at most jokes, and wince at a few that push uncomfortably too close to home. Some jokes hit like a ton of bricks - better a tough joke than a Kassam rocket.

I steal flight safety cards from the airlines. United. American. I stole one from El Al, but the Mossad tracked me down and took it back. They warned if I did it again, they'd destroy the homes of three relatives in Ramallah. I said I don't have any relatives in Ramallah. They said, they don't care.

Audiences roared with laughter, but they know exactly what I mean.

Or this one: I get asked a lot of questions at the airport, like 'Is that your bag?' No that's not my bag, that's my wife. She's wearing a burka.

And Charley joked about throwing change as he drove through a checkpoint. "But they started shooting at me. I thought they were mad because I didn't have exact change," he punned, to roars of laughter, too.

Two hours of jokes, ranging from self-deprecation to sharp political commentary.

Normally, we don't listen to each other. But we were listened to when we joked.

Imagine if we started listening to each other all the time, not looking for reasons to hate but with a human compassion that humor brings out.

My name is Ray Hanania. I'm Palestinian. I surrender. I surrender to the need to trust each other again.

Let's laugh together, knowing we are exactly the same.

Let's fight for peace. Who knows, we just might make the hard choices that only real trust will allow.

The writer is an award winning Palestinian American columnist, author and stand-up comedian.
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