

Open Shuhada Street  
C/O Daniel Mackintosh  
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13 October 2009

The Jewish Board of Deputies  
Care of Director, Mr David Jacobson  
By email: DavidJ@ctjc.co.za

Dear Mr Jacobson

## **ISSUES ARISING FROM THE SHMINISTIM TOUR**

### **Introduction**

We are writing to you on behalf of Open Shuhada Street to tell you about the recent visit of the Shministim, why we chose to bring them out, what they did while they were here, what kind of impact they had on the various audiences that they spoke to and lastly, some aspects of their engagement with the Jewish community.

Open Shuhada Street (OSS) is an organisation campaigning for the full civil rights of all Palestinians and Israelis and advocating an end to the Israeli occupation. We do not view the 42 year occupation as the *sine qua non* of all hostility between Jews and Arabs in the middle-east, but do believe that ending it is a necessary condition for any sustained improvement in relations. We reject violence, condemn all forms of racism including antisemitism and islamaphobia and seek to empower Israeli and Palestinian activists working together in joint struggle for a just solution to the conflict. OSS believes that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become an issue of global concern, not only due to the urgent moral questions it raises, but also because it is at the fulcrum of the West's relations with the Arab world, and therefore of enormous geopolitical significance. We are concerned that the wrong kinds of voices have dominated the discussion until now, especially in Jewish and Muslim communities. The occupation of the West Bank and Gaza has been ongoing for 42 years and it is apparent to us that only by engaging wider society in the debate over how to end the occupation, will progress be made. It is undeniable that the occupation denies freedom to Palestinians on a daily basis and causes suffering and humiliation on a large scale. It is a matter of profound personal concern to each of us to see Israelis and Palestinians move towards peace. This, and our anguish at seeing suffering on either side, drives us to do what we can to support those working for change. That is why we believe it is vital to engage progressive voices from within the Jewish and Muslim communities, and beyond that in all communities, when discussing this issue. Our approach is not unique; organisations with similar aims have started in several countries. It is because of this approach that during their 10 day trip, we introduced the Shministim to a wide spectrum of South African society. They spoke with over 3000 people.

The Shministim tour was co-hosted by our group and the End Conscription Campaign as part of commemorating the latter's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Their visit was funded by Atlantic Philanthropies, an international charity dedicated to equality and social justice principally in Ireland, South Africa and the United States.

OSS recognised the Shministim as representing the small emerging trend amongst young Israelis on the left who are dedicated to combating Israel's oppressive policies towards the Palestinians, working together on joint struggle and simultaneously promoting peace and coexistence within their society. These are the kinds of voices that we seek to strengthen as they are committed to human rights and to the dignity of Palestinians and Jews. We believe the kind of discussion that will emerge from their engagements with a variety of audiences will encourage a less ethnocentric and more complex understanding of the occupation and the conflict as a whole.

We are convinced that visits such as this hold positive potential for stimulating healthy relations and engagement between Jews and other parts of South African society. Firstly, at numerous events including the Book Lounge, universities, the District Six Museum and elsewhere, there were productive discussions involving a significant number of Jewish people with their fellow South Africans. Secondly, the Shministim were seen as role-models by many young people they met with at schools such as Westerford, Bishops and South Peninsula High School. Young people were enormously impressed with the Shministim and thereby formed a very positive impression of these young Israeli Jews, the first they had met in many cases, notwithstanding the fact that they speak very critically of their own society. Thirdly, those attempting to depersonalise the Israeli as a nameless, evil, indifferent killer would have had their fantasies shattered by the Shministim as they remind all of us that there is humanity in the other. Fourthly, in simple terms, when Jews speak out against Israeli illegality and oppressive policy, it makes it very hard for antisemites to use Israel as an excuse for labelling all Jews a certain way. In this regard we have attached to this letter several letters written to us to by Muslims. This is in contrast to the unfortunate statements made from time to time by the SA Jewish Board of Deputies which align the entire SA Jewish community with the most destructive aggression of the Israeli military, thereby making it easy for antisemites to equate Jews with Palestinian suffering. Lastly, it is vital that we all understand that neither the tension between the Jewish community and the Muslim community, nor the tension within the Jewish community, is going to significantly ameliorate until there is a material improvement to the situation in Israel-Palestine, as this is the source of the tension. It is therefore vital that we assist efforts to move things in a peaceful direction, the Shministim being only one example.

## **Description of the tour**

Some of the major successes of the tour included:

- **The talks at UWC, Wits and UCT.** This was an important opportunity for the Shministim to encourage university students to stretch beyond their traditional lenses and meet the Shministim as Israelis, as human rights activists and as human beings campaigning for a peaceful end to the occupation.
- **Meetings with several Jewish audiences.** The Shministim met twice with the SAJBD and once with a Jewish youth audience of about 25 people in Johannesburg where two older members of the religious community hurled abuse at them throughout much of the meeting. They also met with a group of 60 Herzlian students at Deer Park Cafe where all of the participants engaged intelligently and respectfully. They also met informally with a wide variety of Jews in Cape Town and Johannesburg who were so excited to engage mature

Israelis who had committed themselves to ending the conflict. The majority of these interactions were positive, even –perhaps especially-when they were contested.

- **They delivered the Ashley Kriel Memorial lecture.** This is a prestigious annual talk to commemorate one of the icons in the struggle against apartheid. The Shministim connected themselves to a long line of youth who are engaged in the struggle for human rights. They spoke to a hall of people who recognised their personal example, saw them as Israelis committed to the Palestinian cause and felt a sense of comradeship that reminded everyone present that youth still have a key role to play in building a decent future.
- **They spoke at the Tutu Peace Center.** Here they engaged with members of the Black Sash and End Conscription Campaign as well as a group of students.

### **The Albow Centre Event**

We are deeply concerned about events that took place at the Albow Centre on Wednesday 7 October. OSS hired the facility to host the Shministim so that they could engage with a predominantly Jewish audience in a venue where anyone in the community could feel comfortable.

First, our film crew was denied entry into the building by the centre security and Mr Simon Brovdovsky. Nowhere in the rules was it made clear to us that we could not bring a video crew into the venue. It is standard practice for people who hire the Albow Centre to be able to record events. Yet the same rules apparently did not apply to us. We were told that it was a security threat to have someone inside with a video camera. On the contrary, we believe had there been a video camera inside, the threatening, abusive behaviour that characterised the evening would have been less likely to occur as people would have thought carefully about their behaviour in the knowledge that it was recorded. It should be noted that no audience members would have been filmed against their will.

Once we arrived inside the hall, we saw many people from a very specific right wing section of the community. Our strong feeling is that they were mobilised to confront the Shministim. Throughout the meeting there was heckling, abuse, provocative and childish behaviour. The Shministim were called cowards and traitors. Their Jewish identity was questioned. Someone shouted “They should be lynched”, another shouted “Knock some sense into them”. At one point Nathan Geffen requested David Jacobson to get security into the hall to deal with a man who was behaving aggressively towards him and Kira Shlesinger. This request was refused and it soon became apparent that the man in question was a friend of the security.

When the meeting ended, a few dozen people surged forward. They backed Ilan Strauss into a corner shouting abuse at him, crowded around the Shministim at the front and confronted Daniel Mackintosh in very aggressive tones. No security were present. Daniel was screamed at, told he was a traitor, a self-hating Jew, a fomenter of disunity and a disgrace to the community. Pushing and shoving started. At that point, Owen Futeran firmly stepped in, told people that they were acting disgracefully and ensured that Ilan could leave. After another 10 minutes, we managed to get the Shministim out. While we were on the steps, a man, known to the security, in an IDF shirt walked up to Daniel, said he was a disgrace, an embarrassment to the community and then said 'And now we know what you look like. So be aware, now we know.'

The following day, Jessica Stillerman, someone completely uninvolved in the creation of the Shministim tour, was called anonymously and she received a death threat.

The following email was sent to OSS from [de\\_oren@walla.com](mailto:de_oren@walla.com):

*you're all adigrase....!!!!*

*how come you aloud yourself to speak in the name of Israel?!*

*you have no right to do that.*

*I hope that the 3 shministim will burn in hell for their lies and the same for you too- all this stupid organization....!!!! you're not "support human rights"... youre support terrorists and killers!!! you need to be ashamed of yourself...!*

*I'm, Personally going to ensure that youre organization will be destroyed because of all your pathetic lies...*

*enjoy as long as you can... you're end is nearby :)*

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*enjoy as long as you can... you're end is nearby :)*

We consider these incidents antisemitic because the hatred reserved for Jews who criticise Israel is more intense than the ill-feeling towards others who do so, and because Jews who criticise Israel are sometimes blamed for all subsequent criticism of Israel. They were in our view directed against Jews for being Jews. Their vehemence was exacerbated by the belief by these right-wing elements in the community that the Jewish members of OSS and the Shministim are traitors.

Also during the meeting, racist abuse was hurled at a non-Jewish black man attempting to engage in the discussion. Someone asked him if he was Jewish, to which he politely answered that he was not, after which he was told to "Shut the F-k up then."

Before the meeting, David Hersch, a senior office bearer in the South African Zionist Federation, sent out a widely circulated email which you have presumably seen. It all but directly called for a disruption of the Albow centre meeting. In it he stated, "Fanatics just get stronger in their beliefs and agenda the more they are opposed and confronted, but oppose them and let them know they cannot operate with impunity we all must."

Unfortunately a permissive environment has been allowed to develop, in which abuse, threats of violence and unsavoury behaviour are allowed. We believe this should be a matter of deep concern for the Jewish community. Racism, internal antisemitism, threats and the potential for violence should be stamped out of the community. We hope therefore that the SAJBD institutes an independent investigation into these events.

In addition, we are concerned with the SAJBD statement released even before the Shministim had a chance to engage with a single member of the Board. The essence of the Board's statement was to

distinguish between the Shministim and the ECC. Laurie Nathan and David Bruce, two leading (and Jewish) members of the ECC, have both since issued public statements repudiating the Board's claims. The Board statement created an area of conflict when there need not have been one. The reason for releasing the statement was not clear. Many members of the community were involved in the Shministim tour or were impressed by them. Surely it is not the Board's prerogative to take sides in a debate on which there are diverse views in the community. The Board's mandate is however to protect Jewish citizenship and this certainly came under threat from certain intolerant elements of the community.

Lastly, we would like to apologise that only Sahar came to the meeting with the SAJBD last Tuesday afternoon. We tried to change the meeting time of the Shministim but could not find an alternative time, which meant that it was always going to be a tight squeeze between a meeting which began at 4:45 pm and the Ashley Kriel lecture which started at 6:30 pm. Nonetheless, what we committed to was that all of the Shministim would be there and that did not happen, a fact that we take full responsibility for.

While this tour has created a significant degree of controversy, we also think that it has opened up new avenues of debate, solidarity and a chance to see the human side of the conflict so often obscured by violence and slogans.

OSS would like to thank the Board for engaging with the Shministim and reiterate its openness to meeting with the Board in the future.

Regards

Daniel Mackintosh

Ilan Strauss

Nabeelah Martin

Doron Isaacs

Nathan Geffen

On behalf of Open Shuhada Street

## **Email attachments**

**Subject:** [Website feedback] Good Website

**Date:** Sat, 15 Aug 2009 13:17:44 -0700  
(PDT)

**From:** dawood@fairprice.co.za

Dawood sent a message using the contact form at <http://www.openshuhadastreet.org/contact>.

As a South African who is very aware of what is happening in Palestine, I am often stunned by local Jewish support of Israeli brutality and as such find it difficult dealing with them in the business and social arena. Your website in general and petition in particular brings a sense of relief in that it shows that many SA Jews are able to look beyond ethnicity and condemn the brutality unconditionally. I congratulate and applaud them for their sense of justice and you for creating a platform that exhibits this. You have made it much easier for me to deal with SA Jews and have freed me from painting all Jews with the same brush.

*(Note: Mr Dawood has given us permission to distribute his email.)*

### **Facebook messages:**

October 1 at 7:59pm

Just wanted to let you know that I went through to listen to the Shminitism and it was pretty much amazing!! They really are brilliant, the event was organised exceptionally well and the turnout was great too.

It really got me thinking too about whether if I was born into the circumstances they find themselves under would I have had the courage to stand against all those around me for what was right..I really respect them for their bravery hey!

October 5 at 7:26pm

i thought it was amazing

the activism of the shministim is truly inspiring

I'm glad it wasn't just the usual boring lecture but it also involved thought rendering discussions and poetry it truly showed me how youth get involved in situations and how they can truly change the world