

## **Rabbis for Human Rights.**

One hundred and thirty Jewish volunteers planted 400 olive trees last week in Palestinian villages, continuing their work even following at least one violent attack. The volunteers, coordinated by Rabbis for Human Rights, braved freezing temperatures on 14 January and again on 21 January, traveling by buses and private cars from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv to the villages of Awarta and Burin to plant olive trees.

While the first day of planting was completed peacefully, on the second day of planting, 21 January, volunteers were attacked just before Shabbat as they were in the village of Burin. Video footage shows masked attackers descending toward the olive grove from a nearby hill, with clubs, tools and gasoline. The attackers can be seen setting a car ablaze and beating the activists and farmers.

"The settler violence (i.e Israeli fundamentalists who argue that the Holy Land is their land) directed first of all at Palestinians and to anyone who refuses to accept their version of messianic Jewish superiority that they seek to impose." Rabbi Hefetz continues to call on Israeli government ministers to stop talking and to act now to bring the perpetrators of such attacks to justice.

### **Trees of peace**

The new trees stand in the same spots where groves were burned or uprooted and volunteers attacked, not only last week but at least twice during the last couple of years. "Two years ago, delinquents from the outpost hit an 80-year-old rabbi and three of our volunteers; they broke our rabbi's arm; they set fire to the grove," said Rabbi Hefetz. During another attack in November 2021, a Palestinian farmer suffered a broken leg. "Until now he has difficulty walking," said Rabbi Hefetz.

Many times, when Rabbis for Human Rights volunteers undertake solidarity visits to Palestinian communities, even if not attacked by settlers, the army tries to chase them away. However, on 14 January the army did protect the volunteers and they were able to work in peace, said Rabbi Hefetz. On that day, as the volunteers began their tree planting, army soldiers showed up, she said. "Immediately a jeep with soldiers arrived and they told us to leave, and I asked to see the commander." Rabbi Hefetz told the commander that the volunteers weren't there to provoke anyone. "They understood," she said. "The soldiers withdrew and watched from afar. This is because of the recent cooperation between the Palestinian security system and the Israeli security system. It's a lot of work behind the scenes."

"We used to come to a place and the army would chase us from there, or it would usually involve a long discussion with officers," explained Rabbi Hefetz. "I would tell them: 'We are doing the work you should do, protecting the farmers, and if we are not

here, the Palestinians will not be able to harvest.' We are here to protect the Palestinian farmers and help them."

### **Drop the violence**

Following the 14 January tree planting, Rabbis for Human Rights organised an interfaith ceremony, beginning with a blessing for the Palestinian farmers and the volunteers. "We had prayers and texts from Muslim, Jewish and Christian traditions," she said.

The Jewish holiday Tu Bi'shvat, a day of environmental awareness, is observed between January and February. "It's a holiday for nature and, in the Jewish tradition, every seven years we are not allowed to pick olives or to plant trees - we give the land a rest, a sabbatical year for the land," said Rabbi Hefetz.

This year, the rabbis decided to go ahead with planting trees - and instead give violence a rest. Instead of dropping their tree-planting tools, they decided to adopt the motto "drop the violence." During the olive harvest last fall, Rabbis for Human Rights coordinated nearly 1,000 Israeli volunteers who helped pick olives and protect Palestinian farmers. "We harvested for 26 days," said Rabbi Hefetz.

Volunteers have been helping Rabbis for Human Rights for 20 years. Rabbi Hefetz still remembers the beginning: "We were a few, and then people sent the word to others, and the numbers grew." The numbers also grew because Rabbis for Human Rights cultivated not only olive trees but partnerships with other organisations. "Their volunteers joined us because we were leading the olive harvest and tree planting," said Rabbi Hefetz.

As the numbers grow, Rabbi Hefetz wants the message to "drop the violence" to get louder, too. "These are positive actions that we are doing," she said. "This is the message I would like to pass to other people around the world - it's a positive message: there's too much pain and sorrow and violence. I think we should focus on the positive things people are doing."