

Opinion | 'Did You Ever Notice How Jesus Sounds Like Cheeses?' Asked the Israeli Tour Guide

Receiving a tour guide license from the Tourism Ministry included taking a surprising course at Haifa University

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I recently received my tour guide license from the Tourism Ministry, after I took the University of Haifa's tour guide course at its Givat Ram campus in Jerusalem. Though I usually refrain from spitting into the well from which I just drank, let me explain why I can't, in good conscience, recommend this course to others.

The most important person on a tour guide course is the coordinator, a licensed [tour guide](#) who organizes the trips and hires the guides for each day trip (there are about 60 such trips). The coordinator accompanies the students on the excursions, adding his or her own comments both on the bus and in the classroom. A student's experience on the course is largely dependent on the coordinator.

Unfortunately, my coordinator was A.

A. wasn't professional. He often wouldn't respond to students' emails, text messages or phone calls, justifying this by saying: "I don't get paid enough money to answer every email and phone call from students."

His decision-making skills were pathetic. One day our group was up north and it was late in the day. The coordinator had to decide whether we should spend the last two hours at Nimrod's Castle – an important site during the Crusades – or a chocolate factory. He chose the latter because we would get free chocolate.

A. never knew when to stop talking. Once he got hold of the bus' microphone he wouldn't shut his mouth. He would talk about things completely irrelevant to the course such as why he thought the police in the United States are violent toward African Americans.

But his biggest problem was his attitude toward Arabs. Of the 45 students on our course, a little more than half were Arabs. A. was often rude and condescending to them. Ironically, I can say in his defense that A. is an arrogant and obnoxious person in general. Yet he displayed a far greater tendency to be obnoxious to Arabs than to Jews.

Half of the Arab students were Christians, including a deacon and a pastor. On one bus ride, in an attempt at humor, A. said over the microphone: “Did you ever notice how Jesus sounds like cheeses? Jesus and crackers. Jesus and crackers.”

On one trip a 45-year-old Palestinian student asked A. where we were going after visiting the excavations at the City of David in Jerusalem. Even though she was standing right in front of him and looking straight at him, he didn't respond. She repeated her question and he answered: “Just keep walking. I already said where we were going on the bus, and if you didn't hear, that's your problem.”

The day before one of our trips a close friend of mine, an unemployed Palestinian with nine children, called me to say he had no food to feed his children and asked if I could help. I sent an email to my fellow students explaining the situation. The next day every student – Jew and Arab alike – brought oil, rice and beans for me to deliver to my friend. It was beautiful. But later that night A. sent me a harshly worded text message instructing me to never again “use the course as a platform to promote my social agenda.”

A. displayed such a lack of sensitivity toward Arabs that he even scheduled field trips on Christian and Muslim holidays, knowing full well they couldn’t attend. Absence from a trip has serious ramifications; you’ll not only miss the information taught, but since you’re allowed to miss very few trips, you can get dismissed from the course.

The Arab students begged A. to change the dates for trips scheduled for both Easter and the eve of Eid al-Adha, the most important holidays of the year for Christians and Muslims. His response: “No. This is not a democracy.” Out of solidarity, some of the Jewish students said they wouldn’t go on those trips, so in the end he changed the dates.

On the day trip to Hebron, instead of hiring a tour guide, A. decided to be the guide. Since Muslims aren’t allowed to enter the Jewish side of the Tomb of the Patriarchs, A. told them they wouldn’t have a guide inside the building. A. could have hired a Muslim guide for them on the Muslim side, while he guided the Jewish students on the Jewish side, but he didn’t.

Moreover, during our course we had more than 50 tour guides, all of them Jewish. I asked A. if we could once, just

perspective. His response: “No. This is not a democracy.”

Eventually I complained to B., the office manager, about his behavior. She told me I was the only one complaining about A. I found this amusing because I knew that at least seven Arab students had complained to her about A. and she told them the same thing.

She added that A. gets great reviews on the student feedback forms at the middle and end of the course. I found this curious because I spoke with students from previous years at the Givat Ram campus and they never received feedback surveys. And when we finished our course four months ago, B. didn't give us feedback forms; we hadn't received them in the middle of the course either.

Given that B. was indifferent to the course coordinator's behavior and that she lied to me twice, I drove to Haifa to meet with the CEO of the program, Prof. Gabriel Malka. I shared with him A.'s behavior in detail, but he told me I had an agenda.

He was right. I have an agenda: to live in a country where people are treated fairly and equally regardless of their ethnic or religious background, and where a course coordinator at an academic university behaves professionally and without prejudice.

I'm surprised the Tourism Ministry accredits the University of Haifa to run a tourism program that violates the very ethics guidelines the Tourism Ministry requires of tour guides. The ministry's ethics code specifically states that tour guides must show respect and sensitivity to all people

equally without discrimination based on religion, and that they do every job with professionalism and to the best of their ability.

Making Arabs beg to reschedule trips scheduled for major Muslim and Christian holidays doesn't meet the tour guides' ethics code.

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