

Some 130(!) Hebrew University students came on a winter evening for a special evening marking the International Day of Human Rights. The event was organized by IEA's local students group on campus: "Interfaith Encounter", in cooperation with the Department of Comparative Religion, under the title: Human Rights in Religion.



The evening was moderated by Ms. Yael Gidanyan, Chair of IEA Board, and Mr. Salah Aladdin, IEA's Assistant Director.

The first speaker was Dr. Yehuda Stolov who presented the Interfaith Encounter Association and its works to promote genuine coexistence and sustainable peace, through joint community building on the grassroots level, using interactive interfaith dialogue as its vehicle. The apolitical and all-inclusive approach of the organization and its activities enable it to successfully recruit a very wide range of participants and thus to continuously build a true grassroots movement which constitutes the human infrastructure for peace in the Holy Land. He also stressed that in the spirit of IEA the focus of this evening will be different. Many times such evenings focus on what's wrong with someone and what THEY need to do in order to improve. Tonight we will focus on understanding the imperative to respect human rights and hopefully go out with higher commitment on what WE should do to improve.

Then spoke Mr. Bill Van Esveld, senior researcher in the Middle East division of Human Rights Watch. He stressed the fact that their work mostly focus on the secular realm, reporting on and to governments who committed to respect human rights on issues where they fail to do so. He gave a few examples of the interface between his work and religion or religious communities. One example was the law in Saudi Arabia which is based on Sharia (=religious Islamic law) but did not develop clear criteria so two people who committed the same violation can be punished differently. Another example was the challenge to recruit support for a universal condemnation for suicide terrorists by all religious leaders in Iraq.



After the two openings we started the panel. The speakers were introduced by Yehuda Stolov and spoke according to the 'historical' order.

Rabbi Dr. Shmuel Jacobovits, an ultra-Orthodox rabbi who is the son of Rabbi Lord Dr. Immanuel Jacobovits and Dean of the Torah Institute of Contemporary Studies. Rabbi Jacobovits said that there is no doubt that there are many sources in the Torah for the imperative to respect the "other": every human is valuable since s/he was created in the image of God, why was the first human created alone – in order for no one to be able to say to another 'my father is better than your father' and so on. However, it is important to note that besides the values of freedom and equality there are other values, such as faith, worshiping God etc. and that the challenge to balance all of them. Those who choose to give highest priority to the values of freedom and equality have to respect others, who organize their values differently, in order to prevent the danger of clashes.

Fr. Dr. Peter Madros from the Latin Patriarchate, a Scholar on Christian Theology and New Testament Science who speaks 11 current languages as well as 5 ancient ones. Fr. Madros agreed with the rabbi that religion put more emphasis on duties than on rights, although they are two sides of the same coin as your rights are my duties. For example: in the religious law it is allowed to stone some sinners and it stronger than their right to life. However, the right for life is important as it gives the possibility of repentance. In Christianity there is no capital punishment for religious violations but Jesus puts the responsibility on the emperor to deal with the crimes in society. In Christianity there is the right to freedom and self defense but the Apostles say that freedom should not be an opening for the lasts of the flesh and not shelter for injustice.

Sheikh Dr. Raed Fathi, was the Head of the Islamic Council for Fatwas (=religious ruling) and is lecturer in the Dawa and Islamic Studies College in Um el-Fahim. Sheikh Fathi said that after the death of Prophet Muhammad we have no prophets and every conversation between people is a conversation between equals. An important value in Islam is humanity: every person is born without sanctity or original seen. They can do great things as well as make mistakes. And they can repent for mistakes and haste. The basic approach is that the human is totally free to do what they wish, unless there is an explicit text that limits them and there are only some 1200 texts of "do" and "don't do" – much less than in the civil law. There are three principles of equality: all human were created in an equal way, we were all created to worship the one God, and we will all die and stand in front of God. An important principle in Isla is justice – not only among Muslims but among all people, even enemies.



After the three presentations, a very lively conversation took place between the audience and the speakers. Even after we officially concluded the evening, some two and a half hours after it started, many stayed and continued discussing. Many of the people attending signed up to join IEA groups and we hope that in the coming weeks we will find suitable groups for each of them.