

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**Interfaith Encounter Association- Can Jesus, Moses
and Mohammed be friends?
On the Effectiveness of the enterprise of the
Interfaith Encounter Association**

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Preface

During the second semester of the second year of my Master's studies at the Program on Conflict Management and Negotiation, I examined the effectiveness of the conversation encounters of the Interfaith Encounter Association. In order to do so I took part in encounters of various groups in the organization and interviewed participants from different religions.

The Interfaith Encounter Association is dedicated to the promotion of coexistence in the Middle East through interfaith dialogue and joint study. The organization believes that religion can and should be a source of solution for conflicts in the region and beyond. The organization does not believe in the blending of the traditions into one undifferentiated group, but in providing a place where every one can be in safety and ease, while fully maintaining their identity.

Out of my impression from the encounters and out of the analysis of the interviews it was found that among the members of the organization exists a situation of coexistence and there are good connections of deep friendships. Participants also mentioned that their personal identity is not only maintained but even intensified.

It is important for me to note that in addition to the insights that resulted from this research, in these days there is preparation work on its way for the opening of an interfaith encounter group at Bar Ilan University. I am full of hope that as the veteran groups present positive outcome of connections, the new students group will follow on their way.

Theoretical background

Since the end of the Cold War, many researchers claim that the origin of conflicts lies in clashes between communal identity based on race, nation or religion. Different researches bring up the place of religion in conflict, and many of them show the destructive power of religion. Fox (1999) describes how religious legitimacy influences bitterness, complaining and protest by ethno-religious minorities.

But in the last years there is a new reference to religion as a positive factor, which supports peacebuilding processes. Researching the place of religion in peace processes is important in the study of culture and peace. Religious norms and values are central factors in the cultural identity of those involved in the conflict and different researchers and theoreticians identified the importance of the religious aspects, in the escalating or calming of a conflict.

Religious values, like other cultural values, can be a source of motivation for fighting or for reconciliation. Similarly, religious ceremonies can be powerful tools in transforming hatred into cooperation. In addition, religion has the ability to galvanize social, moral and spiritual resources for a process of peace making (Abu-Nimer, 2001).

I wish to summarize theories that refer to encounters between groups in general, to interfaith encounters in particular, and their influence on the building of relations between members of different national groups and the lowering of the hostility between them.

The Realistic Group Conflict theory claims that real competition over limited resources leads to conflict between groups (Sheriff, 1966, Levine & Campbell, 1972).

In a situation in which the group interests of the different social groups are contradictory and there is a direct competition between those of limited resources, then hostility between them will develop. But, when the group interests of different social groups are in balance with each other and the groups will cooperate to achieve them, positive feelings will develop that will bring to the lowering of the negative and hostile attitudes between them. This approach forms an optimistic look on life in the society by being based on the assumption that prejudices and hatred towards the "other" are not inherent in human nature and they can be reduced and even eliminated (Kunovich & Hodson, 2002).

One of the reasons for hostility and misconceptions that exist between groups is the lack of opportunities for close acquaintance with members of the other group (Williams, 1947). Sheriff and his colleagues (1961) found that it is possible to reduce hatred and conflict between groups by creating "super ordinate goals" that require joining the forces of the two groups.

Social Identity Theory refers to cognitive and emotional processes that lead to the formation of prejudices. The theory is based on the assumption that the personal identity of the individual includes unique characteristics of the individual, as well as social identity resulting from the mere belonging to a group. Once a person is part of a certain group, the positive or negative image this group holds will influence also him (Tajfel, 1981).

Kurt Lewin and his students were among the first to conduct workshops for the improvement of relations between groups and they showed that the participants developed great understanding for the subject of inter-group relations and the problems involved in them, and even increased the motivation to deal with solving the problems (Lewin, 1943, in Bar & Bar Gil, 1995).

Opinions about the suitable approaches for the facilitation of such encounters differ. Maoz (2001) identified two central approaches for Jewish-Arab meeting activities, which represent to two poles in the continuum. On the one end of the continuum there are traditional models of coexistence of which the goal is to promote mutual acquaintance and tolerance, and to create more positive inter-group positions. On the other end of the continuum there are confrontational models which emphasize the conflict and the power relations between the sides.

According to Zonenstein & Halabi (2000), there are two main categories of encounters between groups in conflict. The first division move on the axis between human relations workshops and conflict resolution, and the second category move on the axis between "contact theory" and inter-group encounter approach.

In human relations workshops, the focus is mainly on the psychological aspects of the encounter's experience and the goal is to emphasize the commonalities between the participants and suppressing the conflictual issues to the margins. On the other hand, in conflict resolution workshops it is assumed that the conflict between the groups has also roots in the reality and that the way to resolve the conflict requires direct reference to the troubling issues.

The Contact Theory of Allport (1954) claims that personal encounter, neutralized from group attributions, will lower hatred and reduce prejudices, as opposed to the inter-group approach which claims that effective encounter will lower stereotypes only when the group identity of the participants is emphasized and the interactions between them occur on the group rather than personal level.

Another typology of types of encounters between groups in conflict is of Katz & Kahanof (1990) which divides the types of encounters according to three orientations: (1) workshops based on human relations (2) encounters based on inter-cultural learning (3) encounters based on conflict resolution.

The human relations school is characterized with focusing on the psychological aspects of the encounter experience and stresses the personal and inter-personal psychological processes which participants go through. In the encounters free expression of emotions and self exposure are encouraged, which will cross the basic inter-group divide. The idea is to bridge the gaps through the creation of a common denominator and increasing empathy (Katz & Kahanof, 1990). This school starts from the assumption that emphasizing the common will bring more humanization of the other and will weaken the stereotypical approach towards him (Suliman, 1997).

Approaches that stress inter-cultural learning claim that the influences that culture has on the self perception and the perception of the other should be first understood (Traindis, 1983). In order to deal with the gaps between cultures in which a certain behavior is considered legitimate in one culture and offensive in another, the goal of the encounters according to this approach is to eliminate inter-cultural barriers through information and cultural contents (Katz & Kahanof, 1990).

The conflict resolution approach focuses on the influence of processes of social perception during conflict, and refers to the contents of the conflict and the way of dialogue. It examines the influence group perceptions have on the behavior of the individual in the encounter and seeks to identify models and approaches to resolving the conflict (Katz & Kahanof, 1990).

Ben Ari and Amir (1987) suggested a typology that divides the types of encounters into three – (1) the contact model (2) the information model (3) the psychodynamic model. The contact model represents the view that personal encounter between groups will lead to a change in the mutual approaches of the members of the groups and to the improvement of the relations between them. The mere contact will create opportunities for mutual acquaintance, will encourage understanding between the individuals who are in contact and will reduce prejudices, conflicts and tension (Amir & Ben Ari, 1987).

The information model assumes that the development of stereotypes and prejudices result from lack of information or from wrong information, and that contact between the groups will provide an opportunity for finding and correcting the misconceptions (Amir & Ben Ari, 1987).

The psychodynamic model maintains that the individual's negative attitudes towards the outside group are loaded with a lot of projection material, and that psychodynamic processes that occur in the individual, are responsible for his negative reactions to the members of the second group. Improvement of such attitudes is conditioned by raising the contents to the awareness of the individual and the improvement of the ways of dealing with these problems (Amir & Ben Ari, 1987).

One of the central theories in the domains of conflict management and resolution and inter group relations, which constitutes a significant theoretical basis for dialogue workshops, is certainly **Contact Theory**: Allport (1954) raised the claim that inter group relations reduce the mutual prejudices between the groups and therefore this is a very positive process in bringing groups closer together.

Contact Theory is based on the belief that inter group contact will lead to change in the mutual attitudes and relations of those participating in the interaction. In the foundation of this belief stands the assumption that contact between people of different groups creates opportunity for mutual acquaintance, raises the mutual understanding and acceptance, and consequently reduces inter group prejudices, conflicts and tensions. (Allport, 1954).

Pettigrew (1998) suggested an inter group contact theory that is based on the research of Allport (1954). He referred to four conditions for optimal inter-group contact, and later suggested a longitudinal theory for inter group contact. Thus, he added to the basic contact hypothesis the conditions that will turn the contact to be optimal, as well as the time dimension as an important element of the process.

However, in order to achieve these positive results certain conditions should be kept during the contact (Amir 1969, 1976). For instance: opportunities for equal status between members of the groups participating in the contact, inter group cooperation in striving towards joint goals, intimate rather than casual contact, social climate that includes support for inter group contact, characteristics of the individuals taking part in the contact such as their personality and the strength of their initial position. The basic reason for the contact model is that during the contact members of one group can discover positive information about members of the other group. But in order to achieve this, a few of the above mentioned conditions have to exist, in order to encourage "positive exposure" of the contact partners.

Pettigrew's criticism on Allport's findings is mainly based on the claim that his hypothesis does not refer to processive components according to which

contact changes attitudes and behavior. He claims that the hypothesis predicts when contact will lead to positive change, but not *how* and *why* the change appears. Another point Pettigrew criticizes is the fact that the hypothesis does not include reference to the issue of inclusion of the contact's effects and the positive change it promotes beyond the specific situation. Therefore, Pettigrew proposes a wider theory of inter group contact which includes prediction of the generalization of the contact's results and their continued implementation in other situations.

Pettigrew describes four inter dependent processes that occur through contact and constitute a bridge to attitude change:

1. **Learning about the other group.** Findings show that in the same way that ignorance promotes prejudices, information about the other group improves the positions in inter-group contact and leads to more positive attitudes, images and stereotypes.
2. **Change of behavior.** Change of behavior constitutes many times a first sign for change of attitudes. New situations require adaptation and answering to new expectations. Inasmuch as these expectations include acceptance of members of the other group, this behavior has the potential to generate change of positions and attitudes. We can solve the dissonance between our old prejudices and new behavior by renewal and "refurbishment" of our attitudes. This behavioral process is fed by and gains from the repeated contact (in repeating encounters). These repeating encounters make the inter-group contact to more comfortable and appropriate, and thus increase the mutual affection. Likewise, positive reinforcements for the new behavior promote the influences of the positive change.

3. **Creating emotional connections.** Emotions are a critical component in inter-group contact. This anxiety could ignite negative responses. Encounters full of tension and negative feelings, can occur even in the absence of prejudices towards the other group. Continued contact generally reduces anxiety, even though a negative experience can even strengthen it. Positive feelings arising through optimal contact can promote inter-group contact. Empathy holds a central role in this process. Positive feelings arising through inter-group friendship can constitute a central component in the contact process.

Amir (1969, 1976) described the importance of intimacy in inter-group contact. In his researches from 1997 Pettigrew found that subjects that had friends in the other group (which included minorities and members of another nation) had feelings of sympathy, appreciation and even admiration towards members of the other group. This was significantly different from the general subjects. Generally, both prejudices and contact involve cognitive and emotional components.

4. **Re-evaluation of the group of belonging.** Optimal inter-group contact provides insights both of the other group and the belonging group. Intra-group norms and customs are the only way to run the social world. This new perspective can reshape your perception of the mother group and lead to a less provincial perception of the other group, a perception with less negativity and arrogant "ethnocentrism".

In light of these processes Pettigrew proposes a renewed wording for Allport's hypothesis. According to this wording, at least four processes take place during the contact. Based on this renewed wording Pettigrew suggests that constructive inter group contact is connected more to close and long-term

relations than to first acquaintance. This perception constitutes a dramatic change in the research of inter-group contact. Pettigrew calls this component "friendship potential" that according to him has to be included in the contact situation. In addition, Pettigrew adds the time dimension in the inter-group process and demonstrates its significance in the promotion of attitude change. In other words, in order for contact to be optimal, encounters have to be numerous and continue over a long period of time (as opposed to short and focused interaction based on a single encounter).

Interfaith theories

In their article Larson & Shady explain how interfaith dialogue is vital to the stability of a pluralistic world. They claim that dialogue has to reach levels beyond tolerance and at the same time preserve respect for limits and personal beliefs (Larson & Shady,2009).

Instead of aspiring for reaching empathy or tolerance alone, which can bring to a reality too far or too close between the sides, a third model is suggested for interfaith dialogue based on ideas of inclusion and adoption, which can be seen in the works of Martin Buber and Miroslav Volf. This model is inclusive, acknowledging and respecting both inter-personal limits and intellectual limits in interfaith dialogue and promotes a joint reality in which all dialogue partners reach the understanding of the other side's position despite the disagreement.

One of the central principles of Martin Buber is of real and inclusive dialogue. He explains that real dialogue occurs when each of the sides takes into account the other in his current and unique essence and approaches him with the intention to consolidate a mutual living connection (Buber, 1955 in Larson and Shady, 2009). When referring to Buber's message in interfaith context, it is important to see that he does not propose a theory of how to evaluate the truth between clashing sides, but emphasizes coexistence in a reality of difference in a way that keeps real commitment to the belief of the individual together with real respect for the views of the other (Larson & Shady, 2009).

The theologian Miroslav Volf uses the metaphor of a physical hug in order to describe the essence of his words on interfaith exchange. The hug, he claims, has four elements – opening the arms, waiting, closing the arms and opening them again. The first phase of opening the arms symbolizes will to be with the other, who is perceived as a friend and not an enemy, and contain him. In the second phase we are waiting to see whether the invitation is accepted. This waiting shows both sides that the other has the right to refuse. The third phase, closing the arms, requires "soft contact", in which we do not squash the other and the limits of the sides remain. In this situation, claims Miroslav Volf, the identity of the self remains and changes at the same time. Opening the arms after the hug shows that the same arms that invited, also release and will be ready to invite again (from Volf, 1996, *ibid*).

In his book Scott Appelby offers many examples of the attempts for creating peace with the help of religion. He shows that in the years after the Cold War, the most promising attempts of making peace through religion focused on training and guiding of the religious leaders in non-violent methods of conflict resolution. This activity included more than learning of accepted tools and ways of conflict resolution. It also encouraged the use of the religious customs of communities in order to find the moral-theological-ethical basis for the task of making peace and creating connections of friendship between torn societies (Appelby, 1956).

The research of Mollov & Lavie (2001) examined the place of the religious culture as supportive of understanding between groups of people who are in conflict, with emphasis on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict between the years 1994 and 1999. The assumption that was checked is that dialogue on

religious basis has the potential to change mutual perceptions to a more positive direction by basing on the similar between Judaism and Islam.

The research was based on findings taken from two case stories. The first was a dialogue project between Israeli students from Bar Ilan University and Palestinian students from the Bethlehem and Hebron areas which took place in the year 2000. The second case was a dialogue encounter on religious themes which took place in Gaza in the year 1999 with Israeli and Palestinian students and academics.

From reviewing the attitudes towards the second group, in the first case it was found that on both sides the students who were more religious showed more negative attitudes towards the second group and less willingness for encounter. From the second case of the religious dialogue in Gaza, among "the most religious" Palestinians a significant positive movement was found in the willingness to meet with Israelis before and after the dialogue.

An interesting example for interfaith dialogue can be seen in the Beliefnet website (www.beliefnet.com). This is a spiritual website that was created in 2000 by Steven Waldman and gets every month some 3.1 million visitors (Beliefnet, 2006b). In 2001 Beliefnet began a series of interfaith dialogues the form of forums in order to check the responsiveness. At first there were six forums and the participants were daily users of the site who were interested to hear from others about their religion. The facilitators of the forum were selected by the site based on their experience in interfaith dialogue in face-to-face form. The site itself has no affinity to a specific religion (Beliefnet, 2006). The advantages of interfaith dialogue conducted in the internet are many,

but the biggest of them is that many who would not approach encounter groups can, without leaving their home, conduct dialogue and get to know the other.

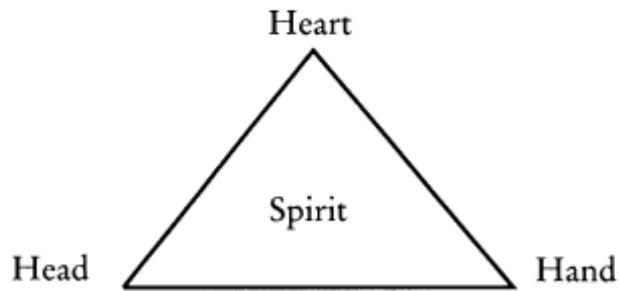
Abu Nimer (2001) makes a proposal for the construction of an interfaith dialogue program in which, he claims, participants can share their experiences of referring to the conflict from a religious perspective. By the use of the religious context it is possible to explain everyday incidents in a different way. For example, bringing a chair by a Jewish participant in order for a Muslim participant to be able to sit, was perceived as an act of reconciliation between Judaism and Islam. The goal in the program is to bring about some change of the narrow positions and perceptions of the participants into more open and accepting perceptions and positions (Abu-Nimer, 2001).

The research of Abu-Nimer is based on material gathered from conflict resolution workshops that took place between the years 1993-1999, interviews of participants from different religions (mainly Muslims, Christians and Jews) and observing and participating in workshops.

The workshops he examined included 58 participants from 11 different religions. Participants were asked informally and formally about their motivation to take part in various religious ceremonies, and about their motivation to participate in peace promoting activity. The interviews were not structured, enabling participants to share their beliefs and positions on inter-religious prejudices and stereotypes.

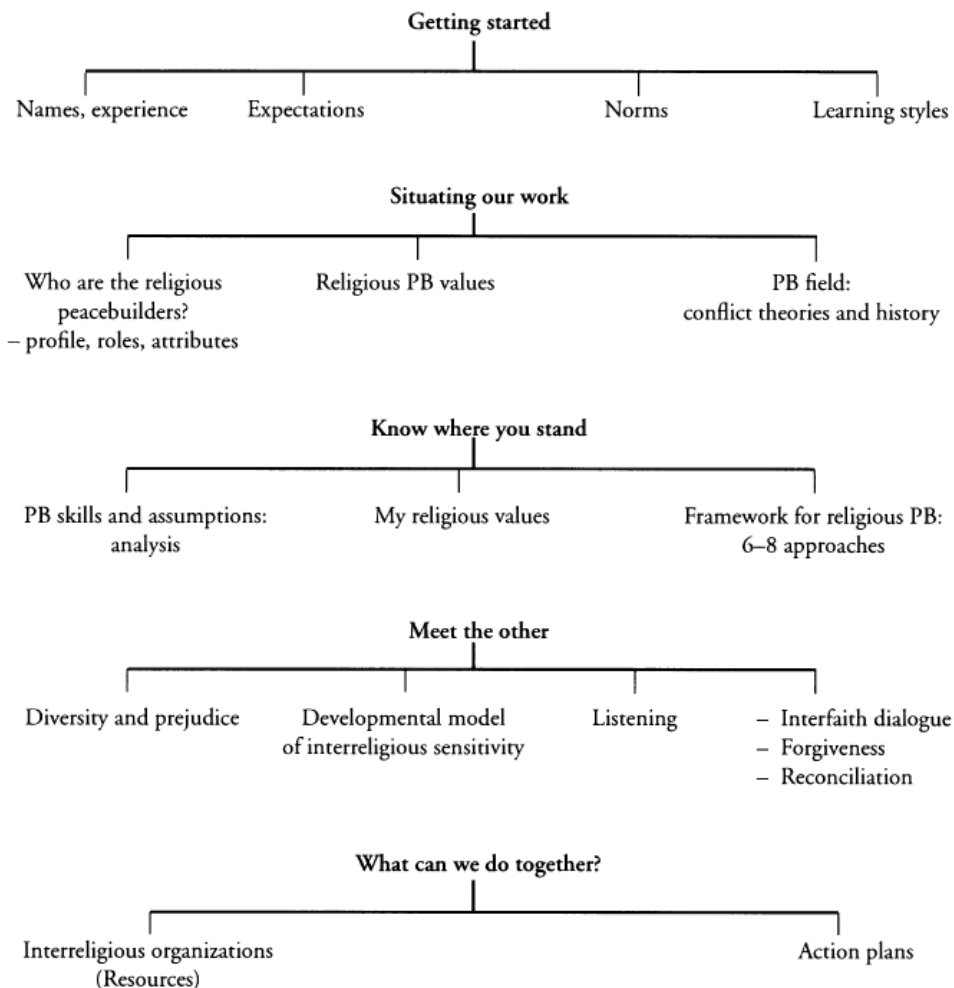
In order to change attitudes, Abu Nimer brings the 3H method (heart, head, hand). When religious people are involved another dimension should be added – spirit.

Figure 1. Principles of Attitudinal Change in Interreligious Training Design



The workshops Abu-Nimer conducted were workshops of training for inter-religious peacebuilding. The phases of the workshops were – acquaintance, learning about peacebuilding and conflict resolution through religion, self examination, getting to know the other and discussion on cooperation.

Figure 2. Training for Interreligious Peacebuilding (PB)



In order to identify participants' responses to inter-religious differences during encounter, Abu Nimer analyzed the positions according to the developmental Model of Antireligious Sensitivity. This model is based on the model of Bennet (1986, 1993) - The developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, which came to study the influences of 'encountering the other'. The purpose in implementing the model in interfaith encounters was to increase the awareness of the participants to the fact that their acceptance and tolerance are limited. Therefore participants were asked to evaluate their attitudes towards other religions according to the following criteria:

1. Negation – the existence or humanity of another religion.
2. Defense – differences which are perceived as threat on the reality of the individual, therefore people from a certain religion can build defenses towards another religion.
3. Inversion – negating the original religion and accepting the different religion.
4. Minimization – diminishing the differences (we are not that different, we are all children of God).
5. Acceptance – cognitive understanding that the other is entitled to exercise his customs and receive respect.
6. Adaptation – acceptance of plurality, pluralism.
7. Integration – living in plurality of religions.

The two last options were rejected by meetings' participants.

The process and dynamics participants went through:

1. Participants express personal excitement to meet members of other religions. They take part in a series of activities and dynamics that reflect tension, happiness, politeness, pleasantness in meeting 'the other'. In this stage there is emphasis on finding group and personal points of similarity. Also, many participants kind of idealize their religion.
2. The religious and cultural tension continues but participants start to learn more about the differences between the groups. The personal, cultural and religious acquaintance continues but the emphasis is shifts to the similarity between the religions. In this stage participants share their stereotypes on other religions. The atmosphere becomes less tense and less threatening due to the mutual and informal discovery of acquaintance and points of similarity.
3. The participants explore various religious beliefs and values. The acknowledgement of the points of difference can create frustration, lack of trust, suspicion, blaming and tension. The level of tension depends on the connection made in the previous stages.
4. In this stage the participants recognize the advantages and disadvantages of interfaith encounter. They feel empowered for their ability to connect to people of other religions. They stress the points of similarity and are able to define sensitive issues. The last part of this stage is when the participants search together for ways of cooperation and practical implementation of their agreement and their ability to study to understand one another.

After we have seen the different theories dealing with encounters of discussion and interfaith dialogue, I will now go to the description of my field project in the Interfaith Encounter Association, its results and discussion on conclusions.

Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA)

Interfaith dialogue was initiated in Israel in the late 1950's by a small group of visionaries, including Martin Buber and others. Despite several decades of interfaith activities, only a small number of people recognize the fact that faith without dialogue can bring to social instability (www.interfaith-encounter.org).

In light of the above, activists in interfaith dialogue formed the Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA). The guiding lines of the organization are:

- Equal representation of all faiths in the Association
- Equality of the genders in the decision making processes and activities of the Association
- Outreach to individuals from all faiths, age groups, walks of life and levels of society
- Outreach to individuals across the religious-secular and political spectrums
- Continual recruitment through committed activists on the local and regional levels
- Implementation of interactive programs that effectively change outlooks and attitudes, such as extended weekend seminars and ongoing study groups
- Continual development of new programs for effective encounter
- Ongoing evaluation of all strategies and programs

The Interfaith Encounter Association is dedicated to the promotion of coexistence in the Middle East through interfaith dialogue and joint study. The organization believes that religion can and should be a source of solution for conflicts in the region and beyond. The organization does not believe in the blending of the traditions into one undifferentiated group, but in providing a

place where everyone can feel safe and at ease, while fully maintaining their identity.

In acknowledgement of the activities of the Interfaith Encounter Association, Association, UNESCO declared the recognition of IEA as an organization that contributes to the culture of peace and as an actor of the global movement for a culture of peace, a United Nations initiative.

In order to create trust it is important to stress that the meaning of peace in the Holy Land is predominantly a situation in which individuals and communities manage to live calmly side by side. Consequently, every political model supported by one of the groups, has to allow for members of the other groups to live peacefully with it. Therefore, efforts to create peace should include anyone who is aware of the reality of different people who live together and for their need to so peacefully, regardless of their political views.

The Interfaith Encounter Approach is the main methodology of IEA and it is founded on four principles:

- (1) Emphasis on personal dialogue
- (2) Discussion of religious themes or religious aspects of themes
- (3) Encounter on the level of the individual
- (4) Permission to express any view but in a non-offensive way

The idea is to achieve attitudinal change not through theoretical study or lectures, but through personal experience and direct dialogue. Therefore, the main activity of the organization is not lectures, but encounters in small groups of 10-12 participants. In this way participants are given the opportunity to

speak openly and freely with each other. When people meet "the other" in a way that is both deep and positive, they are exposed to the human side of each other. This exposure has a great power of change which helps participants to teach themselves to overcome prejudices and fears and replace them with open thinking, mutual understanding, respect, trust and friendship.

Open and interactive interfaith dialogue includes three elements essential for its success:

1. It invites participants, whether religious or secular, to come and meet "the other" from a religious point of view and a deeper existential place.
2. It enables revealing of resemblance points between the religions.
3. It allows for the differences between the religions to be raised in a safe and non-threatening way.

The Interfaith Encounter Association acts in four geographical focuses:

1. Within the State of Israel – the organization encourages and supports the formation and maintenance of community-groups that connect neighboring communities. These groups develop inter-communal friendly relations on the one hand, while maintaining mutual respect and maintaining personal identity on the other hand. 27 groups were formed, 17 of them are currently active, across the land from the Upper-Galilee to Eilat.

2. Between Israelis and Palestinians – the organization works in cooperation with seven Palestinian organizations that believe in the same methods.

Weekend retreats were organized (since 2002), conferences and joint prayer

took place. In addition, there are four Israeli-Palestinian encounter groups, including two groups of Palestinians and Settlers.

3. In the Middle East – the organization works in cooperation with similar organizations in Egypt, Jordan, Iran, Lebanon, Tunisia and Turkey. So far five international conferences have been held, especially in Amman.

4. In the world – the organization encourages the formation of groups of Friends of IEA, which help financing the activities of the organization and hold parallel dialogue.

Method

In order to evaluate the contribution of the encounters IEA holds and their effectiveness, we conducted a qualitative research project. The sample included several groups in which I visited during encounters and of which some of the participants were interviewed. The groups selected were: *Jerusalem Women's Interfaith Encounter- WIE*, *ADAMA - Abu Dis and Maaleh Adumim* and: *Reut-Sadaqa-Friendship* which meets in Jerusalem. In all three groups there were Muslim, Jewish and Christian participants, between the ages 20 and 75. The main part of the analysis was based on the personal interviews of the participants in the groups, while my participation gave me a general impression about the conducting of the group and the ability to compare between the different groups in the organization.

The interviews were half-guided, i.e. there were questions asked in all interviews but in each interview there were questions added out of the unique flow created in the course of the interview. The questions that were explored in all interviews concerned interfaith connections prior to joining the organization, attitude and views towards other religions before joining the organization, personal goals for the participation in the encounters, the personal process participants went through in the organization, attitude and views towards members of other religions after joining, changes in the level of trust towards members of other religions, the influence of participation in encounters on the immediate surrounding of family and friends and the advantage of dialogue of religious type over other types of dialogue.

Details of groups and encounters:

Encounter in the Islamic Art Museum with the Jerusalem women's group

The group of Jerusalem Women's Interfaith Encounter (WIE) has been active for eight years, and includes Muslim, Christian and Jewish women who meet and together study various issues from the perspectives of the different religions.. The encounters take place once a month and in addition to the dialogue encounters, include also a variety of activities from meeting in a café to touring a museum to visiting the home of one of the participants. The encounter is a source of power and empowerment for women who discover the values they share as well as the similar challenges they face as women.

The encounter in which I participated included a visit to the Islamic Art Museum in Jerusalem. Some seven participants came, as well as a guest – the husband of Evelyne, the Jewish coordinator. The visit was guided by a young Muslim woman, who alternated quickly between the languages Hebrew-Arabic and English. We visited the different exhibitions that present the history of the religion and the different every-day customs. . The meeting concluded in an art exhibition of Arab artists from across the country, who chose to present different social problems in the society, from the political situation to the status of women.

The art exhibition elicited the widest response from the women; it seems that the art touched on all of them in the same way. During the whole visit there was full attention by all the participants, they all took interest and asked many

questions. The Muslim participants shared from their own experience and life and other participants shared comparisons based on their own lives and experiences.

Israeli-Palestinian encounter in Maaleh Adumim

Since the approach of the Interfaith Encounter Association is a-political with religious emphasis, it is possible to hold encounters from all parts of the political and social spectrum in the country. Even when violence occurred in the country, encounters continued to be held with caution and in carefully selected venues. The group I participated in was an encounter group between people of Maaleh Adumim and their neighbors from Abu Dis. Usually the encounters take place in homes of participants from Maaleh Adumim but there were also encounters in Abu Dis.

To this encounter I did not come alone, my husband Alon and baby son Eviatar joined me. We met in the home of Leah, the Jewish coordinator, with Jewish participants, residents of Maaleh Adumim, Muslim participants from Abu Dis and also from Jenin and a Christian participant of the Calvinist denomination, who visits the land for the purpose of religious studies.

The theme of the encounter was mysticism. Majdi, a teacher from Jenin, began by describing mysticism in Islam and spoke of the Sufis. Leah spoke about Kabala- Jewish mysticism and finally, the visitor from the US that joined the group, described to the participants mysticism in Christianity. The presentations were prepared, as the theme was decided ahead of time and the

presenters prepared their presentations in advance. After presenting the theme and a discussion, participants turned to the dining table and enjoyed the refreshments prepared by the hostess. It seemed that this is an important part of the encounter as all sat together, ate and talked about different subjects (from raising kids to the status of checkpoints).

Fare-well to Karmela in Reut-Sadaqa group

The Interfaith Encounter Association holds encounters of groups across the country, which connect between neighboring communities and creates a kind of inner-community that exemplifies the relations of mutual respect and friendship while maintaining and reinforcing the unique identity of each group. These groups set an example for the surrounding society by demonstrating that the several faiths can coexist in peace.

The Reut-Sadaqa group meets once a month in the Swedish Theological Institute on Prophets Street, and constitutes a meeting place for Jews, Christians and Muslims. The group was formed by three women, and they also chose the name of the group. On the day I joined the encounter the group bade farewell to Karmela, who is a nun, moved to live in the convent in Ein Karem and therefore had to leave her role as the coordinator of the group. In the encounter, in which the theme was 'transitions', every participant spoke, summarized the period of the group and wished Karmela his/her wishes.

It was very moving to see the farewell of the Muslim coordinator, Rafiqa, to her colleague Karmela. It seemed that Rafiqa is very connected to

Karmela and learned much from her. Karmela summed up the period she was the coordinator and one of the initiators of the organization as an important period in her life. She said that interfaith encounter became part of her life and she finds it everywhere, even on the operating table in the Shaarei Tzedek Hospital where she was operated by an interfaith team.

Here too, like in the encounter in Maaleh Adumim, the second part of the encounter was around the refreshments table. In the pastoral courtyard of the Swedish Institute we set together and talked. In the spirit of fare-well, the group brought up memories and the atmosphere was as a family. At some point private conversations between participants of the group developed and so passed another hour.

Processing the interviews

In order to explore the subjective experiences of the participants in the encounters of the Interfaith Encounter Association, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with participants of the three groups. In total 11 participants were interviewed, 5 Jews, 4 Muslims and 2 Christians, out of them 8 women and 3 men. The range of ages was between 20 and 78, and time span of participation in interfaith encounters was between 1 and 20 years. Places of participants' residence were Jerusalem (East and West of the city), Jenin, Maaleh Adumim and Abu Dis.

1. Interfaith connections prior to joining IEA:

From the perspective of prior interfaith connections it was found that the Jewish and Christian participants came from a rich background of acquaintance and connection with other religions, resulting from home education, which was varied in terms of kinds of people who visited, and from activity in different organizations connecting the different religions.

The Muslim participants, on the other hand, generally reported that until their participation in the group they did not know members of other religions on the personal level. One participant even said that Muslim education does not encourage curiosity towards the other, especially not towards Jews, "We know they are the enemy and there is no need to know more", he said.

2. Attitude and positions towards other religions prior to joining the organization:

Referring to this question, together with the previous one, showed that the reference of more participants was very open towards other religions, or at least neutral. It wasn't heard from any participant that his attitude towards members of other religions was negative.

3. Personal goals in participation in the encounters:

The personal goals for attending the encounters were varied. I divided them into four main goals. The first one is the creation of friendships and connections. Jewish and Muslim participants reported this goal. One of the Jewish participants said that she always had attraction to Islam, which started already from home as a child. She said that she grew up in a house where Arabic was spoken and the contact with Muslims was always close. Today she deals in an area which is related to the Arabic language and participates in the encounters in order to widen her social connections with Muslims.

Another Jewish participant said that he was interested in widening the circle of his interfaith friends both on the friendship level and the professional level. A Muslim participant said she comes to the encounters to meet her friends and is happy for any new connection made.

The second motivation for participation that I found was curiosity. Both Jewish and Muslim participants reported this goal. This curiosity results from the will to know the other. When participants talked about curiosity they

mentioned a lot the importance of knowledge about other religions as well as their own. One Muslim participant said that until he was exposed to the internet he did not know he was interested in other religions and when he discovered this, he started with a process of self learning and was very happy when a friend brought him to an encounter. A Jewish participant told that she discovers each encounter that her knowledge on both the Jewish religion and other faiths exceeds the knowledge of others and she enjoys sharing it with others. Another Jewish participant shared how much she enjoys learning from people of other faiths their ways of life, for example hospitality from the Muslim participants.

The third personal goal was self presentation of the religion and the community before the others. This goal was mentioned only by Muslim participants. One Muslim participant said that it is important for her to meet with Jews so that she can show them "that not all Arabs are terrorists and violent", and another participant said that through personal encounter he feels he can save the name of the Muslims. Another Muslim participant said that it is important for him to hear what other think about Islam and Muslims. One Muslim participant said that it gives him a lot of pleasure to show that Islam is more complex than the principle of Jihad.

The last personal goal but the most comprehensive that I heard was the faith that through the encounters it is possible to change the existing reality. Participants that expressed this goal belong to the three religions. Some called it "making peace", others called it "Tikun Olam" and "bringing the hearts closer together". The participants said that they feel that with the help of the encounters they have the power to achieve change.

An accompanying goal that I found during the interviews was the goal of self empowerment. Most participants said that they feel that they themselves learn a lot about their religion and consequently feel closer and more connected. Both through developing self learning and through comparing with the other that makes them feel happy in their share.

4. The personal process participants went through in the organization:

Most participants found it difficult to answer this question, claiming that the encounters became part of their way of life and it is difficult to see participation in encounters as a separate process. One Muslim participant said that now, after a year and a half of interfaith encounter, he can say that his contacts with Jews are not merely work-relations but also friendly relations. Another Muslim participant said that he went through a personal process of coming closer to religion and that now he understands his place as a Muslim and accepts it in peace. A Christian participant, who deals with interfaith dialogue for many years, said that she feels more complete with herself when she deals with it and feels it became a way of life that accompanies her in nearly anything she does. A Muslim participant said that once they started visiting participants in their homes, she saw them suddenly in another light – more similar to her.

5. Attitude and positions towards members of other religions after joining:

Although most participants claimed that they were open to accepting members of the other religions even before they joined the organization's

encounters, they also claimed that their attitude towards members of the other religions changed, became more positive. One Muslim participant said that she learned to distinguish between politics and people. A Jewish participant said that she discovered that despite the difference, dialogue is indeed possible. Another Jewish participant said that through the encounters she discovers various things about members of other religions and even though she herself is not religious, she is happy to be specifically Jewish. A Muslim participant said that he learned from the encounters about different Christian forms and the manner in which Jews believe in God and through this study he came to understand and better appreciate their ways of life.

6. Changes in the level of trust in members of other faiths:

"In every society there are good people and bad people, the bad ones are probably not those who want to meet with me" (A Jewish participant).

Despite the change in perceptions and acceptance of the other that most participants conveyed, they did not ignore the political situation and did not express naïve one-dimensional perceptions. A Muslim participant told that in her group there were difficult situations which demanded a lot of acceptance and trust when at the same time there participated a Jewish woman whose husband was killed by a Muslim and a Muslim woman whose husband was killed by a Jew.

7. The influence of participation in encounters on the immediate circle of family and friends:

A major goal of the organization is to advance people to people dialogue on the community level. In all the groups I visited there were at least two people who were in the group because another member brought them. Therefore the influence on the society is evident, but very slow.

Some of the participants told that their family is supportive but does not show too much interest or will to join. In response to a question whether his wife would like to come to one of the encounters, a Muslim participant responded that she is simply not curious to encounter others, but she does not object to his participation. On the other hand, the same participant said that the influence on his children is different, they see him speak Hebrew and meet with Jews and are interested and want to be like him.

A Jewish participant said that she feels her friends appreciate her for participating in these encounters and ask many questions. But not always the environment is supportive, an Arab participant said told that the level of support depends on the political situation and there are people who tell her that nothing will help to change the reality and that all depends on the government's policy. Another claim she heard was that there may be equality inside the group between members of the different faiths but this is not the situation in the reality.

8. The advantage of interfaith dialogue over other types of dialogue:

Most participants did not have the chance to participate in other types of dialogue and consequently there were not many answers to this question, but the words of a Jewish participant who is active for many years in different dialogues gave a thoughtful answer to this question.

"The meaning of religion constitutes a foundation for mutual understanding. Without understanding the religion of the other there is no understanding between people. Every one wants to be the one who is right, in the interfaith encounter everyone is right".

Discussion and conclusions

The goals of the Interfaith Encounter Association can be divided into two – the first touches on the promotion of coexistence with the use of religion as a source for conflict resolution. And the second part is the maintaining of the personal identity of the different communities and even reinforcing it.

Examples for creation of interpersonal closeness of feelings and coexistence could be found in all the encounters which I visited. In addition, all interviewees talked about the fact they made friendships and connections with members of other religions. However, it can not be ignored that most interviewees and those in the groups said they come from a background of openness to the acceptance of the other, whether it is personal or educational background, and whether it is openness of curiosity. This finding was strong among Jewish and Christian participants. Among Muslim participants, on the other hand, reports were made about the discovery of the other, transition from a state of lack of knowledge to the creation of curiosity and learning.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the participants come from a state of openness, the influence of the encounters improved their attitude towards the other in a significant way. It seems that the openness that characterizes many is not enough, but the encounters themselves generate strengthening of this openness and prevent deterioration. In addition, I found that through the participation in the encounters, this openness very slowly diffuses into the larger society. Many participants come to the encounters out of the reason that a friend brought them. Out of the responses of the interviewees about the influence of their participation in the organization's encounters, it seems that there is a slow

influence that causes the environment of the participants to open to the other and to the possibility of dialogue and coexistence.

The question is asked why the advancement into the society is so slow? **Stephan & Stephan** (1996, 1999) noted the importance of elements of anxiety and uncertainty in inter-group meetings. A certain level of uncertainty exists in every relationship, but when the communication is between people who are members in different groups, the uncertainty grows and intensifies. This uncertainty relates to the person's ability to predict the behavior of another person, and to the level of the knowledge (or its lack) that he has about members of the other group.

They present, in the model they developed, three types of threat that hold central role in the formation of prejudices: realistic threats, symbolic threats and negative stereotypes. In their research from 1999 they add also the inter-group anxiety threat.

Realistic threats: these include feeling of threat on the mere existence of the mother group, threats on its political and economic power and on the physical and material existence of its members. A threat of this kind includes every threat on the peace and well-being of the mother group and its members. This feeling of threat can lead to prejudices, regardless of whether the threat is indeed "real".

Symbolic threats: these include inter-group differences perceived in morality, values, standards, beliefs and positions. Symbolic threats are threats on the world view of the belonging group. These threats partly rise because the mother group believes in the moral justice of its value system. These threats

include the threat which the other group poses to the central values of the mother group.

Inter-group anxiety: people experience inter-group anxiety when they feel personally threatened in interaction with members of the other group. This anxiety causes intensification of cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses, mostly in a negative way, in the inter-group context.

Negative stereotypes: the essence of the threat is the expectation for negative incidents, caused by conflictual and unpleasant interaction with the other group. Research about negative stereotypes found that these predict prejudices.

According to Stephan & Stephan, the more people are unaware of the beliefs, values, norms, roles and patterns of behavior of the other group, the more they are expected to feel threat and anxiety in front of the encounter with them. Other factors that influence the feeling of threat are quantity and quality of previous contact between members of the two groups.

They stress that negative stereotypes towards the outside group are possible not only in real conflict situations, but also in threat situations of a few kinds: realistic threat resulting from fear of the inside group from harm by the outside group to its resources, symbolic threat resulting from fear of members of the inside group from cultural take-over by members of the outside group and therefore significant damage to its values and inter-personal threat resulting from rejection and embarrassment in the mere encounter between the groups.

That is to say, the current reality in the State of Israel is full of stereotypes, threats and fears. This reality makes it harder on the wish to meet

the other. Nonetheless, the Interfaith Encounter Association tries to show that on the basis of interfaith dialogue, these difficulties can be handled.

A significant additional difficulty, which also slows the pace advancement into the society is the lack of funding, without which it is not possible to widely publicize the organization. If more people were aware of the existence of the organization and of the existence of its encounters, more would have joined and thus it was possible to see wider change of attitudes.

Another issue that was found in analyzing the interviews showed that usually Muslim participants defined as one of their goals in participation in dialogue encounters, explaining themselves and their religion to other religions. Phrases like "showing that not all are terrorists" or "explaining Islam" were heard. According to Abu Nimer (1999), the goal of interfaith encounters is to change the participants' world view, especially positions, perceptions and behaviors towards the other.

The best way to bring about change of attitudes is a question that is examined by different researchers in Behavioral Sciences. Levin (1948) proposed a three-step process, (1) dissolving of negative approaches and perceptions, (2) creation of new approaches on the basis of new knowledge and experience, (3) freezing and reinforcing of the new approaches by positive experience and actions. This approach is in the basis of many conflict resolution interventions.

The contact hypothesis is another approach that explains the conditions needed for change of attitudes, and on the basis of the contact idea many models were built for interventions in different ethnic groups (Abu Nimer, 1999).

The three factors that, according to Abu Nimer (1999) influence the plan for interfaith intervention are: 1) how cognitive, emotional and behavioral factors can change personal positions in the program. 2) how effective it is to refer to persons in the group as representatives of their religion or as individuals. 3) how much experiential learning is effective in comparison with learning based on information or implementation of tasks.

It was found that approaches of participants significantly improved, or at least remained positive. There was not an interviewee that said that as a result of the encounters he appreciates less the members of other religions or has less trust in them than he had before the encounters. It seems that the encounters give participants a lot of hope and faith that coexistence is indeed possible out of their success to make meaningful contacts with one another.

From the interviews it was found that members of all religions feel that they strengthen their religious identity since their participation in the encounters of the Interfaith Encounter Association. Most of the participants are not religious, meaning fervent in the rules of his religion, and most of them even define themselves as secular. Even so, almost all of them talked about a process of learning and out of it coming closer to their religion and finding their place and religious definition.

Mollov & Lavie (2001) in their discussion about the advantages of interfaith dialogue cite Kelman (1999) regarding the stress on central elements in the self identity during dialogue between groups. They complement his idea by claiming that the mere dialogue on religious themes enables the groups to stress religious elements in their identity, and thus develop stronger self identity.

The last issue I will refer to is the conflict. One of the principles of the Interfaith Encounter Association is not to discuss issues of politics. The question rises whether coexistence and friendship are possible only while not talking about the conflict, but once the sensitive and conflictual issues arise, these friendships can forget themselves for the principles on which the conflict is based.

The issue that came up very strongly, during the interviews and encounters, was optimism. Interfaith encounters, which are based on the similar rather than the different, create a basis of friendship and a connection that constitutes a basis for resolution of conflicts. Nearly all the participants expressed strong hope and faith in the ability to solve problems. They said that without a joint basis and the creation of respect and mutual listening – it is impossible to sustain coexistence, which is the goal of the Interfaith Encounter Association.

It is important to note, that even in cases when conflicts arose out of the difficult reality, which has many conflicts, the groups stood to the test. The Reut-Sadaqa group and the Women's Group were active at the peak of the Intifada and managed to cope with suicide attacks, IDF retaliation activities etc. The ADAMA group continued its encounters even following the war in Gaza. It seems that the deep relations that developed in the groups helped their participants to cope with these difficult events and go through them together, instead of moving away from each other.

In this opportunity I would like to thank from the bottom of my heart, and to strengthen all groups' coordinators and participants who opened their doors and hearts to me so that I could gain close familiarity with the different levels of the organization, and to see and understand the processes they go through and lead. I wish you will continue to enjoy the deep friendships and that you will granted the opportunity to see the influence of your activity on the society.

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