



אגודת המפגש הבין דתי (ע"ר)    جمعية اللقاء بين الديانات  
INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER ASSOCIATION

## 2002 Annual Report

12/2001-12/2002

### ❖ Programming

In 2002, eager to provide an alternative model to the ongoing violence surrounding it and concurrent to building its own organizational structure and capacity, the IEA began implementing its new vision for society: a grassroots interfaith movement for peace, justice, and sustainability in the Holy Land and in the Middle East. It marked its inaugural year by organizing more than **30 programs** that brought over **800 participants** into interfaith encounters. Operating in all three circles of interfaith work the IEA launched all three of its programmatic sections and made use of all its program formats.

### ❖ General Program – Inner-Israeli, Israeli-Palestinian, Middle East Region Circles

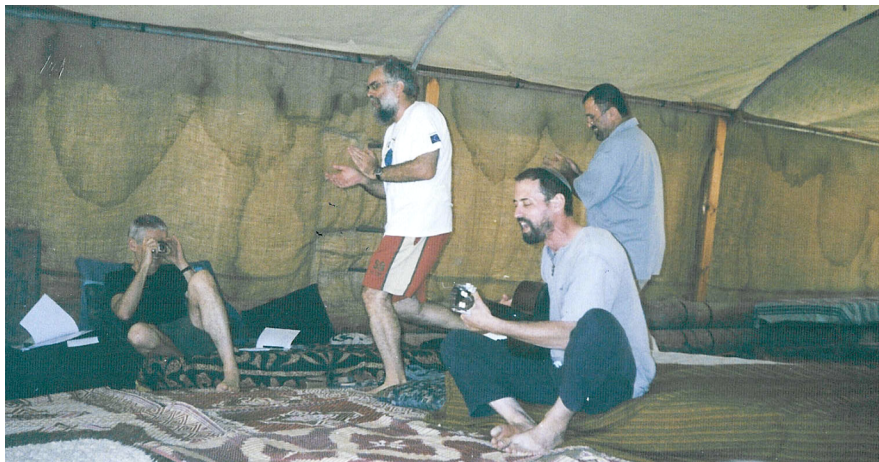
Operating in all three circles and accessible to all segments of society, the general section has achieved enormous success in its inaugural year: **two inter-religious study sessions, two desert seminars, a two-day conference in Acre, two Israeli-Palestinian conferences, and it co-organized a five-day Middle East region interfaith conference in Berlin.**



### **Inner-Israeli activities:**

The IEA organized **two Inter-religious Study Sessions**; one session focused on "Difference and Equality" and the other on "Christian-Jewish Experiences of the Other."

The IEA also organized **two Desert Seminars** in conjunction with the Youth Institute. The desert seminars brought together people from all walks of Israeli life: Jews, Muslims, and Christians; men and women; clergy and lay people; religious and secular; younger and older; Nuns, Priests, Rabbis, and Sheikhs; an accountant, a singer, a film director, and a psychologist. Experiencing the desert first hand, participants discussed the forming role the desert played in each of the three religions, meditated, and sang. Each of these activities had three sessions, each led by a different religious group. Beyond the verbal sessions participants also took hikes together and used the nights for solitude sessions – alone with the quiet, the stars, one's deep self, and God.



With additional funding from the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the IEA also organized a **two-day conference** in Acre focusing on the theme: "Love Your Neighbor as Yourself." For two days, over 100 people from all walks of life engaged in intensive, deep, and sincere conversations with each other. They learned about each other's beliefs and found their common humanity. Out of this conference came the decision to establish an on-going dialogue group in the West Galilee area.

### **Israeli-Palestinian activities:**

In the Israeli-Palestinian circle the IEA managed to organize two different Israeli-Palestinian conferences focusing on the theme "The Humanity of the Other" from a religious perspective. Both conferences were made possible through generous funding from the European Commission.

Unfortunately, the first conference was fraught with many of the difficulties and challenges endemic of Israeli-Palestinian interfaith work: the Palestinian participants were prevented from crossing into Jordan to reach the conference in Antalya, Turkey. In spite of the fact that the Palestinians were not able to attend in person, both groups of participants managed to rise above the obstacles in order to achieve progress

nonetheless. Both groups believed that to have given up completely and to have gone home would have been wrong. Therefore, the joint decision was made to go on with the program as planned but in parallel. The two groups learned and discussed in-depth the assigned theme: "The Humanity of the Other." They studied Jewish, Muslim, and Christian sources and exchanged their understandings and views about them. At the conclusion of the conference both sides expressed their desire and need to find the soonest possible opportunity to hold a conference together where they could actually meet face-to-face.

That need was met only three months later when, for the first time in two years, an Israeli organization – the IEA – and a Palestinian organization – the Nablus Youth Federation – organized a joint conference in the Holy Land itself that was open to the public. The conference took place at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem and a wide diversity of people were in attendance: men and women from across Israel and the Palestinian National Authority; Jews, Muslims, and Christians – both secular and religious; and even one visiting Native American. For many in both groups, it was the first time they had met the Other. It was established from the start that the participants at the conference did not have the responsibility to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but that they did indeed have the responsibility to develop human peace among the group participating in the conference. In order for that to happen, especially when the range of political views was wide in both groups, the discussions remained focused on religious perspectives and vied away from political arguments.



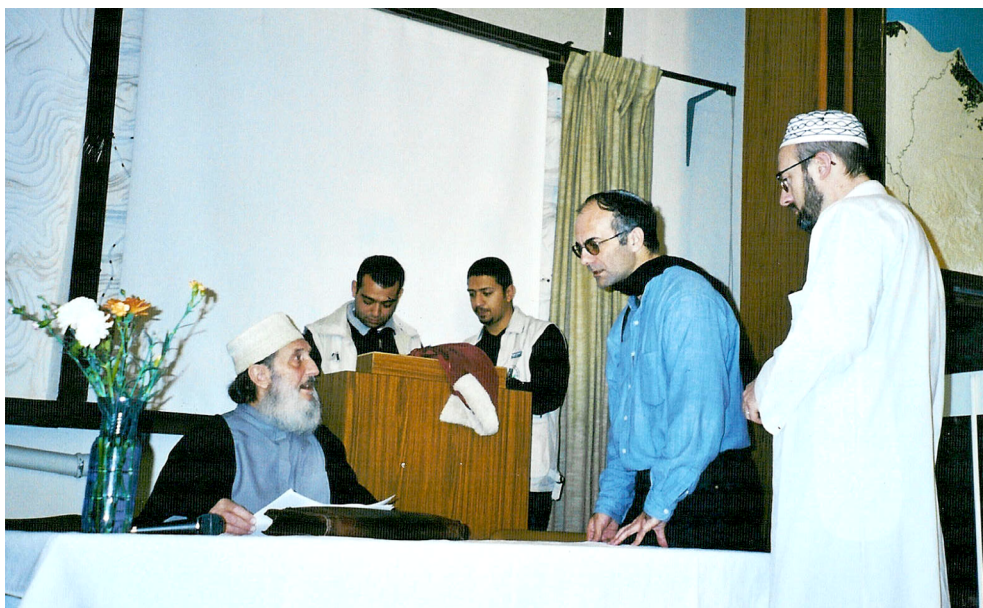
During the conference a Rabbi from west-Jerusalem, a Christian scholar from the Old City, and an Imam from East Jerusalem all addressed the participants. All three portrayed their respective religious views about the humanity of members of other faiths, especially the Abrahamic faiths, and the need to manifest that humanity in our relations with the Other. Both the Rabbi and the Imam mentioned the story of Cain and Able as an example of the wrong way to deal with differences. They stressed the need to overcome the tendency to follow that way by developing an alternative conversational approach. Especially moving were the Muslim Jumaa prayer on Friday and the Jewish prayer for the beginning of Shabbat – all participants, regardless of religious affiliation, were invited to attend all the prayers. Christians, Jews, and Muslims sat together witnessing, learning, and respecting each other's prayers. Nearly all participants, from both groups, expressed their excitement about



the process, the transformation they went through, and the need to take it further to more people and in more depth.

### **Middle East region activities:**

In conjunction with the URI Europe, the IEA organized a Europe and Middle East Conference in Berlin in April, 2002. Representing the three Abrahamic traditions, Middle East participants arrived from Egypt, Jordan, and Israel to attend the conference. Unfortunately, the crisis in the Holy Land prevented the Palestinian delegation from joining them. Naturally, this same crisis shadowed the participation of the other Middle East delegates as well. For some Arab participants it was the first time they had met a Jew, let alone an Israeli.



Conducting separate sessions and activities of the conference, the Middle East participants decided to face their fears directly and courageously. Meeting in two subgroups – one for Arabs and one for Jews – participants wrote down all their beliefs about and grievances with the other group. When the two long lists were finished, each group chose a spokesman from the other side to present their list; thus an Arab participant had to speak for the Jews while a Jewish participant had to speak for the Arabs. In so doing, the painful subjects being addressed were put into a humorous, yet challenging framework. Before starting the exchange the two representatives put on each other's religious hats, a movement that caused everyone to laugh and relax. At the end of the spirited session each group enthusiastically cheered its representative and emphasized their satisfaction with his performance. Naturally, the conversation did not end with the victory or defeat of either side but rather with the victory achieved in having both sides listen to and recognize the humanity of their "opponents." While neither group was forced to abandon its narrative, both groups learned that another narrative did exist that they must be aware of and understand in order to fully respect the humanity of the Other. The participants spent the last night in a friendly environment, taking photos together, talking, and wandering together around the neighborhood. As each group freely and casually mingled with each other it looked as though Berlin had witnessed the fall of another wall.



### ❖ **Women's Interfaith Encounter (WIE) – Inner-Israeli Circle**

Since its inception, the WIE has had over **15 inter-religious study sessions** and **one two-day conference**, in addition to countless visits, phone-calls, and a few "movie nights." The program's success has attracted such a large membership that it has created two on-going groups – one in Jerusalem and one in the Northern region – and plans two more: one in the center and one in the south of the country. Some of the themes addressed in monthly meetings included: shared religious celebrations (specifically: Christmas, Hanukah, & Ramadan); stories of the creation of the first woman; stories of the founding mothers; study of the calendars; religious customs for women; and wedding customs in each tradition.



With funding from the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the WIE also organized a **two-day conference** in Nazareth focusing on the theme: "Religious Tolerance and Social Justice." Eighty Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and Druze women spent the weekend living together, studying each other's faiths, praying together, eating together, dancing and singing together to Jewish and Arab music, doing yoga and meditating together, and sharing their lives, suffering, hopes, pain and dreams with each other. The encounter was comprised of women who might otherwise never have met, but found themselves assigned to share rooms together and parted with embraces and tears. Thus a hotel in Nazareth was transformed into an oasis of peace, warmth, and coexistence. The women formulated plans for interfaith action in the North including formal inter-religious study, visits to each other's homes and villages, joint declarations on matters of mutual concern for their societies, and pilgrimages to holy shrines. The conference also functioned as part of an academic research project conducted by Dr. Ben Mollov of Bar Ilan University. Dr. Mollov studies the effectiveness of interfaith encounters to affect real and lasting change.

The WIE also participated in the United Religions Initiative's "Visions for Peace Among Religions" project. As part of the one-on-one interviews focusing on how religion is a part of our daily lives, many women spoke of how the WIE experience had transformed their outlook on not only other's religious beliefs and practices, but their own as well.

Some quotes from participants in WIE inter-religious study sessions include:

- "I'm a nurse and work in healing and I came to the meeting because we need to heal our souls." – A Christian woman
- "We're defying the reality of what's around us, by creating a safe and sacred space among ourselves." – A Jewish woman
- "I originally came to these meetings just for the opportunity to talk with women of other religions, but now I enjoy going back to the Qur'an and learning more about my own religion so that I can share it with everyone and I see the importance of interfaith dialogue for strengthening my own faith. Every time we meet we strengthen ourselves as women." – A Muslim woman
- "Maybe we can change our way of thinking and make things better" – A Muslim Woman
- "Our meetings reflect the true diversity of Jerusalem with all the different cultures here and provide an opportunity for the cultures to meet together and get to know each other." – A Jewish Woman



#### ❖ **Youth Interfaith Encounter (YIE) – Inner-Israeli Circle**

The YIE, dedicated to bringing youth into interfaith encounters, initiated its programs with **two four-part series of inter-religious study sessions** held at Beit Hillel, on the campus of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on Mt. Scopus. The sessions were conducted in the form of joint group study of a subject from different religious perspectives – through its canonic texts and led by a senior religious teacher of that religion. Born out of the success of the series, an on-going group for in-depth joint study of different religious texts was established in Jerusalem. Similar such groups are on their way to being formed in the Sharon-Triangle and in Tel Aviv. The YIE is also planning to organize further series in the spring and fall semesters of 2003 at Hebrew University and Tel Aviv University. The YIE also plans to establish two more groups: one at the Ben Gurion University in Be'er Sheba and one in Nazareth.

The theme of the first series was "Post Mortem: Life After Life" and each session featured the perspective of one of the four traditions: Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and Druze. Following each presentation, participants engaged in joint discussion of the material in both an intra-religious context – how the religion varies within itself on the subject – and inter-religious context – the similarities and differences between the religions. The theme of the second series was "Talks With God: Prophets and Prophecy" and featured presentations on the Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and Baha'i perspectives. Once again, each presentation was followed by vivid joint discussion.



## ◆ Support

The IEA would not have been able to achieve such progress in its inaugural year were it not for the generous financial support and gifts in kind of many friends around the world. When the IEA first approached many of these friends, it hadn't managed to start a lot of its programs yet. It took a lot of faith and confidence in us to donate to our activities and development. Yet many of our friends did have the trust in our vision and supported our attempts to realize it throughout 2002. We are deeply grateful to those friends for their support, no matter how large or small, and hope to continue to rely on it. It is this ongoing support which enables us to continue our activities as we begin to work for peace, justice, and harmony in the Holy Land and the Middle East. We hope to be able to widen this circle of friends and supporters and thereby expand the scope and reach of our programs and efforts. Every single donation makes a difference and we wish to thank every single one of our friends and supporters – past, present and future – around the world.

In particular we wish to thank:

### ❖ Our Donors (\$500 +):

- The European Commission
- The United States Institute of Peace



- The American Cultural Center
- The Sufi Order of Sarasota
- United Religions Initiative
- David E. Scheim
- Viola Wintz
- Barbara Meislin
- Anne Radford
- Avraham Barshalom & Marcel Klapisch
- Sara A. Gottesman
- Rosalind Swig

❖ **Our Sponsors (\$150 - \$499):**

- The Rotary Club of Geneva
- John Kador
- Carol Christine Saysette
- Danny Shine

❖ **Gifts in Kind:**

- The Swedish Theological Institute
- Beit Hillel at Hebrew University, Mt. Scopus
- Dr. Jodi Prinzivalli