



THE QUEST FOR PEACE

Pro-peace movements in Israel rarely get media coverage. Yet they provide a voice for many Israelis and Palestinians who cannot identify with extremism or war. Most of them seek Jewish-Arab rapprochement, cultural and religious pluralism, democratic values and peace in the Middle East. **ELIZABETH BAN** spoke to members of an interfaith group.

○ Last September an inspirational message was brought to Australia by the Jerusalem-based Inter-Religious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI), the largest inter-religious non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Israel. The council is using religion and interfaith dialogue to break down negative stereotypes and promote peace between embattled religious communities in Israel.

The three-member delegation reflected clearly the complex nature of Israeli society. It was made up of a US-born Jewish educator, Dr Debbie Weissman, an Israeli Muslim Arab educator, Issa Jaber, and a Christian Palestinian, East-Jerusalem resident, Rula Shubeita, who has refused Israeli citizenship. They spoke about initiatives to promote peace and dialogue.

“The goal of ICCI is to learn to coexist, to learn to live together in peace, even if we are not in peace right now. In other words, dialogue is not the goal, it’s the means,” says ICCI director Dr Ron Kronish, from his office in Jerusalem.

“ICCI is called ‘Preaching Beyond the Choir’ – for people who haven’t met the other – rabbis who have never met a Palestinian or an Imam and vice versa. We want them to learn to encounter the other; to learn about the other person’s religious traditions and discuss issues and the conflict they have in common and then take some action together,” he says.

“Doing it together” and addressing difficult issues at the grassroots level is the principal modus operandi of the ICCI, which was established in 1991, during the First Intifada – the Palestinian uprising against Israeli rule on the West Bank and Gaza, that lasted from 1987 to 1993 resulting in much suffering on all sides.

“All of our programs serve the same overarching goal,” Dr Kronish says “which is our mission statement, that is, we recruit people who will want

to go through a process of transformation, so that they can become forces for reconciliation and peaceful coexistence in their communities.”

The sad reality is that in Israel today, many Jews, Christians and Muslims, who revere the same religious ancestor, Abraham, know very little about each other. Communities of different faith may flourish side by side, but remain separated by fear and prejudice resulting from the political mayhem around them, which affects everyone. The ICCI programs are aimed, first and foremost, at breaking down these barriers.

Dr Kronish says there are two aspects to the peace process in Israel, what he calls “peace-making” and “peace-building”. Peace-making is the political arena, where lawyers and politicians hammer out their vision of “peace”, he explains. Peace-building is where the ICCI comes in.

“We try to make peaceful relations between people which involves an educational, spiritual and religious long-term process. So the message is: peace is possible in our generation and the method is that we have to engage people in dialogue to learn to live together in peace, if not now then in the future,” he adds.

The ICCI projects target all levels of society: the religious leaders, men, women, children, youth, the educated and the disadvantaged.

One of its projects is called KEDEM: Voices of Religious Reconciliation. The purpose is to bring together Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Druze religious leaders, who would otherwise never meet, in order to study and undertake projects together that they can later take to their communities.

Originally planned to run for three years, Dr Kronish says that once they started the participants did not want to stop, which is why it was extended for another two years and ran from 2002-2007.

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basic common values.

"For example, all of them talk about the importance of peace in their traditions. Perhaps the most dramatic thing was learning about each other's basic religious values in ways that changed their perception, particularly about Judaism and Islam. The rabbis and the imams discovered how, in many ways, Judaism and Islam are very close to one another."

When KEDEM came to an end, a similar program started in Northern Israel, where rabbis and imams wanted to work together. Dr Kronish adds that the ICCI feels free to call on any of its former participants as needed for speaking abroad or joining in new projects.

A similar initiative is the Jerusalem Women's Dialogue Group, of which Rula Shubeita is a graduate. She says that she joined in 2001 because of her interest in religion, and since she had a feeling it would be a good opportunity to meet others and engage in a dialogue that would contribute to a better understanding of each other and promote life with coexistence, harmony and peace.

Eighteen professional Jewish, Christian and Muslim women met every three weeks for three-and-a-half years. The dialogue began at the Tantar Ecumenical Institute, which is located between East and West Jerusalem, and was originally established by the Vatican in 1971 to facilitate dialogue between Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican and other Christian denominations.

To avoid language difficulties, the meetings were held in English. Later, the women hosted each other in their homes. Initially, the discussions centered on politics, but that didn't work, Rula recalls, so the women decided to leave politics to the politicians and get to know each other through discussing their families, culture and religion. She says they had a shared vision of living together in Jerusalem in "harmony and reconciliation", even after a Palestinian state has been established and recognized by Israel.

Despite good intentions, politics disrupted the group many times, but the women managed to handle each situation and stay together. How they did it and reflections on their experiences are outlined in their book "Women of the Book, a Jerusalem Collage", which was published at the end of the project.

One of the difficult moments, Rula Shubeita told several Australian groups, occurred in 2004, when Sheik Yassin, the founder and spiritual leader of Hamas was killed in a targeted Israeli air strike. The Muslim woman at whose house the meeting was scheduled said she couldn't host it as she was in mourning. The Jewish women were horrified and said: "You are in mourning for a terrorist?" The Muslim woman responded: "to you he may have been a terrorist, but to me he was a spiritual leader."

The group didn't meet for a month. But when they met again they spent the whole evening talking about this question. In the end they did not agree. The Jewish women still felt that he was a terrorist and the Muslim women still felt that he was a spiritual leader, but by the end of the evening, Rula says, they understood each other.

"I think it's a beautiful story," Debbie Weissman says, "because it shows that a crisis has to be dealt with and you don't have to necessarily agree, but you have to keep on talking."

Insisting on pursuing honest discussion of difficult issues is one of the unique features of the ICCI methodology, says Dr Kronish. "We believe in being honest and sincere and talking about the real issues of the conflict and not sweeping things under the table, so people feel that it is an honest discussion when they can share what is on their minds."

What about the children and the young people who are caught up in the conflict? ICCI is in continuing partnership with the Auburn Theological

Seminary's Centre for Multifaith Education in New York and its highly successful program called Face to Face/Faith to Faith.

This is a year-long dialogue and leadership program that brings together fifty 16-18 year olds from the US, the Middle East, Northern Ireland, and South Africa at a facility in upstate New York. Teenagers attend classes and workshops on multi-faith education, dialogue and communication skills and get a chance to meet with artists and storytellers. This gives the Israeli teenagers a chance to learn how other post-war societies learned to live in peace together.

ICCI is the umbrella organization for more than 70 Christian, Palestinian/Muslim and Jewish institutions and serves as the Israeli Chapter of the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP). It is also one of the Israeli members of the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ). Many of the member organizations began in response to a specific event that happened in a community. One example is the Association for Arab-Jewish Coexistence in the Judean Hills (AAJCJH), which was co-founded by Issa Jaber in 1990, during the first Intifada.

As Issa Jaber told the story, the inciting incident was the case of two brothers who lived in his town of Abu Ghosh. One of them was killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber. When the other rushed to see what happened, the traumatized Jews attacked and almost killed him because "he looked Arab" and they thought he was one of the terrorists. "It is really a good example of how violence is very terrible," Issa Jaber says and adds that "violence and terror have no nationality, no religion and no race. They can kill anybody: an innocent man, without being aware of his wrongness, his religion or colour."

The way he saw it, he says was that there were only two choices: "Either we die together or live together. If we live together, we have to talk." But talk is not enough, he cautions. People have to work together on projects that benefit all.

One of the first AAJCJH projects was a classical music festival in one of the historic Catholic Churches of Abu Ghosh, which has become a biannual event attracting 20,000 visitors. The 36th Abu Ghosh Music Festival is being held this October. The unusual feature of these events, Issa Jaber points out, is that they are hosted by a Muslim town, with performances in the Catholic churches, and the visitors are mostly Jewish.

Another highly successful project was one for school children. It was called: "In the Footsteps of Abraham", funded by the Abraham Foundation. It lasted four years, in which Jewish and Muslim children created art projects about Abraham as they envisioned him, from what they had been taught by their own traditions, from their parents and their schools. At the end of the project, Issa Jaber says the program assessors were surprised to discover that "both Jewish and Muslim kids share the same traditions and the same ideas concerning the personality of our father Abraham".

One of the recurrent questions the visitors from Israel were repeatedly asked was related to the usefulness of interfaith dialogue. "Isn't it just talking to the converted and a waste of time?" someone asked. Debbie Weissman gave a three-fold answer:

"First of all, the people who do it need support, and one of the ways is to support each other. Number two: You can widen the circle by having each person who is involved bring a friend, and then have the friends bring a friend, and that way you can reach out to people who are less likely to be as open and tolerant. And number three: We've actually structured a dialogue group for clergy, who aren't necessarily that open and tolerant. For example, the rabbis in the group are all orthodox, including some settlers from the settlements."

Although the message is encouraging, it has not been easy, the visitors explain, but they are not game to give up. "Politics impacts badly on whatever we do," says Issa Jaber, "but we have no other alternative ... And since we are living together, we should have what's called open dialogues in order to promote our daily lives for the benefit of both sides - the Arabs and the Jews, because we work together and we live close to each other, and we have no other alternative."

ICCI has many future plans, including the establishment of an Institute for Jewish Muslim Dialogue. "I often say it's a bumpy road." Dr Kronish says. "We are going to have a two-state solution sooner or later and then the rest of us who are not politicians figure ok, how are we going to learn to live together as part of the world? And that's where religion and education kicks in. So, I think we are on the slow boat to peace... Our role is to help people to learn to live in peace together. That's a big challenge. And I think that the kind of work we do will be needed for a long time to come."

*For more information about ICCI's work and the projects mentioned in this article, please check the following links:

ICCI

www.wcrp.org

World Conference of Religions for Peace

www.wcrp.org

International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCIJ)

www.iccj.org

KEDEM: Voices of Religious Reconciliation

www.jcrelations.net

Women of the book, a Jerusalem Collage

www.wcrp.org/resources/toolkits/collage

Face to Face/Faith to Faith

www.faihtofaith-facetoface.com

THE MESSENGERS

DR DEBORAH WEISSMAN

Even when she smiles, Debbie Weissman has a no-nonsense air about her. She tells it like it is - neither embellishing, nor simplifying her responses to hard questions. Perhaps that's a throwback to her New York origins, from where she immigrated to Jerusalem in 1972.

After completing her PhD in Jewish Education at the Hebrew University xxxxxxx, ??This is an old 'xxxxx' so I'm not sure why it is here....Mark??xxxxx Debbie became a leading light in Jewish education in Israel and immersed herself in interfaith dialogue, which led her to specialize in teaching about Judaism to Christians.

As well, Debbie was one of the founders of Kehillat Yedidya in Bak'a, a modern Orthodox synagogue that has excellent neighbourly relations with its Reform and Conservative neighbors and hosts visiting multi-faith groups from around the world.

She is a religious feminist and is currently co-chair of the Inter-Religious Coordinating Council in Israel, as well as president of the International Council of Christians and Jews.

ISSA JABER

In contrast to Debbie's exuberance, Issa Jaber is a quiet, self-contained presence and wherever the group appears, his smiling eyes welcome the stranger to engage in discussion. Like Debbie, Issa Jaber is a professional educator, a veteran interfaith activist, co-founder of the Association for Arab Jewish Coexistence in the Judean Hills and co-chair of ICCI.

Issa Jaber was born an Israeli citizen in the historic Muslim town of Abu Ghosh, situated in the Judean Hills some 10 kilometres west of Jerusalem on the way to Tel Aviv. The town has historic significance for Christians and Jews, but in the interfaith context its major significance is that it chose to stay neutral in the 1948 War of Independence and, in the interim, has enjoyed good relations with its Jewish neighbours.

After finishing his schooling in Israel, he studied in Turkey for nine years and has an MA in Political Science & Public Administration from Ankara University and a Certificate in Education from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He was principal of Abu Ghosh High School and has served as a facilitator for Education for Arab-Jewish Coexistence in the Knesset. He is currently Director of Education in the town of Abu Ghosh.

RULA SHUBEITA

Rula Shubeita does not appear comfortable in the company of strangers, but once she begins to relate her stories of pain, struggle and hope, she is mesmerizing. She is an Arab Orthodox Christian Palestinian. A theology graduate, she works as a tourist guide for Christian pilgrims in the Holy Land, with whom she travels throughout Israel. In addition to telling them the history of the places dear to Christian tradition, she also talks to them about the Jewish and Palestinian people who currently live there and the three religions they profess: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Rula lives in East Jerusalem and holds Israeli residency, but is not a citizen. It's not that she can't, but she chooses not to, because she expects and hopes to live one day in her own country: Palestine. She is a graduate and fervent promoter of ICCI's Jerusalem Women's Dialogue Group. She even got her sister involved. She is one of the ICCI speakers who speak to inter-religious delegations visiting Israel. ●