

Inter-Religious Dialogue as a Method of Peace-Building in Israel and Palestine

By Rabbi Dr. Ronald Kronish

Abstract

Interreligious Dialogue is understood as a method of peace-building—bringing people together to learn to live in peace -- which is different than peace-making, whereby politicians and diplomats develop peace treaties between governments. In Israel and Palestine, we are engaged in interreligious dialogue in the midst of conflict, which means that we are not “resolving” the macro conflict, but are mitigating and managing it through our dialogue and educational programs. In recent years, we have embarked on pioneering programs which engage youth, young adults, religious leaders, women and educators in this process. Through our grass-roots educational work, we have developed a four-part model which combines personal encounter and interreligious learning, with discussion of core issues of the conflict and action projects. We believe that this model can resonate with many people in this field in Israel and Palestine and around the world.

Introduction

During the past eighteen years, I have been actively engaged in the grass-roots work of inter-religious dialogue and education. While this work has had its share of ups and downs, successes and obstacles, challenges and setbacks, I can say that without a doubt, I have learned a great deal about the role of dialogue in peace-building in our part of the world by trial and error and by persistence and partnership with key organizations.¹

This article will be divided into three parts:

1. A theoretical section on the importance of peace-building programs as a supplemental and parallel track to peace-making political processes
2. A description of some of the most important peace-building programs that we have implemented with some success in Israel and Palestine in recent years, with a special focus on programs for youth and young adults
3. A new model, which is an outgrowth of our “best practices” in this field in our region in recent years.

¹ Over the years, my organization, the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, has partnered with the World Conference of Religions for Peace www.religionsforpeace.org, the Face-to-Face program of the Auburn Theological Seminary www.auburnsem.org/multifaith/faithtofaith.asp?nsectionid=4&pageid=4, the St. Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace in London www.stethelburgas.org/, and Risho Kosei-kai in Japan www.rk-world.org/.

Section One—on peace-building, peace-making, and conflict resolution/management/mitigation/transformation

We are often asked—sometimes cynically—whether our inter-religious dialogue and action programs will solve the Middle East conflict. All too often people feel that all dialogue must be political or diplomatic and that only such processes will actually solve our core problems in Israel and Palestine.

Accordingly, it is important to state at the outset what the purpose of inter-religious dialogue is and should be in our political context. In order to do this, we want to draw an important distinction between “peace-making” activities and “peace-building” programs.

“Peace-making” is the work of the lawyers, politicians and diplomats. The goal of those who engage in such work is to create peace treaties between governments, what one of my colleagues calls “pieces of paper”. While acknowledging the importance of these political/diplomatic processes, we need to be mindful of their limitations. Once these documents are prepared and agreements are reached, public ceremonies take place with lots of fanfare, publicity, and photo-opportunities. They are considered “historic” and offer new frameworks and possibilities for the peoples suffering through an intractable conflict for many years, even many decades. After the agreements are signed, sealed and delivered, both sides spend the next several years blaming the other side for not living up to its part in the agreement (in the case of the Oslo Accords signed on September 13, 1993 on the White House lawn, this has been the case for the past 17 years). This is the work of lawyers and politicians, who constantly remind each side of the supposedly legally binding nature of the agreement and the obligations of the other side to live up to the agreement.

“Peace-building,”² on the other hand, is not the work of diplomats or politicians. Rather, it is the work of rabbis, imams, priests, educators, social workers and psychologists, who bring people together to enter into dialogical and educational processes that are aimed at helping people figure out how to live in peace with each other. This process—which is sometimes called “Track Two Diplomacy” or simply “People-to-People Programs”—supplements the political processes but is somewhat different in nature and substance. They involve long-term psychological, educational and spiritual transformations, which take place over many years.³

² According to Catherine Morris (*What is Peacebuilding? One Definition*, 2000), “The term “peacebuilding” came into widespread use after 1992 when Boutros Boutros-Ghali, then United Nations Secretary-General, announced his *Agenda for Peace* (Boutros-Ghali, 1992). Since then, “peacebuilding” has become a broadly used but often ill-defined term connoting activities that go beyond crisis intervention such as longer-term development, and building of governance structures and institutions. It includes building the capacity of non-governmental organizations (including religious institutions) for peacemaking and peacebuilding.”

³ Peacebuilding involves long-term processes and the transformation of human relationships, according to John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997, pp. 82-83.

There is, of course, a close connection between peace-making and peace-building processes. When there is a momentum in the political realm—as there was in the 1990s with the Oslo Accords (1993), followed by the Fundamental Agreement between Israel and the Holy See (1993), the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan (1994) and the Wye River Agreement (1996)—then the existential and immediate need for people-to-people programs is more obvious and clear. Conversely, when there is a total freeze in political progress, as has been the case in Israel/Palestine from 2000 until now, then the existential need for peace-building programs is perceived to be more distant and difficult.

Nevertheless, we believe strongly in the importance of peace-building programs, even when the political processes are hardly functioning. These programs keep a flicker of hope alive in an ongoing conflict. They point the way to the future. They remind us that the goal of peace is normalization, not separation. They train the people for the possibilities of peaceful coexistence among people and peoples for the future, even if this is not the reality of the present moment.

One more theoretical note is in order here. Our programs are part of a growing field in the world known as “Religions and Conflict Resolution”. The idea is that religions, i.e. their leaders and followers, can and ought to do their part to help resolve conflicts in various parts of the world.

Yet, in recent years, there has been much less focus on “resolution” (the word is hardly used any more) and much more focus on conflict mitigation, management or transformation. Indeed the government of the United States began a program a few years ago under USAID which it calls “Conflict Mitigation and Management”.⁴ In other words, those who engage in peace-building programs are no longer expected to solve the macro political conflict. But, if they can reduce hatred and violence, then they will be accomplishing something, at least in the short-term.

Moreover, conflicts can be “transformed” from a violent phase to an educational/social phase, as in the cases of Northern Ireland and South Africa, where the bloodshed has ended and now what needs to be done is to overcome hundreds of years of hatred and separation. We in Israel/Palestine will be happy to get to this stage, the sooner the better, in which the war will have ended and we will be able to focus all of our societal energies on educational, spiritual, and psychological transformation. But even though we are not there yet, we need to begin wherever possible to bring people together to experience and learn about the possibilities and benefits of living together in the same country or same region. This is precisely what we try to do through our dialogue and action groups, especially with youth and young adults.

⁴ According to the USAID Guidelines: “Mitigating, managing, and responding to violent conflict are priority areas for USAID assistance. This policy defines conflict mitigation as activities that seek to reduce the threat of violent conflict by promoting peaceful resolution of differences, reducing violence if it has already broken out, or establishing a framework for peace and reconciliation in an ongoing conflict. Conflict management refers to activities explicitly geared toward addressing the causes and consequences of likely conflict.” http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/conflict/publications/docs/USAID_Conflict_MM_Policy.pdf

Section Two —Dialogue and Action groups as a method for personal and communal transformation

Dialogue and action groups can be a powerful method for transforming people into change agents for peace in their communities in both Israel and Palestine.

Through the implementation of programs for teens and college students, we in the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel have learned the importance of a model that includes dialogue, intensive experiences together, volunteerism and action projects.

In cooperation with Auburn Theological Seminary of New York, we offer an annual program for youth called Face to Face/ Faith to Faith. The program includes twelve months of dialogue and an intensive summer experience abroad. As a result of a comprehensive evaluation process of the program that was implemented last year,⁵ we discovered that there are ten transformative ways in which participants are affected by such programs:

1. Seeing that the conflict has two legitimate sides, and being able to accept people who have different opinions
2. Becoming better listeners
3. Realizing that not everything is solvable
4. Looking at the conflict in a more complex and realistic way
5. Realizing that people are similar in many ways yet still have strong differences
6. Allowing them to grow up and become more confident in their own abilities
7. Influencing them to become more active in society
8. Becoming stronger in their own opinions while simultaneously becoming more tolerant and accepting
9. Having more knowledge about other religions
10. Realizing that “the others” are also human beings

In addition, we conduct an innovative program for college students from both East and West Jerusalem, which seeks to engage in interreligious dialogue and action in order to change the tenor of public discourse and improve relations between Christian, Muslim, and Jewish students at their universities and in the city of Jerusalem as a whole. Jerusalem is divided by both physical and psychological barriers in such a way that young people growing up in the same city almost never visit the “other” side. Participants in this program attend different universities/colleges, speak different languages, and belong to nations of opposing political objectives. They live in different realities.

During the course of the past year, the participants discussed various topics dealing with the different holiday traditions and they visited each other's homes and celebrated each other's holidays together in fulfillment of one of our central goals—to eliminate the psychological barriers that divide Jerusalem and expose the participants to the life of the “other.” In order to get to know each other better, they engaged in a photography project wherein they divided up into pairs—one Israeli Jew with one Palestinian Christian or Muslim—and took photos of themselves in places they love in Jerusalem. Even the simple task of visiting different

⁵ This evaluation report was prepared by Rebecca Russo, a Dorot Fellow interning with ICCI during 2008-2009.

neighborhoods in East and West Jerusalem was a challenging and eye-opening experience for the participants; many had to overcome fears about visiting the other side of the city.

Last year, all of our dialogue groups experienced difficulties during the war in Gaza. The college student group met twice during this period: once during Hanukkah, on the first day of the war, at the home of one of the Jewish participants. During this meeting, participants decided that despite the war, and the difficulties of the time, it was important for them to continue meeting. During the height of the war, they met again, and the participants had a difficult discussion about how they felt about the war, and what it meant for them to engage in inter-religious dialogue at such a time of conflict -- demonstrating their commitment to dialogue, even when the going gets rough.

As a result of this program, a number of our graduates went on to attend peace camps or work as counselors in inter-religious camps last summer. One of them participated in a "Building an interfaith community" Seminar in Bossey, Switzerland through the World Council of Churches, where she was given a wonderful opportunity to meet new people, encounter new point of views, and learn new perspectives on religions, peace and community-building. Another one served as a counselor in the Face To Face/ Faith to Faith Summer Intensive Experience, hosted by Auburn Theological Seminary in upstate New York in July; and a third traveled to Walberberg, Germany and participated in "Breaking Barriers", an Israeli-Palestinian Solidarity Project founded in 2002, an initiative by Israelis and Palestinians with aims to end the vicious circle of violence in Israel-Palestine by building mutual interest, solidarity, and trust between the people.

The fact that many of our youth and young adults go on to be involved in other peace and inter-religious seminars and camps is the true success of our informal educational programs for peace.

Section Three: A new model for inter-religious dialogue in the service of peace

Over the past 20 years ICCI has developed a model for successful interreligious dialogue, as a result of its work on the ground rather than through a theoretical laboratory of a university. In other words, it came about after many years of trial and error in Israel and Palestine, especially during the last ten difficult years, since the beginning of the second intifada, which began in September 2000.

Our model is comprised of four major elements:

- Personal interaction—getting to know each other as individual human beings
- Interreligious, text-based learning
- Discussing core issues of the conflict
- Taking action, separately and together

1. The Personal element

All of our dialogue groups bring together a diversity of people from various religious and national groups. Each comes to the dialogue with his or her own personal identity, which he or she shares with the group. The group learns to understand and respect the identity and narrative of each of its members, by listening carefully and genuinely seeking to come to know a lot about

each participant. Through this process, people in the group come to recognize the human dignity and integrity of each other.

We have come to call this process "de-demonizing the other". In our part of the world, due to the ongoing violent conflict of many decades, Palestinians and Israelis who have never met each other before coming to our dialogue group usually see the other through the prisms of the conflict and the negative media stereotypes which dominate our print and electronic media. In our dialogue groups, we shatter these stereotypes by asking each person to share their identities and life stories with the other. When this is done over time—at least a year—we find that people are actually quite shocked to discover that the other, who is supposed to be "the enemy", is actually a human being.

This first layer of our dialogue process builds an important foundation of trust, which is essential for the rest of the dialogue. It often creates lasting friendships or at least much collegiality, which is a critical component for constructive, honest, and fruitful dialogue as the year progresses.

2. Inter-religious Learning

We have discovered over many years, to our sorrow, that individuals often know very little about the cultural practices and theology of other religions in Israel and Palestine. Accordingly, Israeli Jews know almost nothing about Islam or Christianity. And, what they do know is usually negative and was learned in courses in Jewish History in which they learned that Muslims or Christians either oppressed or massacred Jews throughout the centuries. Nor do Muslims or Christians who live in Israel or Palestine know much about Judaism. Much of what they do know is negative, as they learn it mostly from their print and electronic media and from the "street" and the family.

Therefore, a little education—properly and sensitively taught by good teachers—can go a long way in a short time to breaking down ingrained negative stereotypes of each other's religions. These teachers choose good texts with a positive message—from the sacred canons of each religion, such as the Bible and later commentaries (The Midrash and Talmud), the Koran and the Hadith, or the New Testament and the Church Fathers--and teach them in a way that can be readily understood and appreciated by "the other side".⁶ When this is done well, another very important level of trust is developed. Participants who have gone through this process in our dialogue groups can talk about common humanistic values shared by the three major monotheistic religions, and they can sense a spirit of religious partnership, which motivates them to continue the dialogue and to seek meaningful paths of action together.

⁶ This educational component to our dialogue process is especially important in our work with religious leaders from the three Abrahamic faiths, as in our KEDEM Program (Voices of Religious Reconciliation) from 2003-2008. In dialogue groups conducted by the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, Muslim, Jewish and Christian religious leaders not only brought texts with positive messages in text study sessions, but they also re-interpreted problematic texts in creative and beneficial ways in the spirit of reconciliation.

3. Discussing Core Issues of the Conflict

Since our dialogue process takes place in Israel and Palestine, in the midst of an ongoing and often violent conflict, we cannot ignore the contemporary context in which we live and function. More accurately, we choose not to ignore the conflict (whereas other organizations actively seek to prevent "politics" or "the conflict" from entering into the discussion).

We believe that in a genuine dialogue process the core issues of the conflict can be discussed in an open, honest, and sensitive fashion, guided by careful and consistent professional facilitation, without creating animosity or acrimony. In fact, we have found that participants in our dialogue groups continue to come back to the table year after year precisely because the discussion is frank and forthright. This means that the discussions in this part of the dialogue process are often very painful and difficult. But when significant levels of trust have been developed beforehand, most people find this phase particularly meaningful and enriching as a way to genuinely get to know the other. It leads to deep mutual understanding of the other's religious, cultural, and existential reality, even if it also delineates where people fundamentally do not—and often cannot—agree with the other.

4. Taking action, separately and together

Many years ago, one of my Muslim colleagues said to me when we were preparing to convene a dialogue group: "Dialogue is not enough!" It is not enough for us to learn and undergo personal transformation. As responsible members of society, we must take our learning and create change. We are obligated to work for peace, to influence others, and to cause a ripple effect. As a result, we strive for our groups to experience both dialogue and action. In other words, all of our participants—religious leaders, women, youth, young adults, educators-- are asked to take some action—separately or together—as a result of the personal transformational processes that they go through within this intensive experience.

Action can take many forms—personal, social, educational, and/or political, but it is agreed that every person who is moved by the dialogue process is obligated to share their experiences with others in whatever ways possible. From our experience, we have found that often simple human gestures of reconciliation, such as visiting the sick or the bereaved, can go a long way towards cementing personal relationships and creating genuine trust and profound relationships among friends and colleagues (former “enemies”) who are involved in long-term dialogue processes. Moreover, each person—through personal and professional networks and associations—should be committed to acting in such a way as to bring the insights and lessons of their dialogue processes to the attention of people in their own communities. In this way, each person in each dialogue group is a "multiplier" who can spread the message of the possibilities and benefits of peaceful coexistence, and the method of dialogue and education, to many other people in his or her society.

Director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI) since 1992, **Rabbi Dr. Ronald Kronish** is a noted rabbi, educator, author, lecturer and speaker. During the 30 years he has lived in Jerusalem, Israel, Dr. Kronish has lectured to a wide variety of groups, including students, teachers, and visiting Jewish, Christian and interreligious groups. In addition, he has

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Dr. Kronish is the editor of *Towards the Twenty-first Century: Judaism and the Jewish People in Israel and America*, an anthology in memory of his father, Rabbi Leon Kronish. In addition, he has edited two books of essays: *Toward the Third Millennium* and *Pilgrimage in a New Millennium*. Furthermore, Dr. Kronish blogs at <http://icciblog.wordpress.com>