

The education that I received at home was liberal, modern, pluralistic and significantly patriotic. My parents are Palestinian refugees from a village called (Saforyi) that was demolished in 1948 war after the Israeli occupation, and my father was a political prisoner for three years in an Israeli jail. When he raised a family the kind of education, principles and moralities he wanted us to acquire were political and patriotic and not by any means religious.

When I was nineteen I decided to go to university. I picked the Jerusalem Hebrew University, since there are no Arabic universities in Israel, and because my brother was already studying there. The night before I left home to Jerusalem, friends came to my home to bid me farewell and wish me luck. One of my friends told me something before he left, he said: "Ok Saladin, go and liberate Jerusalem". Heavy words for a young man to carry, but this were my mission.

When I arrived in Jerusalem I couldn't find dorms to live in so I lived for a while over friends places, till I heard that there was an Israeli guy who lived alone in a dorm that was actually for two people. I went to the room and knocked on the door. I told the Israeli guy (his name was Yaneev) that I heard he lived on his own and I asked him if he had a problem with Arabs????!! We had a long chat and eventually he agreed that I move in.

This Israeli guy, Yaneev, was a soldier in the Israeli army, he was an officer. And he used to brag, endlessly, that he was a war hero and that he killed tens of "Terrorists" (which were of course Palestinians or Arabs, my people). And I had a mission – I had to liberate Jerusalem!!!!

At the first night I slept in that dorm I wasn't able to close my eyes. It was too weird for me, my enemy snoring only six feet away from my bed! An Israeli, an officer and he killed Arabs and Palestinians. Should I do something, should I walk up to his bed and put my hands around his neck and squeeze!!!!???

Not only that but he also literally opened the door for me to his dorm! He opened the door wide to Judaism too. He used to take me to his family on Shabbat to have dinner with them and we used to exchange experiences and impressions. Thanks to my "enemy" I began to have a wider view and more tolerance of the Israeli and Jewish culture.

Prior to the Intifada (Palestinian uprising), (October 2000) I had a lot of Israeli friends. We used to sit and smoke Nargila (water pipe), study together and go out to places, they used to come and visit me at my parent's house and I used to go to theirs. But then the intifada burst out. Most of those guys (my friends) started to walk away and contact me less. Some of them, when they saw my picture in the newspaper or on TV, demonstrating, demanding to preserve my people's rights, they called and expressed their disappointment as if I had committed a crime.

The behavior of those friends of mine was rather shocking to me; I never asked them nor expected them to regret serving in the army. It is their national duty, why was I not allowed to express my feelings and take an active part in my national duties? After some time I realized that the relationship I used to have with those guys was built on weak and unreal ground. As long as we don't talk and express our real feelings to each other, as long as we don't ask to know what they really think and why they think like that and if we are not interested in their stories, then everything is just a fraud, and the relationship is not genuine.

This disappointment with my friends' behavior made me think. Was everything a big lie? Can Palestinians and Israelis really sit and talk? Can they really have a normal relationship like any two other people? Or is it the religion thing? Is there a fundamental crisis and difference between Islam and Judaism?

In 2003 I attended the first meeting of the Jerusalem youth interfaith group, I was the only Muslim guy there except for a Muslim guy who told me about the meeting. At the first meeting I was surprised to know that there are other Jewish guys that just like me, want to know more and deeper about other people and their religion that live just a door step away.

For the first time I felt that I can really know Jewish people, I can know them from their stories, from their backgrounds and I can tell them whatever I feel without fearing they might judge me. For the first time I felt that this relationship that we were building there is real and genuine.

I always believed that the minute we can open our hearts and listen to the other side talking we can really understand. And sometimes such understanding comes through creating something together.

We can give so many examples, but I would like to speak about one peacebuilding activity which has been very special for me, which is young Muslims and Jews from our interfaith group, cooking and eating together. Dotan, will also talk about this as well from his perspective. Not that it was my first time that I had cooked food with non Muslims, but the experience of cooking food for the Ramadan fast-breaking meal was incredible. For Muslims, it is considered a special family event and brings enormous joy and fulfillment to the members of the family, but now sharing such a significant event with others from another faith tradition gives it a new meaning and creates a family atmosphere. Add to the event, not only that I can share this occasion with people who have become like family members, but we also learned the Jewish traditions of cooking food and keeping kosher food. When we combine the Islamic meaning to the event with the Jewish meaning and traditions, a new level of sharing and togetherness is fulfilled.

Today, I inquire deep into my religion and at the same time I peep into the other religions with more understanding and more tolerance knowing that what you think you know and what you really know and what you really should know are totally different. And as one of the members of our youth group (Noa) in Jerusalem said, (and I'm quoting), "I realized how ignorant I was regarding the other faith just after two meetings of the group, I didn't imagine that I know absolutely nothing about one fifth of the population and they live just next door".

*Salah Aladdien is the co-leader of the Jerusalem Youth Interfaith Encounter, part of the Interfaith Encounter Association. He is Muslim and has Palestinian nationality, and Israeli citizenship. He is an accountant in Jerusalem.*