

I grew up in a Jewish orthodox village and received a religious education. After the murder of Yitzchak Rabin (1995) I was involved in a dialogue between secular and religious Jews to heal the gaps in Israeli society. I thought that the discourse within Jewish society was important, but dialogue between Jews and Arabs was really urgent, because this was an issue of blood and suffering. So I joined the Interfaith Encounter Association. They were nice years and for me also optimistic. Barak went to Camp David and I hoped he would come back with a peace agreement, but then the Intifada broke out, and 13 Israeli Arab citizens were killed in demonstrations. I felt really helpless after 11/9 in America. I felt there was no chance for peace between the Islamic world and the West. They were also difficult years for me personally as well. I lost a lot of friends in terror attacks. A good friend of mine was murdered by Arab terrorists who shot at his car. My mother was wounded in a suicide attack in a bus station in Jerusalem. In this attack quite a few people were murdered, one of them was a lady who was my kindergarten teacher. She was killed with her granddaughter. Another friend of mine lost his baby that was shot by a Palestinian sniper.

It was very hard then, and still very hard to speak about interfaith dialogue now in Israel. It's difficult to find new participants for our group. People are pessimistic. But I think we don't have the privilege to give up. Every meeting of our group I am convinced that on the other side there are people that think, and hope like me. I see that they have an open mind and I enjoy talking with them. But I am not naïve. I think that it will take a lot of time till we know serenity in our land, but I believe that as well as political steps, we need grassroots peacebuilding activities. I want to describe some of our activities.

We believe that the heart of the conflict is religious. So, we are trying to meet at this point. Every meeting we learn together from scriptural sources from both sides, and I see how much Jews want to learn about Islam and vice versa. We also have social events. We celebrate festivals together, for example we gathered together at one of the member's house and lit the Hanukah candles. This year the Ramadan Fast was at the same time as a Jewish fast (Gedalia Fast). Together, we ate the meal for breaking the fast with traditional food from both sides. Now, for our interfaith young adult group, it's already a tradition – we have done it twice, for 2 Ramadan's meals, and I'm sure we will continue, with go-d's help. One of these meals was at Salah's house. For us, as observant Jews who only eat kosher food, it was an uneasy mission. But we succeeded to do it with a lot of common will. We went also to a museum for tolerance. It was very interesting for me to see how the Muslims and the Jews looked at the exhibits from different points of view.

As I said, the basis of our activities is learning. We want to win the ignorance on both sides. So I want to finish with a short study from our sources. In "Bereshit" (The Book of Genesis) we read about the tension between the brothers Jacob and Esau. Esau was angry with Jacob because Jacob stole his blessings. When Jacob came back to the land of Israel he was afraid that Esau would kill him. He prayed to g-od to save him but still was very frightened. However the meeting was well. They kissed and hugged each other. What was the secret? What dissolved the heart of Esau? Martin Buber developed the method of the "leading Word" in bible interpretation. The dominant word teaches us the deep level of the story. The leading word in the story of the meeting of Jacob and Esau was "Panim" (=face). This word is written a lot of

times in the story. The key for reconciliation is to look at the face of the other. Jacob arrived at a place called "penu'el" (face of go-d) before his meeting with Esau. Another Jewish Philosopher, Emanuel Levinas said that we meet the divine presence on the face of the other. The face of the other calls us to act, to take responsibility. Political leaders can negotiate, and sign agreements, but our rule is to meet, face to face. It becomes hard to hate when you see the face of your neighbor. This is our holy Mission in the Interfaith Encounter Association!

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