

December 9th: Sheikhs and Rabbis speak about family

The group of Sheikhs and Rabbis met to discuss the theme of family and its challenges in our time. While the group of rabbis continued from previous encounters, the group of sheikhs was mostly new – as one of the sheikhs who was previously participating now took the lead in coordinating the group and brought new people.

The rabbis opened with the description of Adam and Eve in paradise, which indicates the ideal family structure. In the modern society the family struggles, due to seeming contradiction with freedom. Freedom is a religious value – a person has to combine submission to God with freedom. Family values are helpful also to society with values of freedom since one of the most important elements for the free person is his family and success with it.

The sheikhs stressed the important of the family as the nucleus of society and therefore the strong relation between the values of the family and the society. Jews and Muslims share the warmth of the family, unlike many parts of the West in which the emphasis is on business and careers. It is important that Jewish and Muslim religious leaders will unite to cope together with the challenges, and even coordinate logistically.

On a more general note of introduction the sheikhs talked about the great importance they see in the promotion of understanding between Jews and Muslims. The Islamic faith supports every religion, especially "the people of the book". This is documented in the book, unlike the incitement that sometimes comes from politicians and people with other interests. The real Dawa (=mission of teaching) calls to treat everyone equally. It does not support one side against the other but the connection of both of them to God who gives justice to the world. Historically the Muslim sheikhs did not strive for economic or political power and their success was a result of the respect they gained by combining the work of God with social integrity.

The rabbis responded by saying that unfortunately the discourse of Jews and Muslims in the Holy Land is a discourse of fear, in which everybody loses. The challenge of our Interfaith Encounter groups is to transform this discourse to a discourse of mutual trust.

April 25th: Mutual attitude

Rabbi Riskin stressed that the basic attitude of Judaism towards Muslims is as brothers, who share the same DNA. He shared how when Efrat was built it took six years after planning and before they started the actual building as they wanted to make sure they do not take anyone's land. Moreover, even regarding vineyards that were planted during these six years, about which the High Court ruled they should be given to Efrat, – he ruled they should not be uprooted and even sent students of his yeshiva to help with their harvest. He described thirty years of true friendship with the nearby villages – sharing of weddings and funerals and always willing to help each other.

The sheikhs said that their fathers and grandfathers always told them about the good relations with the Jews and always instructed them to live with the Jews as one family. Two of them were decedents of people who saved Jews during the 1929 massacre (one of them by hiding them with his wife and daughters!). One of them shared the story of a commander in the Islamic Jihad who started to study

religion and consequently changed his way and joined their group.

The rabbis spoke of how important and pleasant it is to meet each other face to face. When we received the Torah in Sinai we became a nation of visionaries – who dream about the ideal life of a person and of the world, how to live in a world full of contradictions and how to solve problems through faith and not through power.

One of the sheikhs quoted a most interesting interpretation about the roots of terror. He said that in the time of Moses there was an incident in which one tribe killed another tribe. Some of the decedents of the killed people are Muslims who support terror and perceive that Jews are on one side and Muslims are on the other side. These people do not have a wide view, they do not understand religion nor the meaning of God.

May 30th

This encounter was relatively small so the conversation was more open and touched mainly on issues of leadership and inter-religious relations.

One of the sheikhs talked about the need to the leader, especially the religious leader, to be connected with the people, really interested in listening to them.

One of the rabbis responded that people are afraid of peace- both Israelis and Palestinians. Therefore he thinks that rabbis and sheikhs specifically can lead the way to real peace.

A sheikh then said that as religious people we believe that the land and everything in the world belong to God and he gives them to people as he sees best. Therefore they do not hold feelings of anger or revenge.

A state is required to allow Muslims to pray and teach Islam freely. Such a state has no conflict with Islam. This seems to be the situation in Israel.

Another sheikh pointed that all people were created by God and therefore, despite the differences between the religions and views, are all brothers and sisters.

Reported: Yehuda Stolov

July 7th

Our religious leaders dialogue group met on Sunday July 7th at the grand Everest Hotel in Beit Jala, overlooking the majestic Hebron Hills. Sitting outside on a comfortable patio, two Muslim Sheikhs and a Jewish Rabbi, accompanied by Dr. Yehuda Stolov, a researcher from the University of Chicago, and a Jewish woman from the neighboring community of Har Giloh pondered the many similarities and differences between the Jewish and Muslim faiths.

Initially, the Rabbi began by explaining that the Ten Commandments were purposely given by God on Mount Sinai, and not on Mount Moriah, so that the Jews would understand that the word of God was for everyone and not just them. The Muslim Sheikhs agreed with this, and explained that they

too accepted the law of Moses, who they view as a prophet, as well as many of the other Jewish prophets and figures of fame, such as Isaiah, Abraham, Solomon, David, and many others.

It was then agreed upon by both religious leaders that the Torah was divinely given. The Rabbi went on to compare the Jewish Oral Law to the Muslim Shariah, and once more everyone was in cohesive accord.

Perhaps the most significant highlight of Sunday's convivial and friendly meeting, however, was the view shared by both the Sheikhs and the Rabbis that human life is worth more than any Holy place, as God puts more value onto us as living beings than he does onto stone and places. This is why, the Rabbi remarked, the Jewish people are able to consider Teshva B'Av (the commemoration of the destruction of the Jewish temples) as a holiday: because God saw the destruction of a building instead of a people.

We ended just as amicably as we began, and contact information was shared over tea and biscuits. Before we left, somebody remarked that it is a privilege and blessing that we were able to bring each other together to talk and build bonds. In response to this, one of the Sheikhs then added that it was not just us, but God Himself who brought us together.

Reported: Eric Altschuler