

Peace in the Holy Land: It can be done

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My intention is to reach the conclusion at the end of the talk that building peace in the Holy Land is actually very easy – if you understand well the root causes, if you take the right approach and if you don't try to run away from the path that needs to be walked. What is the right approach? Isaiah (54, 13) gives us the first hint: "And all thy children shall be taught of the LORD; and great shall be the peace of thy children." Of course: when people study a lot each of them has their own opinion, but still: when they know God they can grow their peace with the growing of their disagreements.

What are the root-causes of the conflict in the Holy Land? Why does it go on and on for more than a century? Why do all attempts to solve it seem to crash and burn, sooner or later?

In my eyes this is one of these cases where the real explanation looks too simple to be true. The root-cause of all these decades of quarrel is ignorance resulting from a broken relationship. The "issues" are just its manifestations. Therefore, trying to solve the "issues" without addressing the broken relationship, and the resulting ignorance with the lack of trust it leads to, just adds fuel to the fire and makes things worse.

A very good metaphor to illustrate our conflict, is that of a married couple that has many problems in their relationship - but not only that, their marriage is Catholic one and they're destined to live together in the same apartment, forever. Now, imagine them trying, as everyone encourages them, to "compromise for peace" without mending their relationship. They divide the bedrooms – one for him one for her, they divide the living room, and put a barrier marking the line of division, they agree on separate hours for the bathroom etc etc. Then they even try to implement their agreement. Does anyone think this arrangement can be sustained for a long time?! It is very clear that what these people need is not a good divorce agreement but marriage counseling. It is not that a divorce agreement is a bad solution, it is an excellent solution in many cases, but not to THIS problem. And like my middle-school teacher used to say: it is not enough to provide a good solution – you have to

provide the solution that is good for the problem you face, and if you try to implement a solution to a problem for which it is not suitable – you'll just make things worse.

If we compare the metaphor to the reality, I think that despite what many think – we must admit that both the Israelis and Palestinians tried very hard to make the separation model developed in Oslo work. I think that most people will estimate a very short the time-frame in which our couple will be trying to hold their agreement. Still, the Israelis and Palestinians tried it for seven years! The issue is not the good will of the two parties but the attempt to separate the two societies in a reality in which it is impossible and as a solution to a completely different problem.

And why? Because the whole width of the holy Land, the distance between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River is less than sixty miles, which makes the metaphor of two people living in the same apartment very valid. If a Palestinian State is formed – it will not be on Mars, not even in Alaska. It will be right beside Israel and its people and communities will dwell no more than a few tens of miles from each other, and many times a few meters from each other. In this situation – the number of Holy Land states is much less relevant than the quality of its inter-communal relations.

This brings us to the real core issue of the conflict: the relations between the Jewish, Muslim, Christian and Druze communities of the Holy Land. Clearly these relations are not the best. They are characterized by negative stereotypes, suspicion and fear. Even hatred. Everything that happens is interpreted according to these basic attitudes, and there is no wonder that these interpretations leads to the reinforcement of these attitudes. Thus, any act of violence by a small number of people from one community becomes the ultimate proof for the diabolic nature of this whole community. Any mention of "The Land of Israel" or "Historical Palestine" becomes an exposure of their true, hidden, intentions to expel us from the land.

On the political level, these basic attitudes led to the collapse of the Oslo Process, after remarkably watching for seven years how "we make so many concessions while they perform so many violations".

In other words: we do not suspect and fear the other because of our experience with their actions, but interpret the actions of the other according to the negative stereotypes we already hold.

Let us now go a step deeper and ask whether these negative stereotypes are based on our good knowledge of each other and the resulting recognition of their negative character, or are they based on the opposite: lack of knowledge that leads to the imaginary construction of the image of the other.

Of course, as the couple in Catholic marriage who is also destined to live in the same apartment – we also have to work on the improvement of our relations regardless of whether the other really wronged us or if it is only our wrong interpretation.

Still, it is comforting to realize how much the communities in the Holy Land are segregated from each other and how little real interaction occurs between them. "How is this comforting?!" you may ask – because this tells us there is no way to base the negative stereotypes on real acquaintance with the other. As mentioned before: the root cause of the Holy Land conflict is our ignorance of each other.

So how do we work effectively to improve the situation? I am sure that by now you would say the answer is education, and indeed it is – but we have to again examine what kind of education. As stated above: members of one community have very little real experience and knowledge of other communities. But as we always maintain in our minds full images of the other – we fill the gaps with our prejudices and the stereotypes we hold of the other.

Once the image is rooted in our minds, we can hear many lectures from the best experts and from people of the highest authority about the humanity of the other and our imperative to respect them. We will absorb the information in our cognitive level, nod our heads with agreement, and ... continue holding our prejudices and stereotypes.

If we want to change our psychological level – we need a stronger and more direct experience. The most effective such experience I know, which can be artificially created, is direct encounter with actual members of the other communities. Once we get an experience of direct, deep and positive encounter with the other – our prejudices and stereotypes are strongly confronted with the reality. When this happens – they just evaporate without hardly leaving any traces.

Now, the only question that remains is: how do we create this "direct, deep and positive encounter"? For me the answer to this question came from my personal experience: some 20 years ago I happened to join an interfaith group of young adults that was active in Jerusalem. The non-Jews in the group were mainly Christian theology students and as I just took a class about Christianity in the Hebrew University some months before, it was fascinating for me to have theological conversations with them and see how real people wrestle with the difficult questions. For a few years my participation was mainly motivated by this "intellectual fun". But after a while, when I reflected on the process I was going through, I realized that the prejudices I grew up with, typical for the Israeli Jew and based mainly on the Crusades and the Inquisition, were gradually being replaced with a more complex view, based on my encounter with real people who sincerely wanted to worship God in the best way they could. My attitude towards Christians and then towards Christianity was changing. This led me to understand the transformative power interfaith dialogue – real, interactive, dialogue – has in transforming people's minds and I developed the Interfaith Encounter Approach to the building of solid and sustainable inter-communal bridges. Some twelve years ago, this approach was the foundation for the formation of the Interfaith Encounter Association.

In this approach, we meet each other from the perspective of our religious traditions. I have to stress right away that it is not only meant for religious people – not in terms of levels of actual practice and definitely not only for religious leaders. Each one of us, at least in this part of the world, has some level of dialogue with their religious tradition, at least as it is manifested in our culture, and this conversation attaches deep existential value to this type of encounter. This brings us to the first advantage of the interfaith encounter: it takes the exchange to a deeper level and makes the whole encounter more intimate than a mere exchange of opinions.

A second advantage is that in this type of conversation we discover the many similarities between us. For new people this is a real revelation that opens their hearts to be closer with the other.

A third advantage is our ability, in this framework, to discuss our differences in a way that not only does not threaten the conversation and relations but helps construct

them. Through our learning to disagree amicably about our religious traditions, we learn to develop respect and friendship towards people we don't see eye to eye with, which is the real challenge we are facing in the region. An extremely significant side-benefit from this grass-roots, bottom-up, approach, is the "new people" I just mentioned. The vast majority of the hundreds and thousands of people active in the Interfaith Encounter Association, or IEA in short, have met the other for their first time through IEA. More than that: the a-political nature of this approach allows people from all parts of the political spectrum to join in on the active building of popular peace front – from Settlers in Hebron to radical leftists and from secular Fatah people to Salafi Sheikhs.

In order to see how effective this approach is, all you have to do is to join one of IEA's 51 on-going groups throughout the country. This effectiveness was much more dramatic when we held Israeli-Palestinian retreats during the height of the Intifada. This experience repeated itself no less than twelve times between 2002 and 2005. A group of Israelis would arrive on Thursday afternoon, coming from Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, escaping exploding busses, to meet a group of young Palestinians from Nablus, people who are very much consistent with the general profile of the suicide bomber. On the other hand, this group of young Palestinians had already left Nablus at 4am, escaping tanks and ambushes, to travel for twelve hours the one and a half hour trip, in order to meet with a group of Israelis from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Most of the people, in both groups, had never met the other before; which meant that all they knew about them was based on their prejudices and the media. In these years this meant "knowing" that the other mainly wishes to kill them. The two groups would meet for the first time in the late afternoon of Thursday and one could see two very well-distinct groups, sitting in different parts of the room during the first session and in separate tables during the first dinner. As the retreat progressed, one could actually see how the two groups mix more and more, taking every opportunity for more dialogue and more getting to know each other – naturally during sessions but also during coffee breaks, free time and meals; and having long conversations into the night. On Friday evening we used to hold a social evening. This took different forms in different retreats, but after only 24 hours from the time they first met one could see the participants singing together, dancing together or telling jokes with one another. When the time came to bid fare well on Saturday it was always with hugs and tears

and wishes to meet again soon. It was like Alice, going from the strange reality we live in, into the wonderland of what the reality could be, and then going back... And drama continues to unfold as we continue our journey of interfaith encounters towards peace. Two quick examples are: one – is the group of Rabbis and Sheikhs. The group of Rabbis includes leading figures in Settlements south of Jerusalem – heads of Yeshivot, Chief Rabbi of a big Settlement etc. The group Sheikhs started with Sheikhs who lead clans of tens of thousands of people in the Hebron area but the most moving of its encounters was the one when they were joined by several Salafi Sheikhs, for whom this was their first encounter with Jews, not to mention Settlers, and whom I am sure that two weeks before did not even imagine they will ever have a conversation with a Jew. One could see they are not experienced in interfaith dialogue, but the warmth and hugs when we fare welled will not be easily forgotten. Another example could be the historical visit, first of its kind – to the best of my knowledge, of a joint group of Israelis, Palestinians, Jordanians, Egyptians, Lebanese and Moroccans to the Majdanek Concentration Camp; which we held some two ago as the culmination of our second Euro-Mediterranean Abrahamic Forum conference in Lublin. Together we visited the Camp, the barracks, the Crematorium. Then we gathered together around a huge pile of human ashes and held a memorial ceremony that included reading names of victims as well as very moving Jewish, Muslim and Christian prayers.

This indeed tells us how effective the Interfaith Encounter Approach is, in transforming people's attitudes from fear and suspicion based on prejudices to mutual respect and friendship based on real knowledge of each other.

However it tells us much more: it tells us how easy it is to build peace in the Holy Land, if you take the right approach, and I think this is true for many other conflicts around the globe. But please note: it is easy if YOU, TAKE the right approach. If you sit back in your couch and wait for the government to make peace, or even go to demonstrate your support in it's doing so – you will wait for a long time.

But if you take the initiative, wherever you may be, join the Interfaith Encounter Association, participate in an encounter group, invite others to follow or anything else that supports active dialogue between people – you will see in your own eyes the growth of peace. All of you are invited to join us in this fascinating and rewarding journey.