

## **Religion and Peacebuilding: Grassroots Efforts by Israelis and Palestinians**

This paper is based on ethnographic research with the Jerusalem-based Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA), a grassroots organization committed to peacebuilding between Israelis and Palestinians. The IEA brings together ordinary people from contending political, religious, and ideological perspectives into dialogue or "encounter" groups intended to develop understanding and respect across differences, principally through a focus on religious engagement. The paper develops "thick descriptions" and analysis of the organization and its members, including the religio-ethical underpinnings and assumptions of the organization's mission, values, methods, and activities; those that propel members' participation; and the impact such participation has on their attitudes toward the "Other" and toward the adversary's national narrative

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"Israel Responds to Attacks by Bombing Gaza." So reads the caption under a graphic photo of wounded Israeli soldiers lying on the ground, being treated by workers of the Magen David Adom, the Israeli counterpart of the Red Cross. *The New York Times'* picture appears on the front page, the article following a few pages later. <sup>[1]</sup> A casual reader may not think twice about this, but the caption, photo, and article all conform to the dominant realpolitik model of conflict, where attacks by one side are quickly followed by retaliation by the other; in short, this is a model of war, of binary opposition across divides, that embraces and advances a win/lose mentality. Such perspective appears to be assumed by policy makers, politicians, diplomats, and certainly the media, both in the United States and the Middle

East.

A much less advertised approach to addressing conflict is currently being advanced by conflict resolution specialists whose interest, of course, is in the cessation or transformation of conflict. They increasingly argue that the answer to conflict, local or global, does not rest on the kind of cyclical revengeful responses just described, nor exclusively on official political and diplomatic interventions; if successful at all, quid pro quo efforts often result in solutions that are temporary and skin-deep. Sustainable peace and reconciliation endeavors address conflict at a grassroots level, using strategies that encourage the development of people's trust and sincere understanding across divides;<sup>[2]</sup> in short, conflict specialists increasingly direct their attention at "citizen" diplomacy.

In this paper, I analyze ethnographic research I conducted in the fall of 2010 with the Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA) in Jerusalem, a citizen diplomacy effort that addresses the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. My research involved participant-observation in six interreligious dialogue sessions, involving some fifty individuals representing the three Abrahamic religions, and intensive interviews with eleven IEA members (who are given fictitious names here, except for the organization's director). Based in Jerusalem, the IEA is an Israeli organization founded in 2001 whose goal is to promote peace in the Middle East through "interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural study. We believe that ... religion can and should be a source of the solution for conflicts that exist in the region and beyond."<sup>[3]</sup> To this end, Israelis—Jews, Muslims, and Christians—throughout Israel are invited to join neighborhood groups that meet monthly or bimonthly to discuss commonalities and differences across religious traditions. A number of groups also bring together Israeli citizens and Palestinians from East Jerusalem and from the West Bank. In bringing together ordinary people from contending political, religious, and ideological perspectives, the organization's goal is to develop in these "encounter groups" understanding and respect across the differences that divide them, beginning with religious differences. This organization thus represents an example of religion utilized as a productive bridge across political divides, which is gaining favor today among many experts in conflict resolution.<sup>[4]</sup>

In a recent newsletter, Yehuda Stolov, founder and director of the Interfaith Encounter Association, summarizes the mission and method of his organization in this way:

Unlike most other dialogue organizations, we work with, rather than around,

the deep cultural roots, beliefs, and traditions of the peoples of the Middle East. Each encounter revolves around a religious theme or topic and features a carefully planned program of joint study and dialogue. The group coalesces into a single community that respects the unique identity of each of its "sub-communities" and participants, thus catalyzing a long-term process of grassroots peace-building. By constructively engaging core religious and cultural values, while initially discouraging political conversations that may close off constructive dialogue, our approach successfully involves social and political groups that may feel very uncomfortable with other approaches. <sup>[5]</sup>

Study participants mirror this understanding of the IEA's mission, frequently stating that their organization is non-political, focused instead on efforts to find commonality and honor differences across the existing divides among members.

At times, conflict resolution literature and some activists characterize dialogue groups that do not directly address political issues as ineffectual, as a kind of band-aid effort whose outcomes are little more than sharing, or, to use Middle Eastern parlance, "hummus and hugs." I have also heard it characterized as adversaries "singing 'Kumbaya.'" In other words, some stakeholders see people-to-people encounters of this type as unable to get beyond superficial, if mutual, personal understanding. They see programs focused on the development of interpersonal understanding as naïve when it comes to taking account of divergent needs among group participants.

In the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, some researchers report that, typically, Jewish-Israeli participants indicate an interest in getting to know the other side, while the Palestinians are motivated by the desire to bring about socio-political change. These critics point to the lack of attention to power relations in apolitical dialogue groups, highlighting the necessity of considering the power asymmetry embedded in relations between Israel, a militarily and economically superior state occupying the West Bank, and Palestine, an impoverished, occupied land, still in search of political autonomy. <sup>[6]</sup> One critic believes that the very "discourse of 'dialogue' presupposes a symmetry" between Palestinians and Israelis, <sup>[7]</sup> which doesn't now exist. In these analyses, power asymmetry extends even to Palestinian citizens of Israel, who, as is well documented, are not on par with the Jewish Israeli population according to a variety of indices, including income, communal infrastructure, and civil rights.

Others characterize dialogue groups as proceeding via avoidance, with participants talking civilly to one another but all along circumventing the "elephant in the closet." [8] In the Israeli-Palestinian context, this would mean a failure to directly engage the conflict in a dialogue setting, seen as a necessary if painful process essential for healing and for establishing honest relationships.

My experience with the IEA, both through participant observation and through interviews with members, reveals a different and more nuanced set of understandings. I conclude that the Interfaith Encounter Association is not apolitical as such; rather, it is political in a particular manner. It does not avoid conflict or power inequalities. It addresses these in specific ways. While I treat the IEA as a case study in this paper, it should be noted that there are literally dozens if not hundreds of NGOs and various programs in Israel and the West Bank working on peacebuilding and reconciliation today. Unsurprisingly, they mostly fail to capture the media's attention; in that region, as in the United States and elsewhere, it is conflict, not constructive relationships, that seems to grab the popular imagination, only to prolong and exacerbate discord.

## **Estranged Neighbors**

It is a well-known fact that most Israeli Jews and Palestinians—those who are Israeli citizens and those who are not—live separate lives even when they live in close proximity; they are typically strangers to one another, often perceived through social stereotypes, mistrust, and a store of demonizing associations common in their respective national or "master" narratives. Media and other public discourses on the Middle East, produced there and elsewhere, typically fortify oppositional views regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the repeated use of such binaries as Israelis versus Palestinians, the Left versus the Right (in Israel), and Fatah versus Hamas (in Palestine). They contribute in this way to the lack of mutual understanding across the divides by treating ordinary Israelis and Palestinians as abstract categories, as disembodied ciphers, not as individuals with passionate, complex, and distinctive views and identities. They fail to reveal the experience of those who deeply regret the current state of mutual alienation, who want to know about and connect to the other, and who search for ways to contribute to the realization of peace and peaceful relations with their neighbors. In this paper, I give voice to some of these

moral actors who have been active in the Interfaith Encounter Association, which has facilitated meaningful personal connections to the other and made room for expanding each side's national narrative without pitting them against each other. I also consider at some length various ways in which the IEA's methods and processes function to create a space for such encounters and transformations.

I begin with three short stories that situate, in a broad manner, typical relations between Israelis and Palestinians in this part of the Middle East today. Reem is a handsome, open woman, in whom gentleness and strength easily intermingle. Middle-aged and self-confident, she is a Muslim, a Palestinian, a professional, a mother. She has just told me she has always been curious "to know about the other." She digs into foggy memories from her childhood to recollect the wall that until 1967 separated West from East Jerusalem where she was born and raised, and where she still resides. "What's behind the wall?" she used to ask her parents, and they would tell her that it divided Arabs and Jews after the war of 1948. As she became older she began hearing from people that they had been friends with Jews. "My grandmother used to tell me stories about her Jewish neighbors, how they were living with each other, visiting, and how we have some relatives, like my mother's uncle, who got married to a Jewish woman. So I was curious to know. ... The wall was removed," she continues, "but I feel that it's still there because there is no interaction between Arabs and Jews. It's opened, OK, but we go [across only] for formal issues-- to the municipality for some papers, for some department. But there's no interaction among the people. You don't know anything about them."

Steve's story complements Reem's. He is a thoughtful Orthodox rabbi in his early fifties, an immigrant from the United States to Israel five years ago. We have been talking about his relationship to Aziz, his Muslim counterpart as co-coordinator of an IEA interfaith dialogue group. In the course of their work together as coordinators, they have discovered they're both "into rocks," Aziz as a professional geologist. "One day after a retreat, it was a Friday afternoon," Steve says animatedly, "I brought him to my house in south Jerusalem to see my rocks. ... My house is like a whole museum of natural history, so he really loved the collection." They became so engaged in their shared passion that they realized too late that "it was like a half an hour from Shabbat," when public transportation would cease in Jewish Jerusalem. Aziz had to get back to his village in the West Bank, so he asked Steve, "How do I do that"? "And I said, 'My God, I have no clue. No Israeli taxi or bus line can take you.

There are Arab buses, but I don't know anything about them; I can't help you. It's going to be Shabbat in twenty minutes.' So I just walked him out to where the Arab buses run and I just said, 'You'll have to ask one of the drivers.' Later he told me it was fine, but it really drove home the point that we live in two worlds that are six inches away from each other; but we have almost no contact."

The third story involves me as a witness. I am interviewing Layla, a young Palestinian woman from East Jerusalem who wears a beautifully arranged hijab. We meet in Zion Square, a prominent spot in West Jerusalem, and walk up a few steps to the outdoor Ben Yehuda mall, a pedestrian promenade chock full of stores, restaurants, and cafes. We are sitting outdoors, sipping our drinks, with Layla keenly focusing on our conversation, as her English is somewhat labored. Suddenly, her concentration is broken; as I follow her gaze away from our table, I see a woman repeatedly attempting to photograph us, despite Layla's waving her away in frustration. When I ask Layla to interpret why the woman would surreptitiously try to take our picture, she responds quietly but clearly distressed: "Because she thinks you are Jewish." I gather that for some, she and I, immersed in conversation, composed a rare and perhaps disturbing tableau. As Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Ned Lazarus argue in reference to the conflict in this locale, "Enemy avoidance is embedded in the routines of everyday life to the point that cultivating relationships with people from the other side is seen as anomalous, subversive, or utterly unthinkable." <sup>[9]</sup>

I begin here with experiences of these individuals, for they accurately point to the physical as well as psychological distance that separates Israelis and Palestinians, and to a somewhat lesser extent, Jewish Israelis and Palestinian citizens of Israel. <sup>[10]</sup> Yet unlike the majority, these individuals have chosen to engage with the other. Among the questions I want to address in this paper are: What have been the factors that have led these people to commit to ongoing engagement with the "other"? How have people's views and attitudes been changed as a result? What has been the IEA's role in this process, including, particularly, the use of religion in developing dialogue across divides and the methodology employed within the encounter groups?

## **The Encounter Group**

The Interfaith Encounter Association has developed a method to bring together people

across the political and national divides focused principally on religious interchange. Its premise is that when lay people, not experts, prepare and share their perspectives on selected religious themes, they will arrive at mutual respect and understanding. The IEA focuses discussion, first and principally, on the three main religions of the area—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—believing that religion serves as a bridge, a way to connect national-political adversaries, as well as religious adversaries among the more extreme representatives of each side, who are otherwise absent to one another as persons in their everyday experience.

The process of discussing religious ideas and practices across divides is thought to lead to both the discovery of commonality and the appreciation of difference. Group coordinators, representing the religions of group members, engage in a pedagogy of respect at the beginning of group meetings, reminding members that their purpose is to learn from one another and that their approach—the "how" of their relating—must express respect and avoid offensiveness. They attempt to create, in other words, a safe space where civility and mutual consideration reign. This is not to say, however, that this process silences disagreements. In one group, for example, where the theme under discussion was "resurrection," a Catholic participant interpreted the Christian view of the resurrected Jesus. A Muslim member responded matter-of-factly, with no trace of animosity, that he did not believe Jesus was crucified but that God raised and resurrected him, but saying again, "He was not crucified." This comment did not introduce discomfort into the room, nor was there troubled contestation from the Christians in the room. Judging by the emotional tenor of the space and by the friendly conclusion to the encounter, this man's view appeared simply to have been taken as a difference in theological perspective, an acceptable one at that.

The encounter group, then, is the central activity of the IEA, and therefore I will focus on it principally. At present there are twenty-three such on-going groups throughout Israel, which include Palestinians living in East Jerusalem and seven groups that engage Israelis and Palestinians from the West Bank; these thirty groups bring together some 2,500 individuals who meet with one another on a regular basis, about once a month. In addition, another 6,000 residents of the region participate in other activities, such as weekend retreats, conferences, or as recipients of regular IEA listserv communications.

Each of the five different encounter groups I witnessed evinced a different ethos, undoubtedly reflecting the personality, style, and particular interests of the co-coordinators.

Twice during my research period, I attended meetings of the Prayer Encounter Group, the most formal of the Jerusalem-based encounters I visited. The group is co-led by Roger, a Conservative rabbi, and Mohammad, a Palestinian Muslim and tour guide (a prominent sheikh had this position until his recent death). Regular participants tend to be lay women and men, but religious leaders are sometimes in attendance as guests, such as foreign Catholic priests on short work assignments in Jerusalem and occasionally visiting rabbis. On another occasion, a German Protestant pastor in Jerusalem, whose church hosted the encounter, was present, as well as a different set of Catholic priests. This group represents a "cognitive" expression of interfaith dialogue, as it "emphasizes the exchange of theological information, seeing it as a route to peacemaking." <sup>[11]</sup> One encounter session was dedicated to repentance in prayer, the other to resurrection. Following welcoming remarks from Roger and self-introductions by each person in attendance, one individual from each of the three Abrahamic traditions made short presentations on the theme expressive of his religious tradition. A wide-ranging, participatory exchange of views followed in each instance. At the end of the meeting dates and themes were identified for the next group gathering.

For a religious studies scholar like myself, these discussions were interesting but of necessity rather superficial in content. I reminded myself that most of this group's members are religious practitioners, not specialists, and that for them the content level might have been entirely appropriate. I did discern, however, other dynamics that contribute to the appeal of this group, the most obvious and powerful one being the ritualized "feel" of the dialogical process at play. Some interpreters view interfaith dialogue as a kind of ritualized activity altogether. For example, Michael Anthony Barnes, with a nod to David Tracy, writes,

Dialogue is not about religious experience, it is religious experience. The entry into and experience of dialogue has about it something of the nature of ritual. A formal position is established, which is a response to the invitation to cross over into another world. Sometimes literally crossing a threshold, the partners indicate a willingness to have their preconceptions tested by something new. These preconceptions ... are deliberately suspended in favor of the discourse of the "other"; the act of listening, which makes up the community's act of faith, is deliberately transferred to the "other." <sup>[12]</sup>

My experience of a ritualized dimension in this interreligious dialogue was distinctive for



this particular group and not for the others I attended. The mode of relating here embedded respect and honor in the way people expressed their ideas, carefully formulating their contributions in a kind of ceremonial way, pacing their comments, making eye contact with their interlocutors, listening carefully to the speaker without interruption, and showing interest in the other by asking thoughtful questions that expressed sincerity and personal transparency. People seemed to be saying to one another in all moral seriousness, "I am truly interested in showing you who I am, relative to my religious beliefs and practices, and in learning who you are. This is important business for me, and it's critical for me to be here with you."

Residents of Jerusalem might well extend this interpretation to another level, insofar as the location of these two meetings made greater demands on some of the group's members than on others. The first of the meetings took place in the Austrian Hospice, located in the Old City in East Jerusalem, an area that many Jews feel uncomfortable or fearful visiting today, especially in the evening. The next meeting, three weeks later, was hosted by Augusta Victoria, an Evangelical Lutheran Church located on the north side of the Mount of Olives, also in East Jerusalem, which is an even farther trek for those living in West Jerusalem. Such locations may be purposely chosen, perhaps as a way to even out the power dimensions embedded in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Such symbolic gestures add to the experience of honor and respect, in this instance, communicated non-verbally by the Jewish Israeli members of the group to their Palestinian counterparts.

I asked Roger, the thoughtful Jewish co-leader of this group, what he thinks motivates Palestinians to participate in IEA's dialogue groups, especially since at times they need to travel long distances and even go through checkpoints if they're coming from the West Bank into Jerusalem. He offered this interpretation:

Arabs are proud people. They need to be respected. They need to feel that we respect them. ... They feel humiliated; the fact that we acknowledge them is extremely important. And that is a very prevalent factor in the conflict. In almost every encounter that I've participated in with Palestinians, they talk of their anger and frustration during their experience in the roadblock. Very often they feel that they are treated very disdainfully by the soldiers. ... Therefore, all the more important, I think for them ... is to have a sense that we [Jewish

Israelis] are going out of our way to come ... to meet with them, to take an interest in their culture.

Marc Gopin, a religious studies scholar and conflict resolution expert specializing in the Middle East, expands this understanding when he writes, based on his extensive work with Arabs and Jews, "Arabs tend to offer honor and expect honor as a conciliatory gesture. ... What so many Palestinians need and demand of Israelis is dignity." He adds that Israeli Jews often "miss the honoring cues altogether," these not being part of their cultural repertoire or expressive of their principal preoccupation with security and safety. <sup>[13]</sup> In this reading, the success of the Prayer encounter group may owe as much, then, to the ritualistic tenor and location of its meetings, and to the symbolic gestures operative therein, as to the actual content of the conversation on religious themes.

Gopin applauds religious text-centered efforts in dialogue groups such as the IEA's, arguing that they create "a temporary but sacred time of reconciliation, and temporary suspension of judgment. The theme of oasis is crucial here," he continues, "as it has always been as a first stage of peace." Speaking of IEA encounter groups specifically, he says, "They avoided politics but seemed to be building something deeper," <sup>[14]</sup> mirroring Yehuda Stolov's view that his organization's face-to-face encounter groups engage people at a deeply existential level, and that might be one of their principal draws. In Gopin's conclusion, which would be appreciated by members for precisely capturing the IEA's goals, he argues,

All contact is good if it leads to informal relationships that expand the circles of those who come to know and understand the enemy beyond the destructive mythification of the other. Destructive mythification is only born of spaces of noncontact, adversarial contact, or ignorance. Such shared study, therefore, should be ongoing. ... It really must yield new intimacies, such as mutual invitations to homes and meetings with families. <sup>[15]</sup> As we shall soon see, they do.

Gopin's oasis metaphor is compelling because it evokes the desert nature of the Holy Land and the possibility, in that terrain, of life and hope sprouting out of religious dialogue between adversaries. He astutely combines this image of safe space with one of precious time, when he characterizes it as "a temporary but sacred time of reconciliation." For me this combination points to Victor Turner's fruitful concept of liminality to help interpret a

dimension of the process involved in IEA encounters. Turner applied this concept particularly to his analysis of rites of passage and pilgrimages. These events, he argued, typically take people out of their usual physical spaces and roles in the social structure, temporarily suspending power differentials and other markers of hierarchy and difference, as they connect individuals with one another in a kind of communal intimacy he called "communitas." <sup>[16]</sup> I am thinking here of the IEA's Circle of Light and Hope encounter group, which meets at the Everest Hotel, located in a kind of no man's land next to Beit Jalla in the West Bank, still within Israel's full military jurisdiction (Area C). It is therefore one of the only places in this area where Israelis and Palestinians can get to without needing travel permits. The hotel sits atop a hilltop that, while overlooking Jerusalem, gives one the distinct impression of being far removed from the ongoing tensions of the Holy City. In the quiet of the hotel's terrace, Jews from Jerusalem and Palestinians from Hebron discuss the nature of sacred space on the day of my visit. There is talk of the temple mount, of the ancient Jewish temple, of the al-Aqsa and other mosques. But this is also followed by a respectful, almost wistful discussion about whether peace might still be possible, and by the claim made by Aziz, the group's articulate and philosophically minded Palestinian co-coordinator, that "We refuse to continue living as enemies. Life is short; we should not waste it on hatred. If one agrees with this, we can discuss where we go from here. There will be a time when people will say, 'Enough. We must have peace.'"

The Jerusalem Women's Interfaith Encounter group develops its own kind of communitas based on the members' experiences as women in a male-centered set of cultures. At the encounter meeting I attend, women speak of how their problems and needs are the same across the religious and political spectrum. At base, one member says, "We are all children of God." Beyond that kind of theological leveling, these women believe that as a women's group, the dynamics here are more intimate than in other groups, in part because they select themes to discuss that encourage personal sharing and mutual support, for example, the family and sexual relations, marriage and divorce, and women in the family, including those who are not married or have no children and hence fall outside cultural norms. This group moves beyond the exclusively cognitive dimension of the Prayer encounter group discussed above. Women's sharing of their experiences as women, often through the use of storytelling, situates this group within the definition of "affective dialogue," which expands the possibilities of interconnection across difference—in this case, across religion, but also cultural and gendered values and experiences. <sup>[17]</sup>

A specifically Muslim perspective is pertinent at this juncture, insofar as it addresses yet another issue for consideration. Reem, a long-time member of this encounter group, tells me what draws her to the IEA is not just her interest in knowing about the other: "You need to let the others also know about you." She explains this in light of the stigma that Muslims are terrorists, which "makes you feel bad, and it makes you feel that ... it's not fair, so you need to let the others also know about you."

While other IEA groups sometimes share snacks during their meetings, the women's group has developed a tradition of bringing sufficient food to constitute a meal, citing religious and cultural imperatives to welcome the stranger, including the importance of welcoming guests in the Torah and the centrality of hospitality in Arab culture. As is well known, commensality levels differences and facilitates the experience of equality—*communitas*—especially as these women symbolically extend honor to one another by being sensitive to each other's dietary needs at their meetings and when they invite each other to their homes for family weddings, birthday parties, circumcisions, Christmas dinners, celebrations of *Eid Al-Fitr* and other religious holidays. They have also organized group excursions to see films and to visit museums, a Druze community, and the Baha'i Temple. Some members meet on occasion for coffee, a meal, or a concert. Socializing is not absent in other groups; this women's group just seems to have more of it.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the IEA sees itself as non-political. It does so insofar as it does not have a precise agenda for interpreting the causes of the conflict or the paths to its resolution. The decision to call itself non-political appears to me to be strategic, with two goals in mind: 1) to appeal to a broad representation of Jewish Israelis, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and other Palestinian populations, as opposed to many peacebuilding organizations that draw largely from progressive and left-wing elements; and 2) to ensure that participants across the religious and political divides develop trust and recognition of the other's humanity in advance of potentially divisive arguments that often break apart other dialogue groups, as alluded to in Stolov's newsletter statement, presented earlier. As one Jewish Israeli member put it, "[discussion of politics] is not productive. It's like World War One trench warfare. We are both entrenched and neither side is going to give in." Another participant, a Muslim Palestinian, reports that his previous and multiple involvements in political/ideological dialogue groups typically ended within two or three months; by contrast, he proudly reports that the IEA encounter group he co-coordinates, the Young

Adults group, has lasted six years, and counting. The negative experiences of these two individuals (and others I interviewed) likely devolves from the tendency of adversaries in a conflict to embrace without question the master narratives of their own side and to provide what mediation experts John Winslade and Gerald Monk refer to as "totalizing descriptions ... that sum up a complex situation in one description that purports to give a total picture of the situation or of a person in it." [18]

While some dialogue-based organizations use trained mediators to work through such conflictual encounters, the IEA prefers a different approach. This does not mean that it does not allow political discussion, but when politics does enter the conversation, it does so in a non-confrontational manner, typically after trust has been developed in the group. This approach has allowed encounter groups to continue meeting through all manner of conflict. For example, Caroline, a long-term Jewish member of the Jerusalem Women's Interfaith Encounter Group, tells me that her group, founded in 2001, has met consistently all these years, through the second Intifada, bombings, alerts, and checkpoints. The group is important to her, as "We've discussed fears, pain, personal lives, and how violence affects our lives ... painful issues, but hopefully, little by little, a drop of water, if you have many, makes a river." Reem, also a veteran member of this group, tells me that there is no discussion of the conflict or of politics as such, because it "increases conflict, disagreement, and hate. But on the other hand," she adds, "here you see that politics is everyday life." She references the frustration she experienced the day before of having had to wait at a checkpoint for an hour when she tried to get to a wedding in Ramallah. "That's not politics; that's everyday life. It's what you do every day, so we should discuss these issues because many times it happens that we have our meeting and some came late. Why? Because, they say, 'At the checkpoint I was stopped, I forgot my identification card,' and so on." She concludes her thought by reiterating, "It's not politics; we call it life, life issues, yes." And the women in her group do, indeed, discuss these.

Similarly, at the meeting of the Abu Dis and Ma'aleh Adumim (ADAMA) group, there was awareness and acknowledgment of the three hours several Muslim members had traveled from the West Bank to get to the meeting at the Jewish settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim, on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Perhaps what is needed is a way to refer to a more inclusive politics, one that plays out in interpersonal encounters or microcosms of the larger society, such as the IEA's dialogue groups. Could the notion of a "personalized" politics be useful in

capturing the work of the Jerusalem women's group and others in the IEA? This term recognizes the importance of identifying, acknowledging, and providing support for perceived injustices experienced by fellow members, and addresses the misperception that the IEA avoids conflict and its power dynamics and the way they affect real people on a day-to-day basis. This process might well be more effective at influencing the conventional political behavior of people, transforming their views as a result of their exposure to the other's experience. The work of political scientists currently investigating the notion of "creative participation" might be a useful tool for future research, for it credits individuals' private involvements with political import, driven by concerns for the common good. <sup>[19]</sup>

Marwan, the Muslim co-coordinator of the Young Adults group, tells me, "What we're trying to do is work from the bottom up. We're trying to work with the people, with the street, with the masses so that ... when the time comes, whatever the change that they might choose, will be the right choice, will be acknowledging the rights of the other people, knowing that there is someone else, that they have rights, they are humans the same as I am." Here Marwan is using the language of "humanizing the other" to characterize the goals of his encounter group and the organization as a whole. Yet like others I interviewed, he uses the language of rights, typically belonging to the political domain, to signal the public recognition and protection of the other, necessary in the long run. He, too, seems to be in the business of personalizing politics when he adds that it's not desirable to treat the other "as the enemy, as a group, as a block of people. ... Instead of [saying], 'It's Jews,' it should be, 'It's Moshe and Avi, and other people.' Instead of just going, 'It's Palestinians,' you have Ahmad and Mustafa, you have names, you have people, so it's easier to communicate and everything is built on trust." Marwan is making an appeal here for engaging with the other in what Martin Buber would call an I-Thou relationship, not the more common I-It connection that objectifies others and nullifies their subjectivity and distinctiveness. <sup>[20]</sup>

As Marwan understands it, trust is key here. Even the most superficial analysis of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict reveals high levels of distrust across the political divides. Marwan's statement, in my reading, represents resistance to that reality; he is saying, in effect, that the IEA's method is intended to challenge the totalizing descriptions of "the situation" by focusing on the being and experiences of actual individuals, with whom group members are able to empathize and engage, given the trust they have cultivated in one another through years of face to face encounters.

The trust developed in this group has produced some fascinating exchanges, as Marwan explains: "You feel that you can trust the group to absorb whatever you throw into the vacuum, the space of the group. At many points when the group used to debate, we would feel that Jews would side with Palestinians and Palestinians would side with Jews."

Recounting the time of the Israeli pullout from Gaza in 2005, he says, "The Jews of the group were against Jewish settlers and were in favor of the evacuation. And the Palestinians and Muslims were in favor of the settlers, saying, 'How could we tear down a house?' So Palestinians became identified with settlers and Jews became identified with Palestinians." I ask him how the group itself interpreted this kind of reversal.

Palestinians said that in '48 and '67, and today, Palestinian houses were demolished, so they understand what a house means. Jewish members said that settlers mean the oppression of Palestinians, and this means of oppression should be taken off. You didn't just express your feelings; you took the extra step, the extra mile, for the other group that put you in the opposite place. It was weird, but this is because of the trust, because if the Palestinians didn't trust the group, they never would say, "Yeah, I identify myself with settlers"; they would say, "Oh, if I would save them someone would judge me"; and the Israelis would say, "If I identify myself with Palestinians, [Israelis] would say, 'You're a traitor, a leftist.'" But because the trust was so deep in the group they allowed themselves to express their inner beliefs freely.

This trust has allowed members of this group to engage eventually in political discussions that clearly depart from the master narratives of each side; in fact, some might say that these young people are expressing solidarity with the so-called enemy in these instances. Jews and Palestinians in this group have been able to enter the narrative of the other in their own minds and hearts, undoubtedly influenced by exposure to and exchange with the "other." But as Marwan emphasizes in his account, they have also been willing to share what are clearly, for them, risky political stances in this mixed environment, where, ironically, there is greater safety than if members of each side expressed these views to their own people. This discussion, in my view, points to the complex and multilayered perspectives on aspects of the conflict held by people on all sides; this constitutes a far cry from the simplifications produced by newspaper headlines and government leaders.

While this account represents an exemplary form of trust and risk-taking in the context of

an IEA encounter group, I believe it expresses more generally the broader methodology of the IEA, which is committed to recognizing the other. The process of meeting with, respectfully listening to, and acknowledging the other expresses a form of moral commitment that philosopher María Lugones calls “world-travelling.” For her, “travelling to someone’s ‘world’ is a way of identifying with them,” Lugones writes, “because by travelling to their ‘world’ we can understand *what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*. Only when we have travelled to each other’s ‘worlds’ are we fully subjects to each other.” <sup>[21]</sup>

## Encountering the Other

The Interfaith Encounter Association, like any organization, draws certain kinds of people, and not others, into its activities. For the most part, those attracted to the IEA are not activists willing to challenge their respective political leadership by engaging in public protest or civil disobedience. Participants represent a fairly broad segment of the population in terms of age, gender, religious affiliation, and political persuasion. This sort of diversity is part of the IEA's commitment to encourage interaction across all levels of religio-political divides. A dramatic example is work that the organization, which partners with a number of Palestinian NGOs, has lately accomplished in bringing into dialogue people who would otherwise never cross paths: right wing settler rabbis and sheikhs in the West Bank.

A variety of motivations draw participants into IEA encounter groups. IEA director Yehuda Stolov believes that these fall principally into three categories: 1) curiosity about the other, since in the course of everyday life most people have little opportunity to meet; 2) the desire to build peace, to contribute somehow in the face of people's frustration over the ongoing conflict; and 3) the need to correct prejudices that might exist relative to their religion. These are helpful categories that in large measure capture my observations as well. As with any set of categories, however, they help order our understanding but erase the richness and depth of personal experience. In order to make room for a sampling of individual voices and experiences, I will briefly feature four participants—two Palestinians and two Jewish Israelis—who tell distinctive but sometimes overlapping accounts of their journey into dialogue and beyond. <sup>[22]</sup>



During interviews, I ask study participants, not only about their motivations for joining, but also about the role that their participation in the IEA has had on their own perspective regarding the other, including widening their perception of the other's narrative. In the course of listening to their narratives, I probe for related concerns, such as people's views on the possibility of hope and eventual peace. I also explore religious and ethical values that inspire and support their involvement in the IEA's peacebuilding work.

Reem expresses a desire to know the other, otherwise impossible in the current political climate separating Palestinians and Jewish Jerusalemites. Her interest is not one simply driven by curiosity, however. Indeed, she is impelled by a longing for peace, for the cessation of injustices and losses that she sees for her own people, but also for Jewish Israelis:

Sometimes I envy other countries because they live in peace, because they don't have this issue, they don't have to pass every day [through checkpoints]. ... So why should we suffer from these checkpoints? And why should Jewish people go and be in the army? Why should women, mothers, suffer? From both sides it's not easy—all these accidents, all these injured people. Why? You can save all this tragedy, save all these incidents, and live in peace and happiness and enjoy our life. <sup>[23]</sup>

Though this *cri de coeur* reveals despair about the conflict, Reem feels she has no choice but to hope. And she believes that the path to finding that hope is through "encounters with the other side," concluding that "this the only way." In making this faith commitment to hope, whose ultimate goal is peace, she engages in a moral act, for this process involves holding on to a vision of a future—perhaps not achievable during her lifetime—that must be sustained through perseverance and courage, despite the odds, and acting upon it. Speaking of Palestinians, she says, "Some people find it not so easy to go to talk to our enemy," suggesting that this is the case for Jews too. She quickly adds, however, "I think that this is not the enemy. The conflict is between governments; it's not between people, because, you know, when you interact with someone and you find it's just a human being like you, you understand that it's out of his hand."

This view, also expressed by others in this organization, clearly prioritizes the shared humanity of people across political divides, thereby rejecting the obligation felt by enemies

to maintain, according to Vamik Volkan, a "principle of non-sameness." <sup>[24]</sup> This is not to say that from this vantage point the situation is the same for Palestinians and Israelis, however; we have already witnessed Reem's distress about her own and other Palestinians' experiences at checkpoints. Undoubtedly, she would agree with David Steele's claim that "to be in solidarity with all sufferers does not mean that all suffering is equal ... [or] that all groups are equally guilty." <sup>[25]</sup> Yet rather than pointing fingers and engaging in blaming behavior and conflict escalation, Reem argues that "we should work together to change that real world, the real circumstances, the real issues, the conflict; maybe we can find a resolution together." As an ordinary person, so to speak, she does not offer specific ways for achieving this goal. For Reem, her 10-year involvement in the IEA has allowed her to travel into the worlds of Jewish Israelis and consequently to engage in empathetic commiseration with their situation of vulnerability and loss. She has contributed beyond this level by attending international conferences, at her own expense, representing the IEA.

Aliza, a reflective young Jewish woman, a native of Israel, is a graduate student in Middle Eastern Studies at Hebrew University. Several factors account for her involvement in the IEA. She, too, has felt a desire to know the other since her high school days, when she started learning Arabic. As an Orthodox Jew, she recognizes the similarities of her religion with Islam and enjoys discovering commonalities. She has also been drawn to Arab culture due to her being a Mizrahi Jew, her parents having been born in Iran. Her connection to Palestinians devolves, in part, from being part of a minority within the ambit of the dominant Ashkenazi Jewish culture in Israel, and hence identifying with the experience of those culturally and politically marginalized, noting, "There is not enough room for my identity in Israel."

Aliza believes that personally encountering the other is essential and truly transformative, though it also demands getting past one's fears. <sup>[26]</sup> In her own experience, for example, given her socialization, she did not recognize Palestinians' right to self-determination and felt intimidated by Palestinians' claims to it. Through her IEA encounters, she has learned to trust her Palestinian interlocutors, which has allowed her to move beyond her fears and to accommodate the other's narrative, a long process she also sees others in the IEA undertaking. Her coursework at the university as well as her exposure to and her friendship with Israeli Arabs and with Palestinians have demanded that she take a close and critical look at her country's actions vis-à-vis the other, forcing her to revise her former view of

Israel's national narrative. "Sometimes it's very painful to be the victimizer. And when you face it—that sometimes you're the bad guy—it's very hard, it's painful." She disagrees with the current policies of the state of Israel and believes that fear drives the ignorance and complacency of many Israelis regarding injustices happening to the Palestinians: "I feel that in Israel now we neglect most of the moral issues that relate to the relations with the other and the way that you have to treat the other." A moral impetus to be involved in peacebuilding is also behind her IEA involvement: "After I finished the army," she says, "I felt that I needed to do something in order to change the situation. I don't feel like I can just live my life—and I have a very good life—without trying to see what's going on. Why are we in such a long conflict for a very long time?" These views impel her to dedicate herself to the work of peacebuilding, providing her with a sense of empowerment, insofar as she is trying to change the status quo. That work includes the founding and co-coordination of an IEA encounter group at her university several years ago, more recently organizing a dialogue group of students from Hebrew University and Bethlehem University in the West Bank, and succeeding after sustained effort in creating a Muslim prayer space at Hebrew University.

Bassam is a Palestinian from East Jerusalem, active for two years in the IEA's Reut-Sadaqa encounter group. The first Intifada cut short his aspirations to continue his studies at a Palestinian university. Instead, he found work in West Jerusalem, first as a waiter in a hotel, later as a bookkeeper. He soon came to realize that there was a discrepancy between the way Jews were represented to him as he was growing up and the reality of the flesh and blood Jews he was meeting on a daily basis. He became curious about Judaism, asking about Shabbat and the Jewish holidays, but soon grew frustrated by the lack of available resources. When he discovered it, the Internet became a godsend in guiding his reading. Books had their limits after a while, as he puts it in his broken English: "I read about the Jewish people from the books. I prefer to know the other from himself, personally. It's better for me." This hunger to know the other, to set the record straight for himself, has been satisfied in the monthly meetings of his IEA encounters. I ask him, "What do you find beneficial in a meeting like tonight's?" He responds earnestly, movingly, "It fulfills my heart. It influences me the way I raise my children. ... I may not have influence on other people, but I have influence on my family. I know the right thing. I raised my children in the right way." The right way, for Bassam, is to buck the accepted verities of his social world, to seek the truth about the other, and to teach his children the way he sees reality.

None of this is without cost; "inner struggle" and "internal conflict" are constant refrains throughout our conversation. And there is the cost of confusion for Bassam's children. When he takes them to visit "Jewish" gardens and markets so they will move beyond constructed polarities and separations, they ask, "Why are their gardens so nice and ours are not? Don't we have our own markets? Why do we have to shop in the Jewish markets?" The subtext here is that shopping at Jewish markets helps the Jews, a view they pick up in their schools. A third cost is the loss of some Palestinian friends who saw Bassam and his IEA involvement either as "normalization" with the enemy or as a bridge, but one that is good for the Jews and not the Arabs. Bassam thinks they are wrong. Yet the upshot is that he must live with ambiguity, a condition he passes on to his children as well.

Judith, a Canadian born Jew, joined the IEA eight years ago because, as she puts it, "The second Intifada directly affected my family." The boyfriend of one of her daughters was killed in a suicide bombing, as were two of her daughters' youth counselors. She concluded that violence was never going to end without taking a different approach. "The only way to stop it," she argues now, "is for people to meet each other," to recognize that "there is another people living in the land." This was not always her view. In fact, in Canada she had been a member of the right wing Kach movement, which followed the now infamous Rabbi Meir Kahane. This, in part, might explain why she was "terrified" during her first meeting with "the enemy" at an IEA sponsored retreat where she met young men from Nablus "considered to be prime terrorists," as Nablus reportedly produced the greatest number of suicide bombers during the second Intifada. <sup>[27]</sup> These young men told of having been shot at, seemingly indiscriminately, by the Israeli army. Recognizing that she "had been lied to by her society," this meeting "changed my life": "I made it my mission to learn everything I can about them and to be involved [in peacebuilding efforts]."

Judith was active in the IEA's Reut Sadaka encounter group until four years ago but left it because she felt that, ultimately, it was "preaching to the converted." Instead, along with a Palestinian man from Abu Dis, she founded the ADAMA encounter group, aimed at involving people she knew in her Kahane days: "Those are the people that I have to reach. ... They have to change like I did. The only way to do it is to expose them to encounters." This dialogue group meets at her home in Ma'aleh Adumim, a right wing settlement near Jerusalem, from which Jewish participants are drawn, with Palestinians members coming in from various places in the West Bank. Judith sees it as her mission to influence the people

in her community, to move them beyond apathy and fear, so they will learn about Islam but also become aware of the hardships that Palestinians have to endure in the current situation. It has not been easy to build up Jewish participation in the group, for, as she explains, "It's very frightening to make that step, because once you do that, you're on the outs in that community," with prospective participants fearing "they'll label you left wing, or whatever." This fear is not limited to right wing contexts. For example, Caroline, a Jewish Israeli living in West Jerusalem and far more politically mainstream, tells me that when she joined her IEA encounter group in 2002, "It was not socially acceptable to meet people from the other side." And we should remember the fear of judgment for engaging with and empathizing with the other felt by both Palestinian and Jewish members of Marwan's Young Adults encounter group.

Judith has persevered in her peacebuilding efforts in her community, though she has experienced a fair share of marginalization, including receiving hostile email and phone calls from neighbors. She recalls email messages from people who wrote to her something like, "We used to feel safe in Ma'aleh Adumim and now you're inviting all these Palestinians to come to Ma'aleh Adumim, and now we don't feel safe anymore." So she wrote back, saying, "Tell me something: every single morning there are hundreds of laborers--day laborers--that come in with permits and they're your garbage collectors, they're your gardeners and they're your store workers, contractors, and whatever, and you still feel safe. But I bring in lawyers and doctors, teachers, and pharmacists who happen to be Palestinians with permits to talk about God, and all of a sudden you're terrified?" With that they conceded that she had a point. This concession became a minor triumph for Judith.

We see in these four profiles different trajectories toward engagement with the other, in some cases requiring the individual to overcome ideological resistance and fear in order to take that first step of meeting the other. We also see that it takes courage to step beyond one's own social, cultural, and political universe to engage in "world-travelling" that has the potential to challenge one's own certainties and social standing. Yet such world-travelling also offers the opportunity for substantial inner transformation. These four examples are not unique in suggesting that significant inner changes take place as a result of the encounter groups, including most importantly, perhaps, the capacity to see the other as a human being and of dropping the language of "enemies." Their experience and aspirations are supported by the historian and peace studies scholar, R. Scott Appleby, when he declares, "[G]enuine

peace emerges 'from the ground up,' through the quiet but persistent and profound efforts of people whose own hearts have been transformed and who have the courage to believe in and evoke the inner goodness of others." [28]

In addition to the process of humanization just described, the process of recognizing and accepting the other seems to lead, in effect, to a gradual acceptance of aspects of the other's narrative as legitimately describing the other's experience. This might explain why, despite the continuing conflict, IEA members express hope for its resolution, if not in the immediate future, sometime down the road. As Peter J. Haas suggests,

The issue is not who is "right" in the Middle Eastern conflict. To assert an answer to that question is already to presuppose a narrative that cannot be accepted by the other side. Hope resides in the possibility that each side will be able to change its Grand Narrative to allow some legitimacy to the Grand Narrative of the other. [29]

In an effort to understand the explicit role that religion plays in IEA participation, I ask members whether religious values constitute a source of their commitment to their organization's work. Jews typically respond in the affirmative, proffering passages from the Torah calling for the love of neighbor or the stranger, such as Leviticus 19:18 ("You shall love your neighbor as yourself") or Leviticus 19:34 ("You shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt"). From their perspective, these biblical commands make a demand on them as Jews to know and engage with Arabs and Palestinians in the region and, by extension, to work for peace.

A few participants offer additional religious sources worth mentioning here. For example, at one point, Judith was part of the Hasidic Lubavitch sect, and the rebbe's "vision and mission was to bring the Meshiach [messiah]. He always said in order to bring the Meshiach, you have to act as if he was already here." For Judith this means, "I have to have peace with the Arabs and my neighbors." Thinking of the occasions in which Arabs sit in her home or when she and they go to parties to celebrate holidays together, she adds, "And now I'm acting as if he was already here." For Judith, this is "a very fulfilling mission." At another point, she suggests that her IEA work is "very much a tikkun olam thing for me," alluding to the mystical view that the world is broken and it is human beings' responsibility to work with God to heal and repair it, a teaching frequently used by Jews today to encourage and

support the work of social justice.

Roger argues that universalism is grounded in Jewish particularism, supporting his view that "for me to be a good Jew, I think you have to be very open to people's backgrounds, you have to bring people together, you have to build good will, dialogue, mutual respect." He tells me that in *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers of the Mishna, it is written that "man is beloved because he was created in God's image. It doesn't say the Jew was beloved, it says 'Adam.' We were all made in God's image." Hence he sees the well-known *imago Dei* passages of Genesis supported by later Jewish tradition, fundamentally establishing equality of value among all human beings, with obvious application to the preciousness of both Jewish and Palestinian lives. Finally, Roger cites Exodus 19:6 ("You shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation") to argue that

A priest's job is to serve the people by bringing them closer to God. ... In other words, the Jewish people are there to serve; the world was not created for our sole benefit, we have a role to play in the world. And that role is universalistic. We are all children of God, and Muslims and Jews and Christians are children of Abraham, at least spiritually. So I think as Jews we have an obligation to do what we can to make that happen, to build bridges so we all acknowledge that we are all brothers and sisters, we are children of God.

Yehuda Stolov is guided by several sources in his work on behalf of peace. He begins by arguing that the Bible commands the pursuit of peace, affirmed in this regard by *halacha* (Jewish law). Having been a student at Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook's yeshiva as a young man, Yehuda tells me that his rabbi strongly emphasized "the need for loving relations between different nations, and the need for Jews to care for other nations." This interpretation was evidently tied up with Kook's understanding of the notion of the chosen people; as Yehuda puts it, "He said we have to take care of them, to know them, and to be able to improve their lives." For Yehuda, this is another imperative of "this work towards harmony."

Muslim study participants also display common religious sources that support their involvement in the IEA, though fewer additional sources are mentioned by them. All Muslim participants claim that, for Islam, relations with neighbors are very important, suggesting that both the Qur'an and the Hadith contain clear teachings about the

relationship of Muslims to their Jewish neighbors. Several times participants offered this popular story:

The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, speaks about a Jewish neighbor that used to try to irritate him by throwing garbage in his way every day. One day, he walked out of his home to find no garbage. He immediately went to the woman's house and inquired about her to find that she was ill and he offered his assistance. She was so moved and at the same time ashamed of her actions at his concern after all she had done to him. This is a prime example of being a good neighbor. <sup>[30]</sup>

According to Bassam, this story inspires his commitment to humanizing the other, while Layla identifies Islam as a religion of peace, signaled by the use of "Salaam" as the everyday greeting among Muslims. Another interviewee, Marwan, talks about the historic Muslim protection of Jews and Christians under the "People of the Book" designation, adding that "the Prophet mentioned many times, 'If you have a Christian or a Jewish neighbor, you should treat them as good as you would treat your Muslim neighbor.'"

As has been seen above, members are motivated by a variety of factors to participate in IEA encounters. Religious motivations may or may not exist at the level of conscious awareness for many of them, but upon reflection, they are able to link their involvement with the deeply treasured teachings of their respective religious traditions. This is an important observation flowing from this study, as it suggests that religion might well have the capacity to mobilize people in the direction of peace and humanizing of the so-called "enemy." Such possibility needs to be more strategically deployed by religious and peacebuilding organizations than is currently the case, in order to offer the various actors in the Middle East constructive, deeply grounded, normative visions of harmony and coexistence that can challenge reigning understandings of the other.

## **Conclusion**

Interfaith Encounter Association members claim to have been personally transformed by their participation in their organization. For them, stereotypes have been broken and enemies have been re-humanized and are now perceived as people who also face the difficulties of the conflict. Friendships have been forged, resulting, for some, in exposure to



one another's families, homes, and cultures. In many cases, trust has been developed across the divide, the legitimacy of the other's narrative has been at least partially accepted, and fear has been concomitantly reduced. Everyone believes there will be peace some day, though some are not at all confident that it will arrive during their lifetime. Still, they refuse to give up hope. This refusal fuels members' continuing participation in encounter groups in spite—or perhaps because—of suicide bombings, house demolitions, military incursions, and heightened tensions over mass arrests in the West Bank or civilian-targeting rockets from Gaza.

The social impact of people's involvement in IEA activities is less clear. Members do share their exposure to "the other" and the positive experiences emerging from it with family and friends. Many report that close relatives are supportive; others say that responses to their involvement are not always enthusiastic. For example, Ed, a long-time Jewish immigrant from the United States but only recently involved in the IEA, tells me he is "constantly sharing" what he learns in IEA dialogues. "You can't change other people, only yourself, but as an educator I can put ideas in people's heads, and they change." While his wife fully supports him in this work, "my kids think I'm nuts because 'it ain't going to happen.' They're cynical. But I'm older, I'm more experienced. ... What do kids know?" Layla has succeeded in bringing her mother and two sisters into her encounter group; yet she also reports that some Arabs ask her, "Why meet with Jews? It doesn't help the coming of peace."

Undoubtedly, there are many reasons behind the skepticism expressed by people on both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli divide about the usefulness of interfaith dialogue for peacebuilding. I have already discussed the concerns expressed by social activists and some conflict resolution experts regarding the effectiveness of dialogue as such, particularly dialogue that sees itself principally as non-political. In addition, a not uncommon argument is that dialogue should be accompanied by some kind of action, such as public protest or joint work between Israelis and Palestinians to, for instance, rebuild Palestinian houses demolished by the Israeli army. While the IEA has been involved in some joint projects (e.g., bringing together Jewish and Palestinian Israeli schools), Yehuda Stolov takes strong exception to the assumption that dialogue and action are separable activities: "Action is not separable from meeting and talking. I think the most effective action is the relations between the communities." And he has repeatedly seen such relations change in the context of the work of his organization.

I would wager that the skepticism of Ed's children, or of the Arabs Layla cites, is a reflection of the continuing public and political dominance of discourses advancing a realpolitik model for addressing conflict. That model has clearly failed to bring about peace. Yet in the absence of solid empirical research, how do we know, indeed, that regularly meeting the other "doesn't help the coming of peace"? While it is impossible to determine this a priori, perhaps it is time to consider a paradigm shift on a broader scale, one that recognizes that a model of engagement, reciprocity, and reflection, applied by the grassroots through the diplomatic and political levels, could help show the way out of the trap of binary logic and zero-sum games of "winners and losers." Admittedly, the process would be complicated, but it might, in the end, prove more hopeful.

I asked Ed how he sustains his commitment to hope and peace in the face of the ongoing conflict and the skepticism that surrounds him. He draws his inspiration from John Kennedy's words in his Inaugural Address, a perspective consistent with the IEA's views that, ultimately, it is the people who can build peace and make it sustainable: "All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days ... nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin." <sup>[31]</sup> This sentiment would be shared by active members of the Interfaith Encounter Association who, undoubtedly, would also affirm the ancient Talmudic teaching of Rabbi Tarfon's: "You are not required to complete the task, yet you are not free to withdraw from it." <sup>[32]</sup>

1. 1. Isabel Kershner and David D. Kirkpatrick, "Israel Bombs Gaza After Attacks That Kill Eight Near Egypt's Borders," *New York Times*, 19 August 2011, national edition.
2. 2. See, for example, Mohammed Abu-Nimer, "Negotiating a Revolution: Toward Integrating Relationship Building and Reconciliation into Official Peace Negotiations," in *Reconciliation, Justice, and Coexistence: Theory and Practice*, edited by Mohammed Abu-Nimer (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001), 101-127.
3. 3. Interfaith Encounter Association, <http://interfaithencounter.wordpress.com/about/our-vision>.
4. 4. See, for example, Robert Schreier, "Religion as Source and Resource for Reconciliation," in *Reconciliation in a World of Conflicts*, Concilium, 2003/5, edited by Luis Carlos Susis and María Pilar Aquino (London: SMS Press, 2003), 109-115.
5. 5. Interfaith Encounter Association, "The Secret of Our Success," Annual Report

2010, <http://interfaith-encounter.org/AnnualReport2010.pdf>, 5.

6. 6. See, for example, Ramzi Suleiman, "Planned Encounters between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis: A Social-Psychological Perspective," *Journal of Social Issues* 60, no. 2 (2004): 323-337.
7. 7. Simona Sharoni, "Compassionate Resistance: A Personal/Political Journey to Israel/Palestine," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8, no. 2 (June, 2006): 6.
8. 8. Mohammed Abu Nimer and Ned Lazarus, "The Peacebuilder's Paradox and the Dynamics of Dialogue: A Psychological Portrait of Israeli-Palestinian Encounters," in *Beyond Bullets and Bombs: Grassroots Peacebuilding between Israelis and Palestinians*, edited by Judy Kuriansky (Westport, CN: Praeger, 2007), 26.
9. 9. Mohammed Abu Nimer and Ned Lazarus, "The Peacebuilder's Paradox and the Dynamics of Dialogue: A Psychological Portrait of Israeli-Palestinian Encounters," in *Beyond Bullets and Bombs: Grassroots Peacebuilding between Israelis and Palestinians*, edited by Judy Kuriansky (Westport, CN: Praeger, 2007), 22.
10. 10. The term "Israelis," when used alone, tends to be associated with Jews, while "Palestinian citizens of Israel" refers to those Muslims and Christians who are ethnically Arab and citizens of the state of Israel. The more traditional nomenclature, at times used by people of all sides, is "Arabs," which tends to be applied to Palestinians who live in Israel and to those residing in the West Bank. Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem occupy an ambiguous location as neither citizens of Israel nor inhabitants of the West Bank. While they do not carry Israeli passports, they have travel permits and have the right to vote in municipal elections.
11. 11. Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Amal I. Khoury, and Emily Welty, *Unity in Diversity: Interfaith Dialogue in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007), 16-17.
12. 12. Michael Anthony Barnes, "Between Rhetoric and Reticence: Theology of Dialogue in a Post-Modernist World," in *Approaches, Foundations, Issues and Models of Interfaith Relations*," edited by David Emmanuel Singh and Robert Edwin Schick (Delhi, India: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and Hyderabad, India: Henry Martin Institute of Islamic Studies, 2001), 150.
13. 13. Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 146-147.
14. 14. Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle*

- East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 152.
15. 15. Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 153-154.
  16. 16. Victor W. Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," *Sociology of Religion: A Reader*, edited by Susanne C. Monahan, William A. Mirola, and Michael O. Emerson (Upper Saddle River, NY: Prentice-Hall, 2001), 47-54.
  17. 17. Abu-Nimer, Khoury, and Welty, *Unity in Diversity*, 17-18.
  18. 18. John Winslade and Gerald Monk, *Narrative Mediation: A New Approach to Conflict Resolution* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 5.
  19. 19. See, for example, Michele Micheletti and Andrew S. McFarland, Eds., *Creative Participation: Responsibility-Taking in the Political World* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2011).
  20. 20. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribner, 2000).
  21. 21. María Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," in *Making Face, Making Soul: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990), 401.
  22. 22. For the interested reader, endnotes will add material on other study participants to provide a broader picture.
  23. 23. Steve indicates a similar type of conflict fatigue when he says, "I don't want to fight any more. I'm going to be 52. I'm too old for this crap. I'm tired of it. I just want to sit around my house and feel safe." In doing so, he puts his finger on the fears about safety that are so much a part of Jewish Israeli consciousness. Speaking about the second Intifada, Steve tells me, "Friends were all sending their kids to school on two different buses because if one got blown up, at least they wouldn't lose both kids."
  24. 24. Vamik Volkan, *Killing in the Name of Identity: A Study of Bloody Conflicts* (Charlottesville, VA: Pitchstone Publishing, 2006), 214.
  25. 25. David Steele, "Contributions of Interfaith Dialogue to Peacebuilding in the Former Yugoslavia," in *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*, edited by David R. Smock (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002), 77-78.
  26. 26. For Steve, the transformation has not been nearly as dramatic. Participation in IEA encounters "cemented my views, which were hypothetical, like I thought it was pretty

safe to assume that there were Palestinians who really wanted peace before. Now I know it is so, and I have also seen the other side." As a self-confessed cynic, he tells me, "There's only a few Palestinians that I've met within the IEA that I really feel I know well enough to definitely say, 'I trust you.'"

27. 27. Yehuda Stolov, personal communication with the author.
28. 28. Scott Appleby, "Foreword," in *In Search of Justice and Peace in Jerusalem*, by James G. Paharik (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), xi.
29. 29. Peter J. Haas, "Moral Visions in Conflict: Israeli and Palestinian Ethics," in *Anguished Hope: Holocaust Scholars Confront the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, edited by Leonard Grob and John K. Roth (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 23.
30. 30. Lamyaa Hashim, "Muslim, Love Thy Neighbor: Social Impact of Islam on Neighborhoods," 29 Sept. 2008, <http://www.suite101.com/content/muslim-love-thy-neighbor-a70864>.
31. 31. John F. Kennedy, "Inaugural Address," 20 January 1961, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/BqXIEM9F4024ntFI7SVAjA.aspx>.
32. 32. Ethics of the Fathers 2:21, *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur*, edited by Rabbi Nosson Scherman and Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, translated by Rabbi Nosson Scherman (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1984), 557.

#### Endnotes:

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