

# Girl Talk, Underground

By LAUREN GELFOND

In quiet gatherings, religious Jewish, Muslim, Druse and Christian women deal with hostilities and hatred by turning to, instead of against, each other

It was 10 days since Holocaust Remembrance Day; 10 days since she memorialized her parents who perished at Theresienstadt and Auschwitz; and 10 days since her grandson was killed in Jenin.

Ester Golan, 79, was sitting in her Jerusalem apartment flipping television channels.

The seven-day period of mourning was easier, she thought to herself. At least then the living surrounded her, and the daily activities were prescribed. Now she was back home, alone with her memories.

She tried to imagine how she would start over again, as the drone of every station focused on one tragedy after another and the heated disputes surrounding Operation Defensive Shield.

Suddenly the doorbell jarred her from a scramble of recollections and thoughts, and she half-smiled. Nothing would eradicate the pain, but her unusual visitors would remind her of something she felt short of that month: hope.

At the door an Orthodox Jewish woman and a Christian Arab woman, coming together to pay their respects, embraced Golan.

On the heels of terror attacks and Israeli raids that led to scores of Israeli and Palestinian casualties that month, the visit was a loaded gesture, the women would later say.

Indeed, the members of the Women's Interfaith Encounter don't come together because they are old friends, political comrades, or strangers to the despair, rage, and pain of the conflict.

Many of the women, like Golan and her visitors, have been personally affected by the hostilities: losing loved ones and neighbors, and witnessing horror, antagonism, and injustice.

But though - and perhaps because - they come with strong emotions and opinions from their disparate communities and experiences, they are hungry to find a bond through their shared sisterhood and faith, to temper the bitterness of their despair.

The Women's Interfaith Encounter is a program of the Interfaith Encounter Association. Headed by Yehuda Stolov, IEA brings together Jews, Christians, and Muslims for faith-based and non-political dialogue.

As an Orthodox Jew, Elana Rozenman, 60, felt dissatisfied with mixed gender dialogue. After proposing a women-only group, she joined up with Christian and Muslim partners to work out a mutually acceptable agenda and recruit 30 women - 10 from each of the three religions - to commit to monthly study of religion from a woman's point of view. The WIE was officially launched in December 2001, with a joint study of Hanukka, Ramadan and Christmas, traditions.

"We were concerned that interfaith dialogue was basically dominated by priests, rabbis, and sheikhs, with very few women, many of them sitting quietly," says Rozenman. "WIE created an opportunity for women to talk intimately and freely, without worrying about modesty issues that can arise with men."

For others, who expressed concern that interfaith dialogue until then was not based on equal planning between the faiths and did not attract equal numbers from the faiths, WIE offers a novel solution. It also differs from some local peace groups that bring Christian and Muslim Arabs and Jews together because of shared political ideology.

Focusing on the study of faith, the women say they are learning more about their own religion and breaking stereotypes about the others.

At a recent meeting, 21 women whose ages span six decades show up for discussions on how religion views purity and women. With neither Hebrew nor Arabic a common language, conversations are in English, with occasional translation.

A few raise their eyebrows in surprise when hearing about sexual separation during menstruation among religious Jews and the ritual bath.

"How many people come in the bath with you?" one woman asks. "How long do you have to stay under water?"

After Jewish women explain how the laws of purity enhance their romantic lives, and how rejuvenated they feel after the mikve, conversations turn more personal.

"It makes a big difference to hear how you appreciate these laws," says one Muslim. "Sometimes we are also forbidden to touch. The man is then forced to see you as a human partner - not just a sexual partner. But on the other hand, if you are in emotional pain and you want to lay your head on his chest and you can't, that's too restrictive for me."

The Muslims also make a presentation and later in discussion, Jews and Muslims find similarities in their laws of purity.

A Christian woman quotes Jesus, explaining that Christianity has a totally different approach.

"It is not what goes into man's mouth that makes him unclean but what comes out of his mouth."

Evil thoughts, words, and deeds are what create impurity, she says. "Purity is in the heart, and love makes us pure."

A Christian from Mexico says that in these difficult days, "it's a daily struggle to keep our minds and hearts

clean, to be able to love God and others. But religion helps clean our hearts from the television and conversations that stain us."

The meetings help Suheir Siam, 45, a Muslim teacher pursuing an MA in education and administration, distance herself from this "stain."

"I study in Ramallah so I have to deal with a lot of checkpoints; it's so humiliating. I come home exhausted and very depressed," she reveals in a private conversation. "But I know the problems are from the governments and people are another story. So when we meet I think it does influence me to feel better - you know other people, see that they understand you, you share your ideas."

"We live in one country. We are two peoples and we must be in contact to understand each other," says Rose Naber, a retired teacher and Arabic-speaking Catholic from east Jerusalem. "We share joy and sadness - with love you can overcome everything."

At the meeting's end Siam and Naber, like most, lean towards the other group members for double-cheeked kisses and hugs.

For many this camaraderie represents an alternative reality.

"I looked around and it was such a wonderful thing. If only the outside world could look like the inside world that we created," says Safa, 27, a Muslim from east Jerusalem, remembering this year's festive Hanukka, Ramadan, and Christmas party. "This gives me hope that maybe someday it can work in real life. I'm sure women can contribute to helping the conflict in a big way, in a different way, we just need to explore how."

"Women have a different way of relating than men do," says Aida Shibli, 29, the new Muslim coordinator. "Beyond religion we find commonalities in relationships, emotions, and our status in society. We also have a more gentle way of solving problems. And when we need to hug or be hugged, it isn't loaded with all that other stuff that could be uncomfortable with men. It's safe and healing, like family."

A group piled into a car recently to drive to Netanya to pay a shiva call when one Jewish woman's father died. They visited another woman when she was sick. And they meet up for occasional movies, dinners, and walks through the others' neighborhoods, to get a sense of their lives.

Most recently, an Orthodox Jewish woman and a religious Muslim woman paired up, giggling, to see the feminist play, *The Vagina Monologues*.

Despite the positive relations and a commitment to focus primarily on religion instead of politics, some members of the encounter group keep their activities under wraps.

Ahuva (a pseudonym), 49, frequently reaches up to her headscarf to make sure every strand of hair is tucked in. Though she feels Jewish law and tradition stand firmly behind her, she prefers not to tell her haredi friends and neighbors of her involvement in WIE.

"I don't talk with anyone in my community about it because there is tremendous fear that if you become friendly with others that are different we will lose our identity, and our children will be attracted to the glitter of the outside world," she says.

"Because of Jewish persecution throughout the generations and a valid fear for physical and spiritual survival, Jews have had to be defensive. In some cases this defensiveness to others became stronger than tradition. But it is my understanding from rabbinic teachings that when we put others down, we also bring ourselves down, because all men are created in God's image. Therefore we are obliged to love everyone. I will talk to others about it only slowly - they are not ready."

She adds: "We don't usually have the opportunity to see how Arabs see things and feel."

A few of the others also keep mum, but for reasons based more on fear of appearing to side with the "other" against their own.

"These are very difficult times and not everyone can be open to what we are doing," says Shibli, echoing the sentiments of many members of all faiths.

While group members try to stay focused on the inside world they create, rage sometimes leaks in during times of heightened tension.

In November, Shibli - a Beduin who moved to Jerusalem five years ago to study nursing - drove past bus No. 20 coming from Kiryat Menahem shortly before a suicide bomber blew himself up, killing 11 and wounding 50. Shaking, she arrived for work at Hadassah-University Hospital's emergency room, where as a nurse she pushed aside her own feelings of trauma to treat the wounded.

Later that night, as she returned home with her sleeping infant in her arms, a gang of local teenagers surrounded her while she spoke in Arabic on her cell phone.

She turned to them and said in Hebrew: "What's the problem?"

She saw hatred in their eyes and felt they were standing too close, when an Israeli security guard intervened. "Go inside, lock the door, and close the windows," he said. "Don't you know what's going on since the terror attack? Arabs walking through the neighborhood have been harassed."

Inside, Shibli bolted her door, but couldn't take her eyes off of her daughter. "To say I feel upset and unsafe would be an understatement," she told a friend on the phone. "I am a nurse, committed to healing. Why should I be afraid to speak my language and sleep in my own home? I have to get out of this city."

A few weeks later, Shibli turns to her interfaith friends before their study session and explains how such incidences make her feel more alone than when her husband left her. The women around her nod, some of them blinking back tears.

"I knew that was the right place to talk. Even the Jewish women hugged me and said they understood my pain," says Shibli. "They knew they couldn't do anything to change this reality, and some of them even have children who are soldiers. But I could see in their eyes that their support was genuine. And that's what gave me the strength to stay in Jerusalem and with this group."

But one of the Jewish members holds back. "I think those teenagers were wrong to treat every Arab like a stereotype and I understand why Aida was so upset," says Inbal Flash, 28, a biologist.

"But I am so angry about the terror attacks. When I feel like people are trying to kill us I don't know who to point the finger at. Sometimes I come to the meetings and I feel angry at the Arab women because I don't know who to be angry at. Usually once we talk I calm down; I think we are the heroes who are finding a different way to deal with the conflict and prevent violence. But if it seems they don't understand why those teenagers were so upset, well, that makes me angry too - the whole point is that we should understand both sides."

Flash has become close with several of the younger Arab women. "I have found so much in common with them as women. But with some it's a problem if we talk about politics because we just don't agree."

Though some of the Muslim and Christian Arab women said they participate simply to know other religions and have others know their religion, a couple express disappointment that the group is not open to political discussion or action. They raise such subjects as roadblocks and military occupation, and dismay that their Jewish friends don't protest with them against injustices.

On the flip side, a few of the Jewish women complain they feel pressured by the more political members of the group who try to change the agenda towards politics, and also by the sense that such suggestions only focus on what Jews, not Palestinians, should do differently.

To create an opportunity for the women to talk about issues beyond religion, a change in agenda was adopted last month and the meeting opened with a short session of personal reflections preceding the study. In addition to stories about their personal lives, people express anxiety about the situation outside. An Israeli woman talks about the angst of having to prepare a sealed room. A Palestinian woman tells of harassment by a security guard she thought was her friend at work.

Tension peaked during March and April of last year and for the first time a meeting was canceled, following a string of terror attacks and military raids that left the women from all backgrounds reeling.

After every terror attack Rozenman relives a small bit of the trauma she faced when her teenage son Noam was severely wounded in a 1997 double-suicide bombing. Interfaith dialogue helps her to lessen the intense fear and mistrust she feels after terror attacks when "there are no human faces on the 'other' - when they're just an undifferentiated mass of people who are alien or hostile to us."

"I decided to better know the faith of the 'other,' hoping together we could plow a path to nonviolence through religion," she says.

But it's not always easy. "It has been a shocking and painful experience for me learning about some of the things that Arabs have gone through," she continues. "Sometimes I have to push aside my own pain and thoughts about what the Jews go through in order to listen."

A Muslim woman says she had similar thoughts when learning that Golan's grandson had been killed after being called up to serve in Jenin. "We have our anger and pain but we have to decide what to do with it. Making contact with Jews, telling them about our pain, listening to theirs, that is a choice."

Golan was extremely moved by her interfaith visitors, even if she understands it was difficult for some.

"I think the visit meant something to them and also to me. I hope, I expect, I believe they can see through me and my grief, the humanity and dignity of my grandson, who reflects my values and the values my parents taught me - which is that all people are equal, created in God's image. When they embraced me, I could feel it was sincere, and that helped me to start getting back on my feet."

Some of those who mourned with her, despite anger about Israeli soldiers, said they did so as one human to another.

When asked if the visit helped humanize the soldier, one Christian Arab, who was very upset about Israeli military actions, says: "I don't know if it made him seem more human but it certainly made me more human."

"To my great amazement the date of the meeting since then has never been canceled, come what may," says Golan, looking at a photo of her grandson. "This to me is a sign that deep inside we have a need to be together in spite of it all. The fact that the group goes on is certainly something which justifies my hope that things will get better."

## **A northern faith**

Recruiting women for the Women's Interfaith Encounter was easier in the North. Though many more northern members wear traditional dresses and headgear, making their "otherness" seem more dramatic, they actually have more in common than some Jews and Arabs in Jerusalem. The 100-plus Druse, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish women participating in the North all hold Israeli citizenship and the great majority are fluent Hebrew-speakers.

They launched their first meeting in the summer of 2002 at a two-day seminar in Nazareth, studying what the four religions have to say about social justice and religious tolerance. Between sessions, the women partnered up for yoga, played instruments, sang traditional songs, and taught each other their dances. With a women-only crowd, many felt comfortable enough to remove head coverings and shoes. Dancing was optional but organizers did insist that for a more intense "getting to know the other," each woman share her room with a woman of a different religion.

Participants, who now meet monthly, say they focus on friendship and learning religion, including examining the role of women in religion and in patriarchal societies. When politics creeps in at times, the focus is less on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and more on how certain Israeli laws may hurt different groups

in society.

For International Women's Week last week, participants from around the country gathered with the northern group in Daliat al-Carmel to study the status of women in Druse society. A new delegation from Umm el-Fahm also participated. The next day, Druse coordinator Siham Halabi's 14-year-old cousin, Kamar Abu Hamed, was killed in Haifa's bus bombing. She says: "Dealing with this tragedy is so hard, but I am really touched that the women from all four faiths, especially the Muslim women, have reached out to me and my family."

## **Jewish, Arab journeys, in their words**

**AIDA SHIBLI:** I wasn't always interested in dialogue. Early in the intifada, I felt only hatred for Israel, Israeli soldiers, mothers of Israeli soldiers, and Jewish people, seeing them as killers and oppressors. Around that time, my husband walked out. And then I realized I was pregnant. The intifada and the life in me were growing at the same speed, and I was alone, filled with hatred and sorrow. I cried all the time, until one day I read about the relationship between a pregnant woman's mental health and the health of her fetus. I can't go on like this anymore, I thought. At least for the sake of my baby.

Setting to work on forgiveness was freeing. And soon I asked, If I can change myself, how can I help change my community? I started looking for opportunities to meet 'the other' and see if I could open myself up enough to know them and see them as human. There are so many political groups, but I wanted to get to know Jewish people in a different way. Who are they - what do they love? What do they fear? What do they believe in?

When I found myself in a Women's Interfaith Encounter meeting, I felt for the first time that I was meeting not enemies, but women like myself, who had the same fears and worries and hopes.

First we have to work on our own souls, and prepare it to be ready to feel the trauma of others. What we do in this group is real personal work. Listening to others and have them listening to me affects me. It makes me more understanding, more open, more loving. And this is what Islam expects us to be.

**ELANA ROZENMAN:** It's always much easier to be surrounded by familiarity, the coziness of the Jewish community, and not be challenged by women whose life experiences are at times so different from mine and who confront me with painful realities that I prefer to forget. With so many vast problems in the Jewish community and in the country I wonder, Does it matter if some women of different faiths meet together?

Rav Kook says that when Moses smashed the Tablets of Law it was an act of "holy destruction." From this Rav Kook teaches that to grow spiritually, we must smash our preconceived notions and habits to lay the groundwork to achieve a higher spiritual reality in spite of the risks.

In the Women's Interfaith Encounter we are going beyond the usual and expected norms, and sometimes with physical as well as social and emotional risks. This was echoed by Ibtisam Mahamid, our Muslim coordinator from the Galilee. A British man once challenged us to abandon interfaith groups and instead to do political work to alleviate the suffering and violence in our region. Ibtisam replied: We don't need to do political work, we're doing holy work."

***In addition to the northern and Jerusalem groups, the IEA and the WIE will inaugurate the program in the Tel Aviv and central region in April, and later in the southern region.***

***For info about their activities, see the website: [www.interfaith-encounter.org](http://www.interfaith-encounter.org)***

---

You can **send e-mail** to:

Elana Rozenman -- [erozenman@hotmail.com](mailto:erozenman@hotmail.com)

Yehuda Stolov -- [msyuda@phys.huji.ac.il](mailto:msyuda@phys.huji.ac.il)

Lauren Gelfond, the writer -- [LGelfond@zahav.net.il](mailto:LGelfond@zahav.net.il)