

The Human Spirit: Meeting Beyond the Comfort Zone

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Accepting an invitation to participate in a workshop sponsored by the Women's Interfaith Network meant moving from my comfort zone. I would travel to Jordan to be one of five Jews meeting with five Muslims and five Christians, all from Middle Eastern countries.

Despite my innate loquaciousness, any desire to take part in so-called dialogues ebbed away during the years of the intifada. My close-up and personal acquaintance with terror, the rooftop celebrations that feted the collapse of the Twin Towers, the Palestinians' own polls which affirmed the popularity of blowing up buses left me, if not speechless, dialogue-less.

I decided to accept for three reasons. First, the invitation had come after I'd given an interview that could be described as "patriotic veering toward jingoistic" to a visiting peace activist/writer. The organizers knew my views. The second was that the local organizer was Elana Rozenman, a Jerusalem woman whose son was grievously wounded in a terror attack on Rehov Ben-Yehuda 10 years ago. If she could take part, how could I refuse? And the last was that of Rosh Hashana's promise of new starts.

My modest personal goal for the workshop was to gain the tiniest glimpse beyond the dead-end image of every political discussion in the last five years. And, I might add, I'd never been to Jordan or any other Arab country.

WE ISRAELI participants crossed overland through the Sheikh Hussein Bridge near Beit She'an, together with hundreds of tourists from Galilee villages. A young Arab man from Sakhnin gave me advice on what to see, and confided that he and his friends were immediately spotted as "Israelis" because of their jeans, their hair styles, their Arabic and their manners.

After a winding drive through rural Jordan, we reached the modest Al-Fanar Palace Hotel in Amman. I'd never thought about roommates, although I'd overheard one of the Israeli women saying that she'd insisted on a room to herself. Still, I was surprised when I opened the door to see another woman in one of the twin beds separated by a night table. We introduced ourselves. She was from Hebron - Muslim Hebron. Talk about leaving your comfort zone.

But within minutes I knew that I was in luck. My roommate was intelligent, urbane, open-minded and had a good sense of humor. Both punctual and analytical, we of Room 413 soon felt a certain esprit de corps. My roommate, an educator in Hebron and in the US, did much of the fine-tuned translation when it was necessary.

After the first day of getting-to-know-you sessions, it was time for bed. My Arabic-speaking roommate found the only English station in our hotel. We fell asleep watching an old James Bond movie.

I assumed that although this was a workshop centered on religion, sponsored by private donors in the US, at some point soon I'd have to make an articulate defense of the Jewish state. I'd come prepared. The Palestinians may have arrived with something of the same mindset. Strange as it sounds, except for one woman who insisted on introducing herself as a "refugee," the political situation didn't come up in any of our group sessions. We assumed we knew each other's views.

Not that our subject matter - religion - was lighthearted. But even when questions like "what elements of your religion lead to tolerance/conflict" came up, we didn't yield to the easy and usual inflammatory accusations. Caucuses within the religious groups about how to present our religions were the most heated. In our group, for instance, only two of us were observant.

THE WOMEN were businesswomen, lawyers, graduate students, teachers, a former Knesset member, a political candidate in Jordan. The expected Iraqi women couldn't come because their airport was closed. Several women took considerable risks to attend. (Hence, I'm not using names.) The Jordanian and Egyptian women had never met Jews before, and I enjoyed being something of a curiosity.

Those of us, Jews and Muslims, who wear head covering talked about that decision and how it impacts the perception of others. The Jordanian workshop facilitator, who wears a *hijab*, said her business consulting company loses accounts when clients see her. Two Muslims had brought rugs and demonstrated how they do their daily prayers and talked about women's observance of Ramadan. The Christian women described their church and life ceremonies.

On Friday night, we Jewish women - even the non-observant - demonstrated a Shabbat dinner. The dining room manager found white tablecloths, paper flowers, long-stemmed glasses. I'd brought hallot and wine from Jerusalem. Someone else brought candles and grape juice, apple and honey to explain about the forthcoming holidays. I explained the meaning of our candlelighting, the symbolism at the table, the restrictions and perks of the day. The week's Torah portion, set in Jordan, was easy to talk about with its message: "Choose life."

Sharing a room with a Sabbath-observant Jew was a new experience for my roommate. She was sensitive to my Shabbat needs. No more James Bond. Instead we talked late into the night. I talked about the intifada. Her greatest fear was that someone might influence one of her family members to become a terrorist. We agreed that Ahmadinejad's nuclear weapons were the greatest threat to both of us. Sometime on that Friday night I got that glimpse of the hope I'd come for. We came up with a peace plan and fell into an optimistic Shabbat sleep.

We'd like to meet again. In "Jericho!" she suggested, but as an Israeli, it's off limits for me. "Jerusalem?" She can't come without special permission. We finally came up with a potential spot: a lone street where both Jews and Arabs have access. It's in Hebron, close to the double cave purchased by and occupied by our mutual ancestor. There's no place to sit, but then again, we aren't looking for a comfort zone.