

Abrahamic Reunion

Making Religion a Force for Peace Vol. 2 No. 1

New Priorities Set at Cyprus Retreat

The Abrahamic Reunion held its annual retreat in Cyprus in early November 2006. After its founding meeting in Istanbul in September 2005, the group held six successful public events, securing its presence as a force for peace in the Holy Land.

Through a year of working together, the members experienced firsthand that peace work is personal and private as well as public. The war in Lebanon and subsequent political events created tremendous personal challenges for the group. Many members had family members or friends who were killed or injured as a direct result of the situation. In Cyprus, members discussed how eroding social and economic conditions—and the steady decline in people's sense of safety—have created a rise in fear, violence, and religious intolerance.

The members acknowledged that these changing conditions affect their ability to do the work of peacemakers. They explored how to remain a force for peace and hope in the face of the war in Iraq, the war in Lebanon, increasing poverty and fear and separation, a troubled administration in



Abrahamic Reunion at Cyprus Retreat

Israel, and conflict over power within Palestine. They concluded that their personal relationships with each other and their faith were two factors that made it possible for them to continue. They also recognized that their experience within the group is key to

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Elias Jabbour

making change. As Elias Jabbour stated: “We have to feel oneness in this group before we talk to others. If we look at each other as Jews and Arabs, if we think that this one is different and not like me, then we cannot go anywhere.”

The group recognized that

the conflicts they are dealing with are not restricted to Israel and Palestine only, but are regional and global in nature. They expressed the need to cultivate friendships and contacts in Lebanon and other Middle Eastern and North African countries, and to educate the American and European publics about the real situation in the Holy Land. They recognized that unlike other peace groups, they have the capacity to influence a broad array of people because their members are seen as spiritual community leaders, and they represent a very broad religious and political spectrum. They also concluded that it is important to stand up for peace whenever there is an opportunity. According to Jabbour: “We cannot command the political *continued on the next page...*”



ABRAHAMIC REUNION
اتحاد أبناء إبراهيم
איחוד מורשת אברהם

The Vision

The Abrahamic Reunion is a team of spiritual peacemakers dedicated to uplifting the human consciousness and building peace in the Holy Land by opening our hearts to the love and wisdom of all spiritual traditions.

Upcoming Events

March 2007

Sulha and Reconciliation
Shefar'Am

May 2007

Public Interfaith Gathering
Shar Ha Negev Sterot

July 2007

Public Interfaith Gathering
Osifiya

September 2007

Peaceful Communication
To Be Announced

November 2007

Interfaith Iftar Dinner
Nazareth

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leaders of the world, but we have a lot of influence over people like ourselves. At least we can raise our voices, we can say loudly, clearly, and sincerely what we think about all of this.”

The group took in two new members (see sidebar), and affirmed that membership should be based on the commitment to act for peace for the sake of all, not just one group or another. Spouses and children also attended. The active participation of husbands and wives brought home the depth of their commitment and the fact that this work is more than just a job.

The group planned six events for the coming year, including meetings where they will continue to develop their skills and strengths as a group and strategize about how to expand their influence.



Peacemakers at Work

In addition to their role with the Abrahamic Reunion, each member works round the clock on their own efforts for peace and reconciliation. In each newsletter we highlight individual activities of several of the peacemakers. Some news from 2006:

Humanitarian Partnership Forms. The *Naqshbandi Sufi Center* of Jerusalem, directed by **Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bukhari**, and the *Abu Dis Society* recently formed a partnership to provide job training, youth education, daycare, and support for small business development in the West Bank. This project provides economic empowerment for people in need and gives a voice to moderate Islam in Palestinian society.

Interactive Theatre Creates Sacred Space for Dialogue. Along with Dorit Bat Shalom, an Israeli Jewish artist, **Ibtisam Mahameed** is using theatre to begin building bridges of peace. Their two-woman multi-media event, *By The Well of Hagar and Sarah* has played in Arab and Druze villages and in Tel Aviv. In early 2007, they will tour the U.S.

Taking the Message to the Children. During the holiday season, **Deacon Jiries Manseur** brought nearly 300 Arab and Jewish children together to share an interfaith Chanukah/Christmas celebration in Gavatine, near Tel Aviv. In Rame, he arranged for 1,200 high school students to come together with local town leaders, rabbis, sheikhs, and bishops for an assembly emphasizing interreligious harmony.

Supporting Women and Children Under Fire. During the heat of Lebanon-Israel conflict, while civilian casualties mounted and rocket attacks displaced thousands, **Elana Rozenman**

arranged for busloads of refugees to come to Jerusalem for respite. Over a hundred women from two communities under fire – Tsvat in the north and Tsverot in the south – gathered to sing and pray and share their stories. According to Rozenman, “The only way I could stay sane amidst such madness was to give the women a chance to support each other.”

School for Peace Opens. The Rodef Shalom School for Peace, a training program designed and run by **Eliyahu McLean**, began training Jewish community leaders and activists to become peacebuilders, using wisdom and practical tools gleaned from the Jewish tradition. A similar program for Muslim peacemakers is under development.

Religious Leaders in Political Negotiations. **Rabbi Menachem Froman**, an official advisor to the Ministry of Defense in Israel, continues his efforts to broker a religiously sanctioned cease-fire among Hamas, the Palestinian Authority, and the State of Israel. Froman recently brought a delegation of Orthodox rabbis to Abu Mazen’s office in Ramallah.



Rabbis Cohen & Smadja

Two Rabbis Join Abrahamic Reunion

Rabbi Zion Cohen, originally from Morocco, has since 1993 been the regional Rabbi of the Sa’ar – Hanegev Kibbutzes near the Gaza Strip. He is involved in dialogues with Hamas; has met with Abu Mazen, the president of the Palestinians in Ramallah; and works constantly in the field of interreligious dialogue both in Israel and abroad.

Rabbi Ari Abraham Smadja, born in Tunisia, is Chief Rabbi of the Ramat Shlomo neighborhood in Jerusalem; coordinator for oral law at the national center for in-service teacher training at Beit Yatziv, Beersheva; director of the Institute for Study of Conduct and Education in Judaism in Jerusalem; and fellow of the Mandel Institute. He is known for his innovative educational programs for Ultra Orthodox Jews. Rabbis Smadja and Cohen will strengthen the *Abrahamic Reunion’s* capacity to provide outreach and to engage with political decision-makers.

Report from 2006: Interfaith Events Reach Thousands

Many people in the Holy Land have limited opportunity to interact with those of other faiths, or to meet with religious leaders from outside their own communities. In 2006, Abrahamic Reunion events were held in towns and villages across the Holy Land, providing a chance for men and women of all four faiths to eat together, to learn about each other's religions, to pray together, and to take a public walk for peace. Hundreds of participants at each event were deeply affected by the sharing of a meal, which has deep significance in the Middle East, and by finding common ground across different scriptures. Thousands of others were moved by the startling sight of religious Jews, Muslims, Christians and Druze walking arm in arm through the streets. Local leaders joined in sponsoring, organizing and hosting events and in planning follow up activities, and media attention significantly expanded the impact of local events.

Rame, January 15, 2006 An interfaith dialogue and dinner in the Galilee village of Rame was hosted by Jiries Mansour and

Publications Available

The following publications by Abrahamic Reunion members are available from info@centerforreligioustolerance.org.

Religion, A Force for Peace by Shahabuddin David Less. "One of the basic tenets of the Abrahamic Reunion is to use religion as a force for peace." This essay describes how "as peacemakers, we must train ourselves to be vehicles for love, and we must remind our friends and neighbors of religion's real intent."

The Abrahamic Reunion Family by Elias Jabbour.

"The brothers who are enemies today were brothers yesterday. . . It might be difficult, but it is not impossible, for them to become brothers again." In this article, Jabbour articulates the purpose and struggle of the Abrahamic Reunion.

Women Peacemakers in the Holy Land by Andrea Blanch.

"With little fanfare . . . women of deep faith from four religions of the Holy Land are creating the possibility of a more peaceful future for all of us." This article describes how the women of the Abrahamic Reunion are developing a new form of peacemaking.



Women Peacemakers in Cyprus

attended by over 400 Arabs and Jews. Major religious leaders offered their blessings and support, including a delegation of 30 Druze sheikhs led by Sheikh Muafac Tarif. View photos at http://golemproductions.com/abrahamic_reunion/

Tel Sheva, June 20, 2006 Imam Khalil Al-baz, local village leaders, and men and women from the Bedouin community welcomed interfaith participants to pray for peace. Special guests included Rabbi Cohen (an Ultra-Orthodox rabbi from Sderot, bordering Gaza) and Reverend Charles Gibbs from *United Religions Initiative*. Significant Arab and Israeli press coverage included a 3 minute segment on Israeli prime time TV. View photos at http://interfaith.israel.net/telsheva_june2006/

Faradis, September 16, 2006 Hosted by Ibtisam Mahamid, Abrahamic Reunion members gathered in this Arab village to issue "A Call for Reconciliation" in response to ongoing violence in Lebanon. Sheikh Hassan Marai of Faradis offered teachings on interfaith cooperation, and Tsholo Tsheole, first secretary of the South African embassy, emphasized the importance of building trust between different communities in the Holy Land.

Yafia, October 17, 2006 Reverend Masoud Abu Hatoum, a Greek Melkite Catholic priest hosted an interfaith Ramadan Iftar meal in Yafia, near Nazareth, as a step toward healing relations with the Muslim community after the Pope's controversial remarks about Islam. More than 200 Jews, Christians, Muslims and Druze from the Galilee and Jerusalem participated, along with international guests.

Jerusalem, December 19, 2006 A Chanukah event was attended by over 70 interfaith leaders, including nuns and monks from the Order of the Beatitudes and two Sufi Sheikhs new to Abrahamic Reunion gatherings. The group offered blessings from the many faiths present, enjoyed traditional foods and joined together in celebration and song.

AR Issues Call for Reconciliation During Lebanon-Israeli Conflict

On July 12, 2006, tensions between Israel and Lebanon escalated into full-scale fighting, which continued until the August 14th ceasefire. Most Israeli troops withdrew from Lebanon by October, although troops continued to occupy border areas until early December. Official reports state that the conflict killed over 1,200 people, including over 1,000 Lebanese civilians. Nearly 975,000 Lebanese and 300,000 Israelis were displaced. Lebanese roads, bridges, electrical facilities, schools, homes and commercial sites were severely damaged, and both countries suffered considerable environmental damage.

During the conflict, members of the *Abrahamic Reunion* stayed in close phone contact, monitoring events and providing support to members and their families. In early September, a *Call to Reconciliation* was issued at a Press Conference in Furedis, including a plea to international leaders to demonstrate a true commitment by making a serious investment in building a sustainable peace (see sidebar).



International News

International support for the Abrahamic Reunion continued to expand in 2006. Active local groups now exist across the US, in Washington state, Virginia, Minnesota, New York, Colorado, and several cities in Florida. Spiritual, administrative and financial support has come from Germany, England and several other countries. Requests for assistance in starting local groups have come from as far away as Australia and Brazil. Local groups have hosted Abrahamic Reunion events and fundraisers, initiated local interfaith dialogues, conducted interfaith prayer circles, educated the public about the global importance of spiritual peacemaking, created coalitions among different religious and peace groups, and convinced local governments to take a stand for peace.

A Call for Reconciliation

In the light of the recent conflicts in our region and in remembrance today of the effects of violence in our world, the Abrahamic Reunion reaffirms our commitment to embodying an alternative to violence. Our work is to show by example the cooperation among the faiths on a small scale that we hope to encourage on a larger scale. It is our destiny as the children of Abraham to live together. All the prophets teach us to love your neighbor as yourself; it's now time to put this teaching into practice. Though our own communities have suffered in the recent war, we hold compassion for all the victims. We urge all parties to uphold the ceasefire and through negotiations to resolve the core issues of the conflict. Unless consciousness shifts so that the people see that a true and just peace is possible, any ceasefire is likely to be short-lived. Sustainable peace building requires more than a cessation of violence, more than reconstruction of the physical infrastructure destroyed by war. Peace building requires building relationships, gaining trust, and establishing conditions where people can experience their common humanity and learn to live side by side. Large-scale peace and reconciliation efforts have worked in other areas of global conflict such as in Northern Ireland and South Africa. Grassroots efforts and the leadership of people of faith made peace possible and sustainable when backed up with the financial resources necessary to make real change. In Northern Ireland alone, over \$650 million was donated by the European Union over a period of five years for dialogue between 250,000 Catholics and Protestants – one-sixth of the population of Northern Ireland. We urge the governments and leaders of the world to assist and support a process of reconciliation and peace building in the Holy Land. We call on the governments of the world, the United Nations, the European Commission, aid organizations, and private foundations to immediately fund a large-scale dialogue and reconciliation program between Jews, Christians, Muslims and Druze. An immediate infusion of no less than \$50 million dollars to begin the process of reconciliation and healing is urgent and essential.

Contribution Information

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To make a tax-deductible donation, send a check made out to: *Center for Religious Tolerance* 520 Ralph Street, Sarasota, FL 34242. If you have questions or would like to receive updates on a regular basis, visit www.centerforreligiousolerance.org.
