



# Center for Religious Tolerance

## Religion as a Force for Peace

December 2008

### Women Lead Political Reform in Fureidis

Less than a year after the start of the social empowerment project in Fureidis, the village women have already made history.



*Hebrew School*

When the program opened last January, few of the participants could name a goal for themselves. Eleven months later, five have jobs, several are exploring opportunities for higher education, three are studying for their matriculation exams, and seven have completed their first year of Hebrew lessons – significant first steps towards active engagement in Israeli society.

In November, the women turned their attention to even larger matters. In anticipation of a mayoral election – and emboldened by their own newfound freedom - the women invited all five mayoral candidates to a public forum to speak about women’s issues. Three hundred women turned out. In a town where women have up until now remained largely invisible, this event was groundbreaking. The women went on to spearhead a successful grassroots campaign in support of one of the candidates.

Mayor Yunis recognizes the role played by the women of Fureidis in his election. He has gone on record promising to set up a Women’s Division in the municipal government, with a budget and a paid director. The Fureidis Women’s Division will be the first in an Israeli Arab municipality and only the second in all of Israel. The women plan to remain active in advising the new administration on a variety of local projects.

Women Reborn owes much of its success to a unique alliance between the religious Muslim women of Fureidis, led by Ibtisam Mahameed, and the Israeli feminist community. The program has already been recognized as a successful model. The Director of Givat Haviva, a well-established Arab-Israeli peace center at a local Arab college, states that “Ibtisam’s program has had a far greater impact than any of the other women’s empowerment activities we’ve been involved with. We are hoping to help replicate it in other Arab towns and villages in our region.”



*Mayor Yunis & supporters*

### CRT Highlights

*Ibtisam Mahameed* has been selected by His Holiness the Dalai Lama as an “Unsung Hero of Compassion.” She will receive a special blessing at a ceremony in San Francisco next April. This program honors individuals from across the globe for contributions at the grassroots level.



*Jiries & Students*

Abrahamic Reunion member and Middle School Principal *Jiries Manseur* recently celebrated the opening of his new school in Rama, an Arab village in the Galilee. The co-ed curriculum emphasizes peaceful coexistence between different faiths and nationalities.

CRT Director *Andy Blanch* has been named a 2009 International Fellow at the *Yale Program on Women, Religion and Globalization*. She will be joined by women from Saudi Arabia and Sri Lanka, and will focus on the role of women of faith in building conditions of sustainable peace.

*The Center for Religious Tolerance has a new look for 2009 - Go to C-R-T.org Jan 1 to view our updates.*

## Sarasota Women's Interfaith Network Builds Tolerance

The Women's Interfaith Network (WIN) of Sarasota-Bradenton completed its first year of local organizing in December. Inspired by Elana Rozenman's work in Israel and Palestine, the group brings together women of different faiths to build tolerance, create public conversations about peacemaking, conduct interfaith service projects, and fight against religious discrimination. Currently there are over 80 members representing Judaism, several forms of Christianity, Islam, Quakerism, Buddhism and Humanism as well as indigenous and spiritual traditions.



WIN celebrates WinterSolstice, Christmas, Channukah, Eid al Adha & Kwanzaa

During 2008, WIN actively engaged in combating religious intolerance in Sarasota and Bradenton in response to the promotion of an anti-Islamic DVD. In September WIN held an interfaith food drive in conjunction with the UN International Day of Peace. Almost 1400 pounds of food was gathered by 26 different faith communities for the All Faiths Food Bank. The food bank director was tremendously moved: "This is the first time in my memory that different religions have joined together to collect food for the hungry in Sarasota. Its amazing what women can do when they work together across boundaries."



### In the News

Babara Sofer was awarded the 2008 Eliav-Sartawi Award for Middle Eastern Journalism for her *Jerusalem Post* article on the CRT women's interfaith leadership workshop held in Amman, Jordan in September, 2007. This award recognizes journalism that contributes to better understanding and dialogue between people in the Middle East. Read the article at [c-r-t.org](http://c-r-t.org).

The *Abrahamic Reunion* was featured in the *United Religions Initiative* Fall 2008 newsletter, which cites the AR's work bringing together men and women of faith as a "template for building peace from the ground up." URI is a network of 400 cooperation circles including over 100 religions and faith traditions in 67 countries. Read the article at [c-r-t.org](http://c-r-t.org).

Abdul Aziz Bukhari, founding member of the *Abrahamic Reunion* and Sheikh of the Naqshbandi Sufis in Israel, was featured in an article in the *Jerusalem Post* on May 22 entitled *Mystical Transcendence*. The article (at [c-r-t.org](http://c-r-t.org)) describes the controversy surrounding Sufism, which many see as the moderate and tolerant face of Islam and its potential role in peacemaking.

### Abrahamic Reunion Plans for 2009

In June, the *Abrahamic Reunion* held its third annual retreat in



Zichron Zaachov, Israel. The group renewed friendships, reviewed accomplishments and begin planning for 2009. Local community interfaith dinners and walks for peace will continue, as will AR participation in larger events, such as the *Big Hug around Jerusalem* and the annual *Sulha* gathering.

In addition AR will expand their capacity to respond to humanitarian needs from an interfaith perspective. This work began in 2008 with the development of an interfaith emergency relief program funded by the Oberle foundation in Germany. Funds have been distributed to both Israelis and Palestinians in need, including residents of Sderot affected by ongoing rocket attacks and Palestinians in need of medical supplies and attention.



The Big Hug

Contact us at: [info@c-r-t.org](mailto:info@c-r-t.org) or 941-312-9795

To make a tax-deductible donation, send a check to CRT - 520 Ralph St, Sarasota FL 34242