

---

Yehuda Stolov

## The Interfaith Encounter Approach to Peace Education in Israel

Die Gesellschaft für Interreligiöse Begegnung – Interfaith Encounter Association – stellt ein ganz besonderes Projekt nachhaltiger Friedenserziehung dar. Sie geht davon aus, dass alle politischen Friedensabkommen eine Infrastruktur wechselseitiger Humanisierung brauchen, die eingeübt und gepflegt werden muss. Der Aufbau von Vertrauen in religiös gemischten Gruppen, die sich regelmäßig zur gemeinsamen Bearbeitung religiöser und ethischer Themen treffen, stellt ein solches, vor allem „selbsterzieherisch“ wirksames Modell dar. Gegenüber immer wieder praktizierter Instrumentalisierung religiöser Vorstellungen zu eigennützigen politischen Zielen setzen die zur interreligiösen Begegnung gegründeten Gruppen auf die Verständigungs- und Versöhnungskraft, die religiösen Traditionen innewohnen. Der persönliche, engagierte Dialog, die Gelegenheit, auch problemgeladene Themen auf der Ebene der Begegnung unaggressiv zu erörtern, führt zu relevanten Einstellungsveränderungen auch bei Menschen, die sich traditionell auf gegnerischen Seiten befinden. Dabei wird besonders der existenzielle Lebensbezug religiöser Überzeugungen erfahren. In Wochenendseminaren, aber auch an Tagesveranstaltungen – grundsätzlich in kleinen Gruppen – wird eine neue Sichtweise aufeinander eingeübt. Das geschieht in Israel selbst – in insgesamt 17 Gruppen –, aber auch zwischen Israelis und Palästinensern, in Zusammenarbeit mit weiteren Gruppen im Nahen Osten und schließlich weltweit. Auf all diesen Ebenen existieren lebendige Verbindungen.

The Interfaith Encounter Approach was developed, by the Interfaith Encounter Association ([www.interfaith-encounter.org](http://www.interfaith-encounter.org)), as a transformative self-educational working tool for the building of true and sustainable peace and coexistence in the Holy Land, while focusing on the grassroots human level and including many and a wide variety of people from all parts of the political and religious spectra (i.e. outreaching beyond the regular, ‘peace oriented’ people who usually take part in this process). In the process individuals and communities interact, many times for the first time, in a deep and positive way. This interaction encourages its participants to profoundly acknowledge the humanity of the other and replace prejudices and fears by mutual understanding, respect and trust.

Usually the quest for peace is perceived as a pursuit for ceasing a situation of war and signing a peace agreement. Many times when we think of “peace” we think of a festive occasion on the lawns of the White House, culminating with the actual signing of two leaders, signing that symbolizes the transformation from the dark ages of war to the enlightened ages of peace.

Other aspects – such as reconciliation or overcoming prejudices and fears or the building of good relations between the two peoples, relations founded on mutual understanding, respect and trust – are either considered natural outcomes of a reality without war, or a challenge that needs so much time to work on that peace just can not wait and therefore will have to be delayed till after the agreement is signed. Consequently efforts are made mainly in the political field and, as a result, are limited to those accepting particular political views.

The Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA) believes that the non-political aspects of the way to peace need special efforts and are not mere results of any political achievement. These efforts are needed after a peace agreement is accomplished, during the efforts to complete it and even before the political process starts. Moreover: they are essential to the success of any such process and for its sustainability. If we do not want the peace to break down after seven years (like the Oslo process did) and lead to a new war, if we want it to be lasting and stable, we have to build the human infrastructure of mutual humanization, respect and most importantly trust, that will be able hold and support it and contain situations that endanger it. There is actually nothing surprising about this view. It is obvious that when two partners have trust in each other they can sign a very short agreement and it will work very well, as whenever a challenge to the agreement will arise they will be able to talk it through. But if they do not have trust in each other they will write a very long agreement, trying to cover all possible scenarios, and eventually there will occur a scenario they did not predict and it will destroy their agreement. In short: mutual trust is a necessary condition to sustainable peace.

But how do we build trust between enemies?

First it is important to emphasize that peace is about neighbouring individuals and communities living in friendship with each other, and therefore making sure that any political model they advocate and promote is a peaceful one - one that the others, who support different models, can live with; much more than it is the implementation of one specific political model. Therefore: the efforts of peace-building should include all those who are aware of the reality of different people living together and of the need to do it peacefully, regardless of their political views.

The IEA also believes that religion is not the problem of the Middle East but can and should act a major role in the solution. As a result, The IEA emphasizes in its activities interactive interfaith dialogue and tries to include all parts of respective societies.

The interfaith encounter approach, which is the main vehicle used by IEA to promote its vision, has three key characteristics:

- (1) Discussing religious issues or religious aspects of issues;
- (2) Meeting each other as individuals; and
- (3) Permission to express any opinion but in a non-offensive way.

This process draws particular effectiveness from the fact it is a **self-educative process**. The most efficient way to achieve the desired transformation is not through preaching or theoretical study but through experience and direct dialogue. Accordingly, the main

focus of IEA activities is not on joint listening to learned lectures, but on direct conversations between participants in small groups of 10-12 people, which will give maximized opportunity for participants to speak sincerely and freely with each other. When people meet “the other” in a way that is both deep and positive, they are strongly exposed to the humanity of the other. This exposure has a strong transformative power and it makes its participants educate themselves to overcome prejudices and fears as well as replaces them with mutual understanding, respect, trust and friendship.

Experience shows that the Interfaith Encounter Approach is a very effective tool to achieve this transformation. **Truly open, and interactive, interfaith dialogue** has three important qualities that contribute to its success:

- (1) It invites participants, whether religious or not, to come to the encounter with “the other” from a faith-related existential perspective, a deeper place in themselves;
- (2) It helps reveal many similarities between the religions – in faith tenets, customs and spiritual considerations; and perhaps most importantly:
- (3) Within the safety of its framework many differences are found and accepted without being perceived as threatening.

Through the process, participants are exposed to the religious model of “*Both are the living saying of God*”, that encourages plurality, by actually practicing it. In this process the participants are self-educated to accept and respect the other as ‘an other’ – with the similarities and with the differences. As a result, spontaneous relationships develop that would be impossible outside this process, and the participants carry them back into their lives, homes, families, communities, and workplaces.

Practically, the IEA works in **four geographical focuses**:

- (1) Within Israel: it encourages and supports the formation and maintenance of ongoing community-groups that bring together neighbouring communities. These groups develop inter-communal relations of friendship on the one hand and respect for the unique identity of each community on the other hand. They are both examples for the larger communities that such relations are possible and growing islands of such relations, with the vision to eventually include the whole communities. To date we formed 21 such groups – from the Upper-Galilee to Eilat;
- (2) Between Israelis and Palestinians: it works in cooperation with 7 Palestinian organizations, from across the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, using the same approach. So far we realized 15 weekend retreats (starting as early as 2002), two one-day retreats and a special prayer vigil in Nebi Samuel;
- (3) In the Middle East: it works in cooperation with additional organizations in Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia and Turkey. Until now we held 5 annual conferences, mostly in Amman, Jordan;
- (4) The world: it encourages the formation of “Friends of IEA” groups, which both help financially to support IEA's work in the Holy Land and maintain parallel dialogue as part of the dialogical response to the conflict we promote.