Introducing Jewish Students to Christians and Christianity in Jerusalem

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Why don't most Jews who come to visit or study in Israel meet local Christians or Muslims or visit their holy sites or educational institutions when they are here? Why do they persist in seeing only "Jewish " Israel, and ignore so much more that Israel has to offer in its cultural and religious landscape?

Last week, I took a group of Jewish students from Great Britain to meet Christians at the Ecce Homo Convent of the Sisters of Sion, on the Via Dolorosa in the Old City of Jerusalem. These students had just spent a month in Jerusalem on a program hosted by the Masorti (Conservative) Jewish Youth Movement of the UK in cooperation with the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, led by Rabbi Joel Levy. This was the first and only time that these students were given the opportunity to visit a Christian institution and to meet Christians in Jerusalem during their stay here, a phenomenon which is typical for most Jewish student programs in Israel, which never introduce their students to Christian or Muslim institutions or people of other religions who live in this city and this country.

So, I let the cat out of the bag. I informed the students that not only Jews live in Jerusalem and the state of Israel. In fact there are about 161,000 Christians in Israel today and about 16,000 (down from 31,000 in 1948) in Jerusalem (the number has dwindled gradually in recent decades, as more and more local Palestinian Christians leave the country in search of better economic opportunities abroad). And, out of more than 8 million citizens of Israel, about 1. 5 million or 20.7 percent are "minorities," the vast majority of whom are Muslim, with a small Christian minority within that minority.

I walked the students through the Christian and Muslim quarters of the Old City of Jerusalem, and pointed out some of the major churches on the way. As we walked down the Via Dolorosa, we witnessed many Christian groups carrying crosses and saying special prayers as they walked on this famous pilgrim's path in the heart of Jerusalem. None of these students had been on this path before.

At the Ecce Homo Convent, I introduced the students to Sister Maureen Cusick, Director of programs for Biblical Formation, at the convent. Sister Maureen — who is active with me in interreligious dialogue and education via the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI), now a department of Rabbis for Human Rights welcomed the students warmly and shared with them basic information about the history of the Sisters of Sion in general and about their work in Jerusalem, where they have been active since 1855. In so doing, she explained to the students about the new era of Dialogue between Christians and Jews, of the last 50 years, since the promulgation of the famous Vatican document "Nostra Aetate" ("In our Time"), which was approved at the Second Vatican Council in October 1965.

The Sisters of Sion have been leading activists in the Jewish-Christian Dialogue during these past 50 years, wherever they live in 22 countries of the world, including and perhaps especially in Jerusalem. In our city, they are also involved in Jewish-Muslim Dialogue and in Jewish-Christian-Muslim Trialogue.

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The Jewish students from Great Britain were engaged by the serious and sensitive dialogue with Sr. Maureen and they were enchanted by the serenity and beauty of the spectacular terrace of the Ecce Homo Convent, from where they could get an excellent view of Temple Mount/ Haram El-Sharif and much of the Old City of Jerusalem. They were impressed by the way that Christians from around the world who come to study Bible at the Ecce Homo Convent learn the Hebrew Bible from Jewish teachers at the same time that they learn the New Testament from Christian teachers.

Most Jewish students — and Jewish people in general — who visit Israel and Jerusalem never meet non-Jews on their visits to Israel. They leave the country without encountering the reality that Jerusalem is holy to Christians and Muslims, as it is for Jews.

It is time for this to change. More Jews from around the world ought to meet Christians and Muslims in Jerusalem and in Israel as a whole — and to visit their holy sites and educational institutions — to learn that peaceful coexistence is not only possible, but that it takes place on a daily basis, under the radar of the mainstream media, which rarely share the good news of interreligious coexistence. One of the ways that this can be done is through ICCI's Center for Interreligious Encounter with Israel which operates under the auspices of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel.

Sister Maureen's story about Friday in Jerusalem gave the students a poignant message in a very clear and simple way. She said that on an average Friday in Jerusalem, the Muslims come to prayer in the morning, the Christians in the afternoon and the Jews in the evening, and they all mix in Jerusalem! "At the same time that it is often a tense city, it is also a mysterious and special place," she said.

While Israel is the national home of the Jewish People, it is also home to over a million and a half Palestinian Arabs, who are Muslim, Christian and Druze. They are part of the fascinating multi-cultural fabric of our society. All Jews who come to Israel — not to mention those who live here — ought to stop denying this and they should include visits to Christian, Muslim and Druze sites and meet the people on their educational pilgrimage to Israel. This will greatly enhance and enrich their experience here, and create an honest and open dialogue will all segments of our society.

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