



KEDEM: Voices for Religious Reconciliation in Israel

31.01.2005 | Kronish, Ron

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by Ron Kronish

A report from the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, written by its director. From "Insight Israel," January 17, 2005.

At the end of last year - on December 29th and 30th, 2004 - ICCI and the El Rafah Association for the Welfare of the Community hosted our first annual KEDEM conference at the Nirvana hotel and conference center at the Dead Sea and the first annual public interreligious symposium in Jerusalem. Both of these events represented the culmination of intensive dialogue and action in the most important educational/social program that ICCI has initiated in its 14 years of existence.

KEDEM - which is a Hebrew acronym for "kol dati mefayeis", "Voices for Religious Reconciliation" - has brought together a unique and unprecedented group of 14 local grass-roots religious leaders from all over Israel: seven mainstream Orthodox rabbis affiliated with synagogues, schools and yeshivot in different communities in Israel and seven Israeli Arab religious leaders -imams, sheiks and ministers - from Israeli towns and villages from the center of the country to the Galilee, which included six Muslims and one Christian. This is the first time in Israel that a group of local religious leaders has met for such a sustained and systematic dialogue process, which has included: getting to know one another on a personal level, studying religious texts of the different religions together on themes of mutual interest, and conducting serious and substantive discussions on the core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In addition to dialogue and discussion in Israel, the group has traveled abroad in each of the past two summers, once to Northern Ireland and once to Sarajevo, Bosnia. Not only did the religious leaders have the opportunity to learn about societies which are emerging from violent conflict into a new and evolving reality of learning to live together, but they also spent 18 hours a day in intensive and soul-searching dialogues which led to strong bonds of friendship and trust to be developed among members of the group.

At the conference at the Dead Sea on December 29th and 30th, 14 new religious leaders-half Jewish and half Palestinian Arab - participated in the KEDEM process for the first time. This was an important occasion since it signaled a readiness of members of KEDEM to invite new people to join in what has been for them an enormously meaningful and deeply enriching experience. When KEDEM reconvenes in 2005, it will now be twice the size-reaching 28 religious leaders - Jews, Muslims and Christians - in towns and communities all over Israel. The goal is to add 14 religious leaders to the process each year, so as to soon reach a "critical mass" within Israeli society

One of the most important decisions of the group during the past year was the decision to "go public", to begin to speak out in public forums and in the media, so as to raise the voice of morality, moderation and reconciliation that has rarely been heard in Israel. At the public forum held at the Olive Tree Hotel - a glatt kosher hotel in East Jerusalem - on Thursday evening, December 30th, four of the members of KEDEM spoke personally and poignantly about the message and method of KEDEM, as they have experienced it: **Rabbi Dr. Shaie Rubinstein**, Principal of the Rishon L'tzion Religious Scientific High School and rabbi in Rehovot; **Fr. Nadeem Shakour**, Head of the Greek Catholic Community in Shfar'am, **Rabbi Dr. Eli Kahn**, Director of the Girls' Midrasha of the Religious Kibbutz Movement in Kibbutz Ein Hanativ and **Kadi Daoud Zini**, the kadi of Acco. In addition, greetings were brought by the **Papal Nuncio to Israel, Msgr Pietro Sambì**, who shared Pope John Paul II's message for peace for the Day of Prayer for World Peace, with the standing room only crowd of more than 160 people who were in the audience that night and by **Rabbi Professor Marc Gopin**, of George Mason University in Virginia, who was the scholar-in-residence with the KEDEM group at the conference at the Dead Sea that preceded this historic symposium.

Greetings were also brought by **Dr. Cyril Nunn**, the Deputy Chief of Mission of the Federal Republic of Germany to Israel. The German government has been generously funding the KEDEM program during the past two years through a special grant to encourage this kind of religious conflict resolution program in Israel.

One of the most important aspects of the public symposium was the inauguration of the **KEDEM INSTITUTE FOR LEARNING AND RECONCILIATION**, a new program initiated by leading members of the KEDEM group last month: **Rabbi Eli Kahn** and **Kadi Abdulhakeem Samara**, the kadi of Jaffa and the Central District of Israel. The purpose of this new institute is to prepare unprecedented educational materials - for the Jewish and Muslim communities - which will deal with problematic texts in each religious tradition that can be overcome by old and new interpretations in each religion. These new interpretations - which emphasize humanistic values and strengthen the forces of reconciliation - will be taught in a new spirit of acceptance and mutual respect, both in Israel and in other countries. The idea of this new institute was brought to a special conference of "Rabbis and Imams for Peace" held in Brussels, Belgium, last week.

Following the first annual KEDEM public symposium, a major article was written about KEDEM in Ma'ariv, one of Israel's major Hebrew newspapers, and one of the leading rabbis of KEDEM was interviewed at length by Israeli radio on one of its major talk shows. So the message and the method of KEDEM are beginning to become known in Israeli society.

Why is KEDEM such an important ground-breaking new initiative in Interreligious Relations in Israel?

- This is the first time in Israeli history that a significant group of orthodox rabbis and Palestinian religious leaders have met for such a sustained and significant period of time.
- This program proves that rabbis and sheikhs and ministers can be forces for moderation, morality and sanity. Most programs in conflict resolution leave out the religious dimension; this one focuses on developing personal relationships among religious leaders as well as text - study about each other's religious traditions, so as to prepare these religious leaders to be catalysts for change in their communities and in our society.
- This program demonstrates that the most difficult issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be discussed seriously, substantively and sensitively in an atmosphere of mutual trust and genuine friendship, in the framework of a genuine interreligious dialogue which seeks to engage in peace-building between peoples (as collectives) and

between people (as individuals), even in the midst of an ongoing unresolved conflict in the region.

The KEDEM process will continue to develop and evolve in the months ahead. It is a small sign of hope for Israeli society, for the Middle East, and perhaps for the world.

Dr. Ron Kronish - who has lived in Israel for 25 years - is the founder and director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI), which is the Israel chapter of the WCRP (World Conference of Religions for Peace) and a member of the ICCJ (International Council of Christians and Jews).