



Religious leaders in Israel unite for a better future

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This meeting, which took place earlier this week, was the third for the Council of Religious Leaders in Israel, an organisation established two years ago at a founding gathering hosted by the Chief of Rabbis of Israel at the headquarters of the Chief Rabbinate in Jerusalem. At that meeting, more than a hundred participants—including leaders from six different faiths and more than a dozen different denominations—signed a pledge for interfaith cooperation and mutual respect based upon a recognition of a common humanity flowing from the Faith in One Creator of All. The second meeting had been hosted in Kafr Kara by the Muslim community and focused on the role of religious leadership in combating violence in society. It was similarly attended by the highest official religious leadership and local political authorities.

However this third gathering hosted by Sheikh Muaffaq Tarif and the Druze community differed from the previous two. There were still the necessary formal speeches by the heads of the major faiths, but these were preceded by vibrant interactive workshops. The theme of “the role of religious leaders in times of crisis” was particularly relevant as there have been a number of violent incidents in towns and mixed villages in the Galilee in recent years—arguably the most notable of these having taken place in Acre last year.

An imaginary scenario was presented by the facilitators (convened by the Center for Conflict Resolution at Bar Ilan University) to the participants who were divided into three groups. The scenario concerned a town that was beset by inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions. One group was asked to propose recommendations for religious leadership in order to prevent strife. The second group was asked to address the role of religious leadership in a situation when conflict had already broken out. The third group was called to make concrete proposals in the wake of a conflict that had been quashed by law enforcement.

The relevance of such a scenario for inter-communal harmony in the country and beyond was apparent for all the participants and the sense of common purpose and shared values was intense. Most of the religious leaders had never met one another and the discussions facilitated warm and vibrant interaction.

Aside from recommendations regarding education and inter-communal cooperation, a general lament was voiced regarding how negative attitudes and incidents seem to enjoy widespread coverage and exposure as opposed to positive efforts to combat enmity and conflict. Indeed, this

remarkable event itself received little or no coverage in the Israeli dailies. But for those of us who were present, it was an unforgettable scene.

The Druze community hosted the whole gathering to a festive lunch which was strictly kosher to accommodate the rabbis. The image of the highest Muslim and Druze leaders of the country, Chief Rabbis of Israel, Patriarchs and Bishops of Jerusalem, together with their co-religionists, sitting in an outdoor courtyard on the benches at Nebi Shueib, sharing food and fellowship, had an almost Messianic character to it.

Naturally the theme of the meeting had not been chosen arbitrarily. The Council wishes to be a force for nurturing good relations between the different communities and to be able to step in where there are tensions and help quell these. However for the some two hundred participants from the different faith communities gathered together in the rain-washed crystal clear sunlight at Nebi Shueib, this meeting was an opportunity to establish initial bonds of friendship and cooperation so important to overcoming the prejudices and stereotypes that generate suspicion and even hostility.

The Council is at the beginning of its journey to foster mutual respect and cooperation between the various religious communities in Israel; and if the warm and animated interactions from the meeting at Nebi Shueib are anything to go by, there is good reason to be hopeful.

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