

The SULHA Peace Project Cooperation Circle

Faiths /Traditions Represented: Orthodox Judaism, Reform Judaism, Islam, and Christianity

Location of CC: Israel/Palestine

Primary Contact: Yoav Peck

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Key Areas of Focus: Peacebuilding, Youth

Names of CC Profile Participants:

Date of Interview: June 2015

Summary

Living along the border between Israel and Palestine exposes everyone there to hostility and conflict. Thus, the work of our CC centers itself around the importance of dialogue and creating a space where we can openly communicate with one another. Our activities build trust and understanding among those along the Israeli-Palestinian border. We feel that this is the first step towards peace. Therefore, the interfaith element of our work is that we engage everyone from Orthodox Jews to Christians to Muslims.

CC Profile Questionnaire:

1. What is the current religious/cultural/social context in the area where your CC is working?

Because of the sordid history between Israel and Palestine, we're sort of in an endless cycle of we attack them, they attack us, and then we're justified in attacking them and they're justified in attacking us.

Israel has not defined its borders for the last 48 years and as a result we have cultivated 3.5 million Palestinians who are bitterly longing for the home that they need. Somehow out of fear or out of ambition, we have held onto the territories and allowed peace to slip through our fingers time after time.

In addition, Jews vary from ultra-secular to modern orthodox to extreme orthodox and Muslims vary from fairly secular to extremely religious and the Christians are in there as well. Between all of these different shadings, a lot of people feel that God is on their side as opposed to the other side. We don't think God works that way. But we have ended up with this conflict that seemingly has no end.

2. Why is interfaith/intercultural bridge building needed in the area where your CC works?

As far as we're concerned, we can't see any scenario in which we won't have to find a way to cooperate. Generally speaking, people would rather cooperate with others with whom we share experiences and have some trust in. That's why our goal is to build trust, instead of a whole bundle of prejudices with us.

I once did an exercise with junior high school students where I sent the Israelis off and Palestinians off by themselves. I asked them to draw a portrait of those on the other side. When they came back the Israelis had drawn a picture of a Palestinian with a knife concealed under his belt and the Palestinians had drawn a picture of an Israeli with a pistol concealed under his belt.

When both sides saw this they cracked up because here we are, expecting the other to be violent and dangerous. It's Pygmalion: the more you expect the more it happens. So, on the one hand we *have* to cooperate and on the other hand we *get* to cooperate.

3. Please briefly describe the main activities or programs your CC is carrying out? Please specify the year in which the activity took/is taking place.

The central thing is tribal fires. We've done some overnight ones where Palestinians from the territories and Israelis get together in the way that I was describing before. Then we have what some call "sulhita," which is the same Sulha approach. The difference is that it's over a period of some 3 days with young people, usually between the ages of 16 and 21. That happens several times a year.

What we would like to begin doing is getting out to high schools and there is a plan to do that. To actually get permission from principals to come in and talk to high school students about what we do in mixed teams of Palestinians and Israelis because there is enormous racism in Israeli schools and a lot of fear in Palestinian schools. We need to start approaching the kids who are going to be building our future.

An idea that has been floated now, well there are several, but one of them was calling it "shoulder to shoulder," whereby instead of face to face Palestinians and Israelis will be grouped according to profession and will enjoy professional training together. That way, trauma specialists could learn from each other, as could science teachers, and so on

There was a pilot between Palestinian and Israeli high school science teachers learning cutting edge approaches from the university professor together. What happens is they're motivated because they're advancing themselves professionally but they're doing it alongside of someone they would never have dreamed they'd be in the same classroom with.

4. Between which specific religions or cultures are bridges being built?

We work with Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

5. Please explain the method or strategy that your CC uses to bring together people of different cultures and faiths that generally do not engage or cooperate with each other.

It's different with each person, but it's often been about challenging people. I'll be having a conversation and someone will say "I have nothing against Arabs personally, but I just don't think you can trust them" and I will say, "Would you be willing to spend an evening in a place that doesn't force you to do anything? A place where you have the opportunity to encounter people in a way that might enable some getting to know them?" Even if they say no the first time, I keep pushing. We have invited people three and four times over, and the 4th time, they come. We want to create the space for people to discover the "other."

That can only happen in a place where- a physical and a spiritual place- where as people walk in the door they get that there's something different happening here. We don't strong arm people and tell them that we have a corner on the truth and that they ought to agree with us. We ask them to be with us and without agreeing or legitimizing their positions we give them a chance to express themselves and to express their feelings that might be upsetting or difficult for people in the listening circle to hear. But there's this principle that everybody has a story and everybody has something that they need to share. We create a space for that.

6. Why do the activities your CC is carrying out improve cooperation among people of different traditions in the broader community?

We will provide you with an example that took place over the summer. We had this meeting to strengthen our inner circle, but a few new-comers were invited and I brought a friend who raised his kids in a bilingual Jewish-Arab school. So he had experience with cooperation between Palestinians and Israelis, but at the end of the weekend he said "At the bilingual school, we have never had the level communication and closeness that was expressed here." So he went back to his community of parents of school kids in a Jewish-Arab school with a whole new sense of the possibility of friendships and cooperations. So there are many communities that we're connected to. It's hard to narrow it down to one.

7. Within your CC, you have members from several different faiths and cultural traditions. How would you describe cooperation among your CC's members? Have there been any challenges?

One of the lessons we've learned at Sulha is it's important to have joint decision making among people from all different backgrounds. The diversity within Sulha is celebrated and honored through joint decision making. So put it in a positive sense there.

Now, we open meetings with checking in personally, we don't just start a business agenda without lighting a candle and take a moment to really find out how everyone is doing.

8. What are some observations or signs you see that relations are improving between people of different faiths/cultures in the area where your CC works?

We've seen bridge building in some surprising areas. For example, some orthodox Jews feel closer to practicing Muslims because they're both serious about their religious practice. So the Jews will pray 3 times a day and the Muslims will pray 5 times a day, but they have a regularity and rhythm to their lives that is similar.

But along the border, we've engaged hundreds and hundreds of people through our gatherings. When you look out in the community where we work, it doesn't have to be the whole region but just generally a concentrated area where we're working. People do multiply our effect right. If someone participates in the Sulha circle, they go home and talk about it with their family members, so eventually we'd like to see more Palestinians and Israelis talking to each other. These ripple effect things happen, so we'd like to see a grain of sand become a hill.

9. What does your CC hope to achieve?

We hope to achieve two things. One is to consistently create hope among all of the people who come in contact with us, along with hope and determination to keep struggling for peace. That's one piece, and the other piece is that we would like Sulha to be a part of creating a critical mass of Israelis and Palestinians who ultimately make it uncomfortable for our leaders to continue messing up the chances for peace: that there will be a ground swell of people who have experienced this kind of thing and that our voice will become audible and that we will have an impact on policy as well. I don't see it happening tomorrow but I do see that as an ultimate goal.

10. Aside from funding, what are some specific ways URI can better support your CC in reaching its goals?

At the moment, what we need most is effective media contact and exposure. The media like to report the bad news, but I think Sulha offers what would be interesting stories.

The chance to receive and share information with people who are working on parallel paths would also be great.

Lastly, we would like to grow our outreach to Israel and Palestine. A lot of it is related to funding: it would be great if we could afford to send activists into the field. That would be wonderful, but we are short on funding.

11. As you know, the Purpose of URI is to promote enduring, daily interfaith cooperation, to end religiously motivated violence, and to create cultures of peace, justice, and healing for the Earth and all living beings. In what ways do you feel your CC's work helping to achieve this purpose?

A few years ago, I stayed in the hotel for a training, and there I was with a room full of Palestinians and I opened one talk by saying "I sound like an American, I'm an Israeli and I served in the army. Does anybody have a problem with that?"

This one guy says "If you have something to teach, then I don't care if you're my enemy, which is something that Muhammad said." If you take a man prisoner and he has something to teach, release him and let him teach it. At the end of the day he came up and grabbed my hand and he said two things: "you're not my enemy and I learned a lot."

By building the relationships we are building, by creating a space where we can build trust, we can chip away at the idea that people should be afraid of them because they are Israeli or because they are Palestinian. That gets us closer to peace.

12. What value or benefits does your CC receive from being a member of URI?

We want to be able to learn from other people doing similar work, to take from their experiences and incorporate it into what we are doing.

13. What value or benefit does your CC currently provide or could potentially provide the URI network?

We've just learned a lot about dialogue, about tools for breaking through barriers, interpersonal barriers, interfaith barriers, intercultural barrier. We would love to share our experiences with other people and I think there is some technology, some tools that we have that we want to share. We'd also want to learn from other people's experiences.

14. Do you communicate or work with other CCs in the URI network? If yes, please share a few examples. If no, please explain why you have been unable/ uninterested to connect with other CCs.

Because we are a new CC, we have yet to work with other cooperation circles.

15. As a CC that works on improving interfaith relations, perhaps you have seen, heard, or experienced something interesting. Please share a very important personal experience or lesson related to interfaith/intercultural relations that changed impacted your beliefs OR a story about something that happened in your community related to interfaith relations.

We have two stories to share. The first is about one of the central members of our management circle. He came from a family that was driven from their land in the heart of Palestine in 1948. They fled to Gaza and lived in refugee camps until 1967, when the war frightened his family enough to move to Jordan, where he was born.

After this odyssey, he grew up knowing that his family had been dispossessed from their village, he finally left Jordan and came to Palestine in order to find Jews to kill. He's open about that and today

as a result of his experience at Sulha he had a turnaround, he had a 180 degree shift, and he realized that he has to stop generalizing and that there are Israelis that he can work with. So he joined the leadership circle.

The other story took place when I was in a hospital bed, with a stranger next to me. He was a settler and an Orthodox Jew. I thought he was an extremist. I thought, "How am I going to survive 3 days of lying in the hospital next to me?"

And then we had a quiet afternoon, he and I just began talking. We started off talking about the food in the hospital. We ended up talking about ourselves and I was appalled to discover that his parents had been killed, along with his little brother. My heart went out to him and I just began to listen to him. He got my listening. Then he began to ask me about myself, which is really the way it happens so often, you know? If I just forget myself and devote myself to listening to someone, one of the results is he gets curious about me.

He said, "Tell me what you do" and I said "I'm very active in this organization." And I couldn't imagine that he would find anything interesting in it, and he got curious and he said would you invite me? I think it's important to mention that I had not thought of it, it hadn't occurred to me that inviting this guy to a Sulha gathering would be appropriate or, I don't know that. And he came, he came alone that day. It took a couple, he missed one and then I kept after him. Then he said yea I really meant it, I want to come and he showed up.