



Sheri Schiff, Victor Begg, Brenda Rosenberg, Rabbi Ron Kronish, Qadi Iyad Zahalka and Dr. Shari Rogers at the Birmingham Community House

# Is Peace Still Possible?

Israelis – one Jewish, one Arab – show that open dialogue can dispel stereotypes.

**T**his past June, my husband, Howard, and I went to Israel and the Palestinian territories to get a look at whether peace is still possible.

In Haifa, we spent a morning at the Beit Hagefen Cultural Center and saw how they use art, music and drama to bring Christians, Muslims and Jews of all ages together. We spent three days at Haifa University meeting professors, administrators and students. We learned about their educational programs on coexistence and saw firsthand how Arab and Jewish students learn together and work together on community projects.

In Tel Aviv, we spent the morning with One Voice, an organization that works with young leaders, both Palestinian and Israeli, who support a two-state solution. In the afternoon, we met with Robi Demelin, founder of Parents Circle-Family Forum, a group of more than 500 Israeli and Palestinian families that have lost family members to violence.

Robi shared with us her new film, *One Day After Peace*. The documentary shares her compelling journey of living through two conflicts, first in South Africa and then in Israel, where she lost her son to Palestinian gunfire. Robi's thought-provoking journey goes from a place of deep personal pain to a belief that a better future is possible.

In our five days in Jerusalem and in the West Bank we spent two days with the group called Wounded Crossing Borders — Palestinians and Israelis wounded in past wars who want to build a new future for both people. We met with Sharon Rosen, a longtime friend, and Suheir Rasul, co-directors of Search for Common Ground Israel. Two extraordinary women, a Jew and a Palestinian, who lead multiple

projects that promote coexistence and peace between Israel and the Palestinian territories.

We had dinner with Dr. Rabbi Ron Kronish, another longtime friend, who is the director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council of Israel (ICCI), Israel's best-known and most-respected interreligious organization. It is made up of more than 60 Christian, Muslim and Jewish institutions and organizations. ICCI's mission is to harness the teachings and values of the three monotheistic religions into sources of reconciliation and peaceful coexistence, based on the understanding that religions should not be part of the problem, but rather can be part of the solution.

Over dessert, Rabbi Ron said he was coming to the U.S. in October. I immediately invited him to Detroit and told him it would be wonderful if he could bring an Arab Muslim associate with him.

Rabbi Ron said yes, and thought of his friend Iyad Zahalka, the qadi (judge) of the Sharia Court of Jerusalem.

## Hearing Hopeful News

I knew it would be a challenge to bring Christians, Jews and Muslims together, especially to hear about Israel, but I wanted our community to hear hopeful news, not just news about rockets, bombings, killings and hate. I wanted them to hear firsthand the amazing and diversified work that Rabbi Ron has accomplished in Israel between Christians, Muslims and Jews, and to have our community know

Israel has a Sharia court and for the qadi to explain Sharia.

We started planning in July for their trip, which took place Oct. 24-25. Sheri Schiff from the Jewish community, Victor Begg from the Muslim community and Al Timms from the Presbytery worked tirelessly to find venues and sponsors. They included the American Jewish Committee (AJC-Detroit), Center for Peace and Conflict Studies at Wayne State University, Church and Society Committee of First United Methodist Church of Birmingham, First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, InterFaith Leadership Council of Metropolitan Detroit (IFLC), Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC), Michigan Muslim Community Council

(MMCC), Northminster Presbyterian Church of Troy, Pathways To Peace Foundation, Race Relations & Diversity Task Force of the Community House, the Social Justice and Peacemaking Ministry Team of the Presbytery of Detroit and WISDOM (Women's Interfaith Solutions for Dialogue and Outreach in Metro Detroit).

The rabbi and qadi presented at the Birmingham Community House, Wayne State University and at First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham. They had an open dialogue with the audiences, a total of 250 people. They shared their identities and personal stories.

The rabbi was born in New York City, raised in Miami, educated at Brandeis University, Hebrew Union College and Harvard, and then followed his heart and moved to Jerusalem to fully live his Jewish

identity.

I saw eyes open wide when the qadi shared his identity as a Palestinian, Arab, Muslim and citizen of Israel. Challenging questions were asked and were thoughtfully answered. A young Muslim woman asked the rabbi to share his definition of Zionism because when she heard him say he is a Zionist, she felt threatened. To her, Zionists are brutal occupiers. A Jewish woman asked the qadi why his definition of Sharia law is not what she has heard, and why doesn't she hear Muslims speak out against acts of terror committed in the name of Islam? As concerns and issues were addressed, you could feel the tension leave the room. In less than two hours of open conversations on issues seldom talked about, minds and hearts were opened to new possibilities.

Participants saw peace builders, a qadi and a rabbi, as genuine friends rejecting both anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, and they saw they could be part of the process.

The audiences saw the power in meeting the other, learning one another's stories, all in a safe space to ask the questions on their minds. The two days were a great step forward on the journey to engage more people in the process.

Yes, I truly believe peace is still possible. □

*Brenda Naomi Rosenberg of Bloomfield Hills is a local activist combatting anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and racism through her documentary, Reuniting the Children of Abraham, the book she co-authored with women from seven faith groups titled Friendship & Faith, and the ground-breaking Tectonic Leadership workshop she co-created with Samia Bahsoun.*



Brenda Naomi Rosenberg  
Commentary