



אגודת המפגש הבין דתי (ע"ר) جمعية اللقاء بين الديانات
INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER ASSOCIATION

Countering hatred based on religion or belief

Summary

The Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA) works to counter hatred based on religion or belief and promote genuine coexistence and sustainable peace, through joint community building on the grassroots level, using interactive interfaith dialogue as its vehicle. The apolitical and all-inclusive approach of the organization and its activities enable the successful participation of a very wide range of participants and thus to continuously build a true grassroots movement which constitutes the human infrastructure for peace in the Holy Land.

In its twenty-two years of existence, the IEA has held –within Israel, between Israelis and Palestinians and in the larger Middle East – more than 4,700 programs, with many thousands of participants (estimated in more than 20,000). A most significant fact is that the participants in IEA programs include people of all political and religious views, as well as all ages, genders, walks of life etc; and that the vast majority of them have met 'the other' for the first time through IEA. As of this date the IEA has founded 124 ongoing community-groups of interfaith encounter – from the Upper Galilee to Eilat, including 39 groups that bring together on a regular basis Israelis and West Bank Palestinians.

Why interfaith encounter?

We live relatively near to one another, and perhaps even shop or work in the same places, but we know so little about one another. History has taught us that when different communities live close by and physical interaction between them is easy, the quality of their intercommunal relations depends more on their being good neighbors than on agreements between their respective leaderships. Therefore, the process of building peace in the Holy Land (and often elsewhere) must include a strong emphasis on grassroots inter-communal relations if it is to be successful and sustainable.

When we analyze the disapproving attitudes that many in our communities have for each other, often leading to hatred based on religion or belief, we realize that these are not the result of an educated decision that it is impossible to live together. On the contrary: negative attitudes result from the generalization of individual cases of



אגודת המפגש הבין דתי (ע"ר) جمعية اللقاء بين الديانات
INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER ASSOCIATION

negativity, which creates prejudices and off-putting stereotypes that result in a negative image of the 'other'.

The problem with such images is that they are psychologically rooted and it is not enough to explain the actual reality to counteract them. In order to uproot them we need an experience that will be psychologically significant. The interfaith encounter in which participants truly and deeply meet the 'other' face-to-face, provides such an experience and can be profoundly transformative.

Interfaith encounter focuses on themes that relate to the foundation of the respective cultures and touches on issues that have deep existential meaning for the participants, even for the most secular among them. Discussing together how one relates to religion and religious texts and ideas allows us to address core issues of identity and meaning and to find shared values, utilizing religion and belief as a bridge. The discussion becomes much more intimate than just an exchange of opinions and gives room for the exposure of the humanity of the 'other', which happens when people really look into each other's eyes. Moreover, this focus reveals large degrees of similarities between participants' traditions. This idea of discovering shared values may sound pedestrian but can be a tremendous revelation for participants. Finally, this angle allows for a constructive way to discuss differences. In this way participants train themselves to develop friendships with people they disagree with, which is the real challenge we face.

Consequently, interfaith encounter is not only relevant for those who enjoy interfaith dialogue or learning for their own sake. Interfaith encounters are important for any person who lives in a split society, as it gives ordinary people an avenue to make an actual contribution towards real peace – directly, without being dependent on their leaders. Knowing and understanding the 'other' directly, in turn, alleviates the fear from all members of their community and thus improves the quality of life for participants.

What is an interfaith encounter?

An interfaith encounter is a meaningful conversation in which participants exchange ideas on issues that have existential significance for them, and consequently get to know one another in a more intimate way. It reveals similarities and helps build bridges between people. At the same time, it enables people to share their differences in a constructive, respectful way, which allows the conversation to proceed and indeed deepen without defensiveness or anyone feeling threatened. In this way, interfaith encounter enables its participants to develop



אגודת המפגש הבין דתי (ע"ר) **جمعية اللقاء بين الديانات**
INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER ASSOCIATION

friendships with those they disagree with and had even been in fear of previously; this of course is the real challenge of peacebuilding in the Holy Land.

Through the transformative power of interfaith encounter, people abandon the prejudices and stereotypes they hold of each other, replacing them with a direct and real understanding that leads to respect, trust and friendship.

Even one encounter creates an important transformation among its participants. But when groups from neighboring communities meet regularly, this provides a regular opportunity for encounter, exemplifies the possibility of inter-communal relations based on friendship and respect for the unique identity of each, and constantly generates change as additional members of the larger communities join. In this way, the transformation becomes much more solid and effective.

Our theory of change fits the extended contact theory that Thomas Pettigrew introduced in the 1990s, as an improvement of the theory Gordon Allport suggested in the 1950s. Our approach meets the conditions Pettigrew portrayed for successful contact process, namely: an ongoing encounter that develops close relations, equality within the group, building cooperation towards the common goal of peaceful inter-communal relations, and active learning about each other.

Our approach differs from most peacebuilding approaches in its strong emphasis on the grassroots inter-communal relations and in its true inclusiveness. It refrains from supporting a specific political model and instead invites supporters of all models to work together on the human infrastructure that is required for their success. This inevitably has a huge impact on their political beliefs as well, because while participants usually retain their existing political views, they seek ways to apply them in ways that care for, and honor the humanity of, the other.

By initially restricting political arguments, we ensure that when divisive issues do come up, as they inevitably will, they are discussed in a non-threatening way and in a way which doesn't damage the group's process. By the time they are discussed, the discussion is between friends who trust each other and know how much they share. When you disagree with a friend, you do so in a way which is dramatically different than with someone you see as an enemy.

Our approach also differs from other interfaith efforts because its focus on interactive conversations between participants, rather than passive listening to expert speakers.

The effectiveness of the IEA approach is supported by a series of academic research works conducted by Bar Ilan, De Paul and Berkley Universities.



אגודת המפגש הבין דתי (ע"ר) **جمعية اللقاء بين الديانات**
INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER ASSOCIATION

Data Sheet 2022

In 2022 the Interfaith Encounter Association was able to reactivate most of its ongoing groups, reaching new records of activity level. During the year IEA oversaw **412 encounters**. The growing commitment was reflected in the fact that our group roster boasted **120 groups** in that year. It is estimated that over **four thousand people** participated in these encounters. 2022 was also the year in which IEA won The **Presidential Award for Volunteerism**, the most prestigious acknowledgment for volunteers in Israel

To see our year-to-year growth, please refer to the graphs at the bottom of the page.



Groups listed from North to South (w/ # of 2022 encounters):

- Haifa Women's Interfaith Encounter (WIE) (4)
- Galilee Religious Leaders (11)
- Northern Jordan Valley WIE (2)**
- Nablus Area (8)
- Rabbis & Sheikhs Sharon-Nablus (1)
- IDC students YIE (3)**
- With 929 (11)
- Bar Ilan U. YIE (18)
- Jaffa (11)
- Model UN YIE (28)
- IEA Reut-Sadaqa (6)
- Jerusalem YIE (7)
- Fananin YIE (6)**
- Jerusalem & Area (11)
- Beit Midrash (19)
- Music group West E-Tariq (34)
- Praying together in Jerusalem (11)
- Tower of David Religious Leaders (2)
- Young Researchers YIE (2)**
- Jewish-Christian Study Luke (15)
- SynaYoga (61)
- Hadassah Ein Karen (9)
- LIFE (5)**
- Circle of Light & Hope (4)
- Midwives of Peace (4)
- Jerusalem-Hebron YIE (5)**
- Jerusalem-Hebron Religious Leaders (1)
- Jerusalem-Yata (4)**
- Hashfela (7)
- Hebron (2)
- Ashkelon (2)**
- Bearer of Peace (69)
- Arad-Tel Arad WIE (14)
- DC area (7)
- Teaneck, NJ (1)

** New/renewed Groups

Groups in Process of reorganizing for 2023:

• Maalot • Acre • Karmiel-Majd el-Krum • Sakninin College • M'ghar-Lana • M'ghar-Green Light • Gordon College • Haifa University YIE • Haifa Youth Interfaith Encounter • Jenin-Haifa • Jenin-Gilboa • Gilboa-Nablus • Lower Galilee • YIE Jenin-Jezreel Valley • Rabbis & Sheikhs Lower Galilee • Carmel City • Tabor Area • Wadi Ara WIE • Living Together in Wadi Ara • Netania-Qalansawa • Tel Aviv University YIE • Oranit-Kfar Kasem • WIE Petach Tikva-Kfar Kasem • Interdisciplinary Center • Non-violent Communication • Baqa-G. Shmuel Schools • Binyamin-Ramallah • Jerusalem-Bitunia • Jerusalem-Ramallah YIE • Study & Dialogue • Jerusalem WIE • IEA online • Mt. Scopus • YIE Hartman-Armenian Schools • Arabic Speaking group • Faith in Music • Mothers & Daughters • Families • Women's Empowerment WIE • East & West Reading Group WIE • Language Exchange Hebrew U. YIE • Philosophy • IEA Excursions • Haredi-Muslim • Yellin College YIE • Bibliodrama • Beit Hakerem-Bethlehem • Jerusalem-Bethlehem • Medical Students YIE • Jerusalem-Bethlehem U. YIE • Herzog-Bethlehem YIE • East of Jerusalem YIE • South of Jerusalem • Future & Hope • Etzion-Hussan • Siach Yeshiva &Hebron YIE • Jerusalem-Hebron • Yeruham-Rahme WIE • South of Hebron YIE • Jerusalem-Yata II YIE • Eilat

Below are charts that reflect growth in IEA from Year-to-year:

