

Religion and Reconciliation forum held by Jerusalem Forum for Interfaith Understanding and Cooperation among Religions

Nurit Hirschfeld
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I'billin, Israel - During a time of escalating tension among religious groups, leaders of Israel's four main religions came together for an interfaith forum.

The Jerusalem Forum for Interfaith Understanding and Cooperation among Religions held the event, on the theme "Religion and Reconciliation," on Nov. 26, 2014, in the Mar Elias Education Center in the northern Arab town of I'billin.



The center, which bears the Arab name for the prophet Elijah and is located at the top of a hill, was founded by Archbishop Elias Shakur of the Greek Catholic Church, who hosted the event with the support of Father Masoud Abu-Hatoum, a dedicated Ambassador for Peace.

Despite the rainy weather, the 27 participants—Druze, Muslims, Christians and Jews—came to demonstrate their determination and strong faith in the goals of peace and reconciliation.



Dr. Nurit Hirschfeld, director of the interfaith forum, opened the meeting by expressing the hope that “we can act as a family by supporting one another in times of difficulties, while continuing to strive and work together for peace.”

Quoting UPF founder Rev. Sun Myung Moon from the book World Scripture, she read: “If each side insists, ‘I exist for myself,’ they can never be reconciled. To achieve the goal of peace, people on both sides need to take the position, ‘I exist for you.’ Then they can come to the point of consoling one another. Peace can arise only when we say to our opponent, ‘I am here for you.’”



The Druze delegation, led by Sheik Samich Natur, expressed their commitment to peace and shared heartwarming stories of people transcending the borders of religion or ethnicity. One story told of a synagogue in the Arab town of Shefar-Am being cared for by a Muslim family.

Archbishop Shakur offered a warm welcome and mentioned our collective responsibility to raise our voices for peace. “Religions should act in unity, based on their common grounds, rather than be divided by differences,” he said. Politicians can sign peace or cease-fire agreements, he said, but those who actually make peace are people of faith. “Peace starts from the level of the individual, and moves on to the level of the family, the neighbors and the whole society,” he concluded.



Professor Yoram Hirschfeld from Tel Aviv University talked about the simple fact that we are first and foremost human beings. “When and how did it happen,” he expressed painfully, “that we started judging people according to their religion, race or color?” He added, “When I meet a person, I would want to know his personality, interests and hobbies, family; only much later would I ask about his religion or ethnic group!”



Rabbi Yaakov Luft from Mevaseret Zion, a suburb of Jerusalem, talked about the important role of religious leaders in bringing peace to the region. “Religious power is strong; if we ignore it, peace cannot be established,” he said. Those who say that religions have brought only damage and ruin to humanity

should think again and investigate the atrocities and lost lives that occurred in the name of atheistic philosophies like communism or ultra-nationalist ideologies such as fascism. “Indeed, religious leaders should act peacefully and not use their power to act in evil ways,” he said. Rabbi Luft concluded by touching on the importance of educational programs in promoting peace.



Mr. Yaron Hirschfeld from the Jewish-Arab friendship association Reut-Shchenim briefly responded to Rabbi Luft's comments. He said he understands why many people reject religion, since those who use religion for violence and fanaticism are often much louder. “I want to hear more religious leaders speak for peace and act for peace,” he said. “The voice of peace should be heard louder and louder; otherwise even those who have long believed in the path of peace can lose hope and stop believing in peace.”

The meeting ended with a tour of the beautiful Mar Elias church, with its many inter-religious and interfaith motifs, including the church’s bronze gate showing an etching of Jesus gathering children to him from various religions of the world

