IEA Theory of Change

Recent history has taught us that when different communities live close by and physical interaction between them is easy, the quality of their inter-communal 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 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 negativity, which creates prejudices and off-putting stereotypes that result in a negative image of the ‘other’.

The challenge of such images is that they are psychologically rooted, therefore 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.

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 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.

The most common way to conduct an interfaith encounter is through joint learning of our respective religions, traditions and cultures. In the Holy Land these carry existential meaning for everyone and can be used to connect any group of people. However, other platforms of in-depth exchange may work better for specific groups of people: music, literature, shared vocation or interest, etc.

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.

"...I am convinced that men hate each other because they fear each other. They fear each other because they don't know each other, and they don't know each other because they don't communicate with each other, and they don't communicate with each other because they are separated from each other. And God grant that something will happen to open channels of communication... because men of good will will rise to the level of leadership."

Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., King Chapel, Cornell College, Mount Vernon, Iowa -- 15 October 1962

"...we need to renew those face to face encounters with the people not like us. I think we need to do that in order to realise that we can disagree strongly and yet still stay friends. It’s in those face to face encounters that we discover that the people not like us are just people, like us. Actually, every time we hold out the hand of friendship to somebody not like us whose colour, or class, or creed, are different from ours, we heal one of the fractures of our wounded world. That is the us of relationship."

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks’ TED Talk in Vancouver, 24th April 2017