



## Reflecting Light

One week in the Middle East  
with Tanenbaum's Religion and  
Conflict Resolution Program

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## Introduction

“There are two ways of spreading light; to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it.”

– Edith Wharton



January 2009: Tanenbaum’s Religion and Conflict Resolution Program traveled to Syria and Israel at the invitation of local partners. Our events on religious peacemaking, planned a year in advance, took on new gravity during the war in Gaza and southern Israel.

Despite the worsening circumstances, we found innumerable flickers of hope during our brief visit to the region. We write about our efforts trusting that our insights may be of interest and use in your own work and communities. Though many of us reside far from it, we are all touched by violence and insecurity in the Middle East. Likewise, we can all join in reflecting the light we find there.



**“It is fitting that Tanenbaum should be in the birthplace of the Abrahamic religions to discuss religious peacemaking, especially given the war now being fought in southern Israel and Gaza.”**

– Georgette Bennett,  
President, Tanenbaum

Tanenbaum is thankful to our Syrian partner, *Peacemaker* Hind Kabawat, who opened the door to Damascus, allowing us to work with a powerful group of women. Her untiring commitment to peace in the Middle East brings together a diverse range of supporters, many of whom contributed to the “Women and Interfaith” conference. Among these was the Canadian Embassy, to whom we extend our special thanks.

We are also grateful to the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute for its generous support and excellent co-organizing of events in Jerusalem. Our travel to the region at this time would not have been possible without their confidence in the power of our *Peacemakers in Action*. We acknowledge Auburn Theological Seminary’s Face to Face/Faith to Faith program and its local partner, the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel.



## Women and Interfaith

Training women and building community in Syria with *Peacemaker*  
Hind Kabawat

“It is important to imagine peace, especially when it is hardest to do so,” said Heather DuBois, Tanenbaum Assistant Director of Religion and Conflict Resolution, as she led an exercise called ‘drawing peace.’ Part of a full-day training for 57 women in Damascus, this and other activities were designed to enable peacemaking across religions, cultures and life experiences.

Because of her experience at the 2007 *Peacemakers in Action* Working Retreat, Hind Kabawat approached Tanenbaum to conduct a groundbreaking workshop for Syrian women. An expansion of her public diplomacy work in the region, this was Hind’s first conference exclusively for women and one of the first interfaith conferences in the country. “Women and Interfaith” brought together women from ages 21 to 65 and from all walks of life – parliamentarians, media



*Above:* Tanenbaum Executive Vice President Joyce Dubensky listens as Syrian author Saher Abu Harb teaches on nonviolence in the context of a personal tragedy.

*Right:* Participants gather in front of the Omayad Mosque during a tour of religious sites.



professionals, attorneys, scholars, grassroots activists and homemakers; Sunni and Shi’a Muslims; Christians from a range of denominations; and those self-identifying as secular.

Tanenbaum’s day of training in the two-day conference focused on the capacity of women, in their various roles, to foster respectful behaviors and peacemaking in their daily lives. Participants created action plans and had the opportunity to publicly commit to them. Many women spoke of writing news pieces, articles and books pertaining to religion, conflict, peace and women’s rights. One pledged to create a website, another to bring her daughter to the next available interfaith

workshop. A radio host from Beirut decided upon a new segment, ‘What is your best idea for peace?’, for her weekly show. Several participants noted this was the first time that they had ever met a Jew, and one Muslim woman said her action plan would be to seek interfaith work not only with Christians but, now, also with Jews.

For her part, Hind Kabawat told the women that her project would be “our project.” She offered to immediately create an email group and suggested that they gather frequently at her home or office. At the end of the conference, all participants received a certificate of completion. Behind the scenes, Hind whispered her larger vision: to make this the first of four annual trainings that would culminate in a cadre of women peacemakers in Syria.

## God is too Big to Fit into One Religion

*Peacemaker Hind Kabawat convenes an interfaith celebration*



*Above:* A close-up reveals that the cake is inscribed: “God is too Big to Fit into One Religion.”

*Right:* Conference participants, religious leaders, ambassadors and other secular guests pose for an official remembrance of the day.



The next day, the “Women and Interfaith” conference began early, with an optional tour of worship sites in Damascus’ Old City. Over thirty women, teens and children, we walked from one holy place to another, as heads turned observing our unusual group. We visited: Omayad Sunni Mosque, Lady Raqia Shiite Mosque, Myriam Greek Orthodox Cathedral, Zeitoun Greek Catholic Cathedral, Evangelist Church and, finally, the Jewish Synagogue.

Although one can easily walk between them, most of the women had not before visited the others’ religious sites. On this day, we prayed together in each other’s languages, in each other’s spaces. Sitting





*Top:* With conference facilitators at their side, religious leaders ceremonially cut the cake.

*Above:* Tanenbaum's Heather DuBois, Peacemaker Hind Kabawat and Tanenbaum's Joyce Dubensky pause for a photo as they say good morning outside the hotel.

*Opposite top:* A passageway in the market of Jerusalem's Old City.

*Bottom:* Standing in the courtyard of the Omayyad Mosque in Damascus.

cross-legged on the beautiful carpet of the Omayyad Mosque, the daughter of a conference participant offered to sing. We gathered around the seventeen year-old woman as her song filled a corner of that grand mosque. In that moment, it did not matter that the sacred music was from one, particular religion. What mattered was that we listened together.

In the afternoon, Hind brought us all to her home, where we were met by the city's prominent religious leaders. These men included representatives of the Sunni Mufti of Damascus, the Roman Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelist Bishop and the Mufti of the Shiite community. Collectively, they welcomed the women returning from their training and the tour. Hand on hand, they cut a cake to celebrate. On the cake was inscribed: "God is too big for one religion." Joined by Hind's other guests, ambassadors, diplomats and other well known secular figures, the religious leaders publicly acknowledged the growing role of women in society and the importance of religious peacemaking. It was a delightful and meaningful event by Syrian and, indeed, international standards.







## Religion as a Force for Reconciliation

*A Peacemakers in  
Action panel with  
the Van Leer  
Jerusalem Institute*



"I have never met a group of people like this in my lifetime... these are all people of enormous moral and physical courage." With these words, Van Leer Jerusalem Institute's director, Professor Gabriel Motzkin, welcomed five Tanenbaum *Peacemakers in Action* to the stage. From Bosnia-Herzegovina, Nigeria, El Salvador, Sudan and the Galilee region of Israel/Palestine, all came to Jerusalem with unlikely success stories born of courage rooted in deep faith.

Each of the *Peacemakers* knows from his or her personal experience that religion can be a force of division and violence – they come from some of the world's most wounded lands. Yet they have lived much of their lives embodying the theme of the panel discussion: "Religion as a Force



*Above:* Prof. Gabriel Motzkin chairs the panel at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, where he is director.

*Right, clockwise:* Peacemaker Rev.

William Lowrey tells a story of his People-to-People Peace Process in Sudan. Tanenbaum Executive Vice

President Joyce Dubensky introduces the film *Women Peacemakers in the Galilee*. Elana Rozenman of

TRUST-Emun and Peacemaker Najeeba Sirhan share a joyous moment.

Peacemaker Pastor James Wuye addresses the audience of 100+.

The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute's Rabbi Prof. Naftali Rothenberg and Tanenbaum President

Georgette Bennett enjoy a discussion before the panel begins.



for Reconciliation." All practice religious peacemaking against the powerful countervailing forces of ambiguous scriptural texts, national religiosity and sectarian militias.

The sacrifices their lives entail give these clergy and lay people credibility to dare speak of peace in the midst of dark times, whether in their own conflict zones or in the Middle East. Before a confirmed ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, on a day when roads were closed due to the arrival of European leaders for peace talks, these individuals told their own stories of long-sought victories and lasting transformation of armed conflicts. The audience that gathered to





Worshippers conduct a morning prayer service at the *Kotel*, also called the Western Wall and one of Judaism's holiest places, in Jerusalem.

hear these messages overflowed the reserved space, moving to a larger auditorium.

The panel ended with a short film about the coexistence education project of Najeeba Sirhan and the late Osnat Aram-Daphna, two Tanenbaum *Women's Peace Initiative* award winners. Following the presentations about other conflicts, this story from Karmiel and Majd El-Krum brought the focus back to Israel/Palestine.

Despite their accomplishments, the *Peacemakers* have no illusions about the difficult road to sustainable peace. Every speaker echoed in some way the words of Reverend William Lowrey: "Reconciliation costs us something." Nonetheless, the reward – and thus their call to action – was clear. "This encourages, in me at least," said Professor Gabriel Motzkin, "a sense of deep humility about what human beings can and should accomplish."



## Across Generations and the Globe

Sharing strength in  
a time of crisis with  
Face to Face/  
Faith to Faith



*Above:* Tanenbaum Executive Vice President Joyce Dubensky speaks with parents.

*Right:* Tanenbaum staff and *Peacemakers* meet with young people, parents and the ICCI program director from Face to Face/Faith to Faith.

“What sustains you, what keeps you going in the work of peace when it is difficult?” This question faced Tanenbaum *Peacemakers* and the ten young adults, students, and parents from East and West Jerusalem who gathered to meet them. Auburn Theological Seminary’s Face to Face/Faith to Faith program, conducted in this region with the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, gives adolescents from historically opposed groups the opportunity to meet in sustained dialogue and shared service. For these young Israelis and Palestinians, this was an opportunity to speak directly with veteran peacemakers.

In a frank and often personal discussion, the *Peacemakers* spoke of their own conflict resolution work and the importance of multi-stakeholder peacebuilding that includes youth. For their part, many of the local residents reflected on the progress they have made thus far in knowing one another across the conflict’s divide. Drawing upon this history and social capital, they turned to the current crisis.

One Palestinian teen shared her recent experience in the Face to Face dialogue group: Meeting for the first time after the start of the war, the young people were angry. “We shouted and shouted,” she said, “and then left without saying goodbye.” The sixteen year-old added that it felt good to express her feelings.

When she finished, something remarkable happened. Her eighteen year-old brother, who had been through the entire program including



a two week intensive camp in upstate New York, turned to her and said: “You say it felt good to express your feelings. Don’t answer me now, but when you return from New York, I want to know how you feel after you have *listened*.”

The young man’s call to *dialogue* – and not one-way communication – is only one example of the promise and hope we saw in these youth. When one of the *Peacemakers* challenged them to persevere to become the future leaders of a durable peace in Israel/Palestine, any hint of cliché was obscured by the urgency of the appeal.



## Religion and Peace: What Works and What Doesn’t?

A seminar with  
the Van Leer  
Jerusalem Institute



At the request of the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, Tanenbaum *Peacemakers* joined Israeli scholars for a seminar on “Religion and Peace: What Works and What Doesn’t?” The dual purposes of the event were to bring together practitioners and researchers and to introduce Israelis to significant actors from other conflict zones.

The event covered a range of subjects at the intersections of religion and peace. Papers presented by ten prominent Israelis included a critical evaluation of interreligious dialogue, proposals for decreasing Muslim-Jewish tensions in Europe, education for intercultural understanding and inviting the divine to politics and diplomacy.

*Above: Peacemaker Rev. William Lowrey.*

*Right: From the hilltop view at the Church of All Nations, historian Yiska Harani points out features of Jerusalem’s Old City walls.*

The peacemaker-practitioners invited by Tanenbaum spoke from the experiences of their home countries. Pastor James Wuye, a Nigerian, addressed the prospects and challenges of religious peacebuilding from

Christian and Islamic perspectives. He declared, “In peacebuilding, we avoid polite dialogue, we talk about the issues... And I see religious leaders keeping quiet, while politicians say words on our behalf... It is time for religious leaders to begin to quiet those few minorities who speak on our behalf and [it is time for us to] have a voice.”

*Below: Peacemakers* Friar Ivo Markovic and Jose “Chencho” Alas share insights from Europe and Latin America.



Bringing wisdom from Mesoamerica, José “Chencho” Alas asserted that “the supreme value is Life” and explained his movement of bottom-up, holistic peacemaking. Sharing best practices from Sudan, Reverend William Lowrey told “An African Story of Respecting the Other’s Rituals and Symbols.” In this, he described how the Nuer and Dinka tribes reconciled and why this was essential to the peace agreement between Northern and Southern Sudan.

Bosnia-Herzegovina’s Friar Ivo Markovic gave an eyewitness analysis of “National Religiosity and the Political Misuse of Religion.” And finally, from the Galilee, Najeeba Sirhan shared her struggle, journey and aspirations for the future of coexistence education in Israel. Addressing the skepticism of many in the region, she concluded, “If I live it, I can convince you.”

From the four-hour round table at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, the emergent consensus was that what works is that which is active and real – change happens through flesh and blood people and in brick and mortar communities. “And religious peacemakers,” said Joyce Dubensky, Tanenbaum’s Executive Vice President, “can be a key resource in that change, in building real, lasting peace.”

*Right: Masjid Qubbat As-Sakhrah, also called the Dome of the Rock and one of Islam’s holiest places, in Jerusalem.*





## Conclusion

“We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark. The real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.” – Plato



Tanenbaum’s training, panel, seminar and private meetings in Syria and Israel were a continuation of our work and, also, the start of something new. The peacemaker-practitioners who have received the *Peacemakers in Action* award are now inviting us to work with them in their home countries.

With these efforts abroad and a new focus on building a formal *Peacemakers’ Network*, Tanenbaum is connecting people around the globe who speak from direct, personal experience of religious peacemaking. And we are connecting those voices of practice with voices of scholarship in the growing field of religion and conflict resolution.

In the Middle East during and immediately after the war in Gaza and southern Israel, Tanenbaum heard people say that this is the “worst it has ever been.” Yet, we also witnessed remarkable hope and determination. Let all of us reflect the light that does exist. Whatever our place and whoever we are, sometimes we can be the candle and other times hold the mirror. What we can not do is let ourselves grow accustomed to the dark.







The daily abuse of religion threatens world peace.  
At Tanenbaum - a secular, non-sectarian organization -  
we work to reduce and prevent the violence perpetrated  
in the name of religion by supporting religious  
peacemakers who struggle in areas of armed conflict  
and by overcoming religious intolerance in workplaces,  
healthcare facilities and schools.



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