

INTER-RELIGIOUS: The Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I presents Dr. Debbie Weissman with book about Greeks in Auschwitz during a visit to the Patriarchate in Istanbul in June



To Meet or Not to Meet

Interfaith and peace organizations are tested in times of crisis

Deborah Weissman, Istanbul

“YOU’RE GOING TO Istanbul?” The taxi driver taking me from my home in Jerusalem to the air-

port seemed incredulous. So were many of my relatives and friends.

In mid-June, less than three weeks after the unfortunate flotilla incident, I spent a week in Istanbul, at the annual conference of

the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ), of which I am president. Despite the Israeli government’s warnings against travel to Turkey, despite media reports of anti-Israel demonstrations and

despite the fear that some Israeli tourists felt on the streets of Turkey, I went. If the organization I head is holding its annual conference, I must be there.

I am the first Jewish woman and only the second woman to hold the position of president in the more-than-60-year history of the Council. The ICCJ functions as an umbrella organization of local councils in about 30 countries (including the Inter-religious Coordinating Council in Israel, the ICCI, founded and headed by Rabbi Dr. Ron Kronish) and runs its own projects and forums, including an annual international conference. In 2008, in honor of Israel's 60th anniversary, the conference was held in Jerusalem, focused on the theme of "The Contribution of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue to Peace-Building in the Holy Land."

The constitution of the ICCJ calls for a rotating presidency between Jews and Christians. In Jerusalem, I was elected to a three-year term of office. My predecessor, who had served for two consecutive terms, was Father John Pawlikowski, a professor of social ethics at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and a veteran of Catholic-Jewish dialogue. His predecessor was another Israeli, Rabbi David Rosen, well-known in interreligious circles.

Our annual conferences are generally attended by 100 to 200 people from throughout the world. The Christians include Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox; the Jews span the wide spectrum from Orthodox to secular.

At last year's conference, held in Berlin, we had chosen to hold the 2010 conference in a predominantly Muslim country, in order to better explore our theme of bilateral and trilateral interreligious dialogue. The ICCI has no intention of abandoning the crucially important dialogue between Christians and Jews. Yet we do wish to explore ways of involving Muslims on various levels of activity, in recognition of our common spiritual heritage as descendants of Abraham and our common concerns in the contemporary world.

One of these concerns is the hijacking of our respective faiths by violent extremists. More than 90 years ago, poet William Butler Yeats gave us words that are no less relevant today. In "The Second Coming," written in 1919, the bard tells us:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;...

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

As Jews, Christians and Muslims, I believe that we must work to ensure that people like us remain passionate and intense in our convictions and our commitments to nonviolence, open dialogue and mutual respect. We took as the motto for our Istanbul conference the famous quotation from the Koran (Sura 49,13):

The advisory against travel to Turkey was, at best, an unnecessary precaution; at worst, it was a political step in a dangerous process

O humankind!

We created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, so that you may know one another...

During the winter, as relations between Israel and Turkey began to deteriorate, our international executive board went to Istanbul to assess the situation. Should we go ahead with our plans to hold the conference there? Would it be safe for the conference participants? Would we in any way be putting local Jews and Christians at risk? Based on our very positive experience there that week and our consultations with the locals, we went ahead with our plans.

But after the tragic events on the *Mavi Marmara* on May 31, we were again faced with a dilemma.

The Israeli media were reporting anti-Israel demonstrations in the streets of Istanbul, in front of the Israeli Consulate. The Israeli Foreign Ministry issued travel advisories. Hundreds of Israelis had canceled their planned vacations in Turkey. Should we still go? What if Israeli passports would no longer be accepted at the Istanbul airport? Would it be safer to go in on a foreign passport? What if there were no flights? Could I fly to another European city and then get to Istanbul?

If we canceled the conference, a lot of fine people would lose a lot of money. And

quite apart from financial considerations, could our organization afford to go a whole year without an international meeting?

One of the local Turkish Jews with whom we consulted told us that there was an "unhealthy electricity in the air" that week, and a Catholic bishop had been brutally murdered in the south of Turkey.

After much deliberation – thank God for the invention of Skype! – we decided to hold the conference as planned. In our letter to the registrants, we wrote: "The words of Hillel in the Ethics of the Fathers are most appropriate: 'If not now, when?' Interfaith and peace organizations are tested in times of crisis. Now more than ever our presence in Istanbul is needed and hopefully we will be able to contribute something (even very small) to defuse tensions."

Perhaps one of the reasons I was less frightened than some is that when I saw the Turkish anti-Israel demonstration on television and heard the report that there were about 10,000 demonstrators, I realized that in a city of 15 to 17 million, like Istanbul, that is not a particularly significant number. I think there may actually have been more anti-Turkish demonstrators in Israel. I must admit that my greatest fear was a fantasy that if Israel cut off ties with Turkey, I could be accused of going to an enemy state and suspected of espionage or treason! But having been on a secret Zionist mission to the Soviet Union in 1971, having served in the IDF (albeit in the Education Corps) and having lived in Jerusalem through two intifadas, it would take more than a government warning to stop me from going.

Of the more than a hundred Jews, Christians and Muslims from five continents who had registered, six were due to come from Israel. Three unfortunately canceled; they and their families were fearful. The other three of us came in, all on Israeli passports. Rabbi Ehud Bandel, the first vice president of the ICCJ, who had just attended the World Zionist Congress, representing the Masorati movement; and Viktoria Kanar, from the Interfaith Encounter Association, were the other two Israeli Jews with me.

This was my fourth time in Turkey, and I felt absolutely no difference from the other three times – not at Ben-Gurion Airport, not at Istanbul's Ataturk Airport and not in Istanbul itself. The Turks tend to be gracious and cordial and they continued to be so. Even on the Turkish Airlines

flight, they continued to air their usual recorded announcements in Hebrew, English and Turkish.

The travel advisory, in my opinion, was, at best, an unnecessary precaution; at worst, a political step in a dangerous process.

THE PARTICIPANTS, REPRESENTING 22 countries, the Vatican and the Palestinian Authority, spent four days together, studying each other's texts, praying both separately and ecumenically, sightseeing, discussing such far-ranging themes as Turkey's bid for EU membership, the status of Muslims in Europe, Islamophobia, the Palestinian Christian Kairos document, anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, women's issues in the "three Abrahamic traditions," and applications of our ground-breaking 2009 Berlin Document to the context of trilateral dialogue.

Speakers at our conference included Prof. Susannah Heschel of Dartmouth College; Imam Abdul Malik Mujahid, head of the Parliament of World Religions; Metropolitan Emanuel of France, who is president of the Conference of European Churches; the Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I, based in Istanbul; and Ms. Sema Kilicer, Political Officer for Human Rights in the EU delegation to Turkey. One speaker quoted Prof. Mohammed Djani, of Al Quds University in Jerusalem, who founded an organization for moderate Muslims: "In times of radicalism and extremism, being moderate is revolutionary."

Each day had the same general format: We began with a meditative moment for the whole conference, each day from a different one of the three religious traditions. We then held a plenum, featuring a keynote speaker from one of the traditions, with a respondent from each of the other two. The theme of the keynote was how each tradition relates to the other. Thankfully, the speakers kept to their allotted times, so that each day there was a lively discussion after the presentations. The rest of the morning on the first two days was devoted to workshops. On the third day, the morning was concluded with two concurrent panels on controversial topics, one on Turkey and the EU, the other on religion and state.

The afternoons involved outings to tourist sites, a cathedral, a Jewish museum and a synagogue.

We were greeted by the vice mufti. The mufti's office had welcomed us when the board came in January and tried to impress us with

how high interreligious dialogue is on their agenda. And it was a very special experience for me personally to be part of a very small delegation welcomed at the Ecumenical Patriarchate for a private audience with the Patriarch Bartholomew, where he presented Rabbi Amy Eilberg of the US and me with a

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book about Greeks in Auschwitz.

And we were hosted by the Jewish community. Another highlight of the week: dinner in the synagogue, where we all joined in singing the traditional "Hevenu Shalom Aleichem" ("We bring peace to you"). I cannot say that the Jewish community feels secure, but I believe that their anxiety and insecurity predate the present regime by many years. The community suffered bloody terror attacks in 1986 and in 2003, and I believe they have been traumatized. Perhaps a sign of this is that in the Jewish museum, which we attended, there was no mention of the attacks.

One evening featured the screening of a film on Turkey's role in saving Jewish lives during the Holocaust. After a closing session, we set out for a beautiful boat ride on the Bosphorus, capped with dinner on the boat and a presentation of Turkish folklore.

THE MOST IMPORTANT IMMEDIATE result of the conference was that at our annual general meeting held the morning after the conference, we decided to revive a veteran ICCJ framework known as the Abrahamic Forum, in order to engage Muslims.

I think that by holding the conference in Turkey, precisely at such a difficult time, we have made a strong symbolic statement about the importance of interreligious dialogue. The ground-breaking document issued by the ICCJ last year in Berlin – "A

Time for Recommitment: Jewish-Christian Dialogue 70 Years After War and Shoah" (see www.iccj.org) – includes the following statement: "We understand that Jewish-Christian relations are not a 'problem' that is going to be 'solved,' but rather a continuing process of learning and refinement. Perhaps most important, we have found friendship and trust. We have sought and found light together."

We must continue this process now with our Muslim colleagues. There are some local organizations within the framework of the ICCJ that are already doing this; most notably, the ICCI in Israel, which, from its inception, has been a forum for trilateral dialogue, and the Three Faiths Forum in the UK. Our Youth Leadership Council has included Muslims for many years, including some from Iran and Saudi Arabia (!). Now we will run trilateral programs for adults, on an international level.

I would strongly recommend that Israelis and Diaspora Jews lift their "boycott" of Turkey. Dialogue and engagement are the only way we will be able to go forward on this and other pressing issues. Jews and Israelis become very upset and angry when others threaten to boycott us. Yet we are doing the same.

And in this case, it seems to me that the boycott is self-defeating. We should be trying to strengthen our ties with Turkey, not end them. I feel it is even more in our own self-interest, as both Israelis and as Jews, than in theirs.

Coincidentally, the Torah portion for the Shabbat immediately following our conference was *Balak*. In that portion appears Balaam's famous prophecy about the Children of Israel, "They are a people that dwell alone..." This, I would suggest, is a curse and even a self-fulfilling prophecy, and surely no blessing. I believe that Jews in general and Israelis in particular should continue to engage with the rest of the world, whenever and wherever possible. It isn't the case that "the whole world is against us."

Was it dangerous? Well, I must confess that I did walk through a red light at a busy intersection (it was my fault) and almost slipped in the hotel shower...

I am certainly not an apologist for Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, nor do I think that Turkey is an exemplary democracy. But our tradition teaches that a true hero is one who can turn an enemy into a friend; we seem to be trying very hard to do the opposite. ●