

Seeing eye to eye with Ishmael & Isaac

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I have traveled to Israel many times - twice with youth groups, once with the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland, often with family and, most recently, last month with Palestinian-Americans.

Why would I travel to Israel, East Jerusalem and Ramallah with Palestinian-Americans? Because David Goldberg, Anita Gray, Samir Mohammed, Khalid Bahhur and others had a vision that lit a spark in the imaginations of many Americans, Israelis and Palestinians. They called that vision Ishmael & Isaac.

Ishmael & Isaac brought the Palestinian and

Jewish communities of Cleveland together in June, not just to dialogue but to act, raising money for projects to benefit both peoples in the Middle East and planning important coexistence programs for the Cleveland area. The result: an historic dinner with about 600 Clevelanders providing a new ambulance to Beit She'an, Cleveland's sister city in Israel, and seed money for a new pediatric oncology center at Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem.

The leadership of Ishmael & Isaac traveled to the Middle East to gauge the tangible and intangible results of those efforts and to investigate other ways to continue our work. I was invited to travel with the group and to lecture about a new technique for partial tonsillectomy developed by my partner at the Cleveland Clinic, Dr. Peter Kottal.

I had the opportunity to give that lecture in the historic room in which Winston Churchill gave Transjordan to King Hussein's great grandfather!

Ishmael & Isaac was founded on the belief that encouraging and enabling constructive contact among peoples is a prime way that we in the United States can provide benefit and hope on the ground in the Middle East. And we believe that a unified Jewish and Palestinian face in the United States makes those efforts dramatically more compelling.

Every available moment of our trip was used to learn about opportunities to provide health and humanitarian assistance to people living in very difficult circumstances in Israel and in the Palestinian territories.

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Shimon Peres, now head of the Peres Center for

bureaucratic and power-centered to do all the necessary work. "NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) are the next great power," he said.

Daniel Kurtzer, United States ambassador to Israel, outlined the "great benefits and challenges with this kind of work," and he provided us with a number of possible projects in the academic and NGO spheres.

Tawfiq Nasser, the impressive and multi-talented director of Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem, showed us the effective work being done there, with seed money from Ishmael & Isaac, to build a pediatric oncology center.

We learned how Shaya Waxner and Eitan Kerem, pediatricians at Hadassah Hospital on Mt. Scopus, are effectively providing the best medical care, and coexistence guidance, for an incredibly diverse clientele from all over the Middle East. Their best resident, Dr. Mohammed De'na, has provided first call coverage for Jewish and Arab victims of suicide terrorists. He is from the West Bank.



Medical care transcends politics as ambulances from Palestinian and Israeli communities are parked side by side at Hadassah Hospital in Jeru-usalem.

We met with an inspiring group of workers from the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) who are doing effective work in cooperative Israeli/Palestinian ventures. They partner with NGOs representing a variety of orientations including peace, human rights, academia, service and development.

When I asked their leader how Israelis who are constantly exposed to terrorism can continue to work with Palestinians, she essentially said, "Because it is the right thing to do." Her co-worker then slipped me a note informing me, "Her son was killed in a bus bombing eight years ago!"

We heard about the rationale for negotiating the Geneva Accords from Ron Pundak, one of the authors.

During our discussion with a diplomat from the Israel Foreign Ministry, Reda Mansour, our Palestinian friends had the opportunity to argue that the blockages (as opposed to security checkpoints) between West Bank towns are onerous and ineffective in deflecting terror, and that they may radicalize the population. The Palestinians were supported in this discussion by Jewish members of our group.

Later, in Ramallah, we had the opportunity to prod the Palestinian Authority minister of development and reconstruction, Mohamed Ishaya, to allow peace-seeking Palestinians to have their voice

es heard, perhaps even in the form of a peace march. In this effort the Jews were vigorously supported by our Palestinian friends.

As an organization, Ishmael & Isaac is non-political and our contacts were designed to learn ways to further our mission. However, a week together provided us with ample opportunity to discuss openly, intimately, thoroughly, and not always quietly our most heart-felt feelings and attitudes.

We learned what many of us had assumed and hoped - that there are Jews, Muslims, Christians, Israelis, Palestinians and Americans who want peace in the Middle East based on shared values of safe and secure borders for Israel and a Palestinian state. We observed that cooperative ventures between Palestinians and Israelis are surprisingly common, even though they have been severely hampered by security concerns since the second Intifada began.

We confirmed that the needs are enormous on both sides, and we concluded that people must provide a prod to help governments do the right thing. We feel that the combined communities of Jewish and Palestinian Americans can be uniquely empowered to help in this work.

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