

October 2021

Dear Johanna and members of the Board of the Matanel Foundation,

We hope that this letter finds you all in good health and that you will remain so during the course of the coming year. We are sending this report following an unusual year that required many modifications of the various components of the Center for Interfaith Leadership. The description of activities that follows will give expression to this reality.

REPORT OF ACTIVITIES

During this past trying and complicated year, we sent you reports and emails in order to keep you up-to-date on our activities regarding the Forum for Interfaith Leadership that you are so generously supporting. The challenges included (a) Covid-19 restrictions, including social distancing requirements, regarding work places and educational programming, and (b) the violence that broke out in Israeli mixed cities – specifically in those cities with significant Arab populations living side-by-side with the Jewish populations.

All of these factors required us to respond quickly and decisively to make changes in all of our programming. This was particularly true of our Interfaith Program. We will detail how we made every effort to transform this period of crisis and uncertainty into a period of new opportunities and initiatives.

In our application to the Foundation, we conveyed the overarching goal of our program: creating bridges of understanding and tolerance between the various faith communities, and serving as “task force” of faith leaders to alleviate tensions – at times violent – that can surface without any advanced warning between interfaith communities. In light of this goal, we presented two central objectives:

- Establishing a yearlong seminar for interfaith leaders in mixed cities to facilitate collaboration in building bridges of understanding, tolerance, dignity, respect and solidarity between the faith communities.
- Empowering the faith leaders to create programs in their communities to ward off friction and, should tensions and violence arise, to act as an emergency municipal task force for crisis management.

Already in 2020, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, we modified all of our programs and took the necessary actions to protect and ensure the safety of our staff and employees as well as of all the program participants. This led to many adjustments that we will describe in this report.

Moreover, 2020 also saw the escalation of tensions and violence in Jewish-Arab relations. This began with acts of violence in the Gaza region, which then spread to Israeli mixed cities. This affected virtually all efforts at interfaith collaboration at the municipal level. Radical fundamentalists in the Arab community pressured moderate Muslim leaders to cease participating in joint, interfaith activities, such as ours. This situation became even more complicated and dangerous with the outbreak of violence in Israel during May 2021. This was particularly prominent in Jerusalem, Lod and Jaffa.

Against this backdrop, Beit Morasha's Center for Interfaith Leadership responded to these challenges by finding the methodologies and techniques to continue with the program's mission. Here are some of the highlights of our activities during this period:

Overcoming Covid-19 restrictions regarding face-to-face encounters by using ZOOM technology

In accord with the restrictions of the Health Ministry and the requirement for social distancing, meetings and discussions of the faith leaders took place via ZOOM encounters. Key issues discussed included: addressing the central community challenges that the leaders faced during this Coronavirus period, and how the leaders adapted new ideas, initiatives, and programs for their respective communities.

A description of this process appeared in the blog (attached) posted in the "Times of Israel" by one of the Forum members, Rabbi Mordechai Cohen.

This change also affected the cost structure of the program (lower overall costs), as it was necessary to reduce the number of face-to-face meetings and to increase the use of technology, in terms of ZOOM and social media. We will elaborate on this in the other sections of the report.

Expanding the Group of Interfaith Leaders

Responding to the continuing and expanding Covid-19 restrictions, we utilized ZOOM technology to transform the pandemic limitations into an opportunity to enlarge the number of participants to include faith leaders from mixed cities throughout Israel – especially in the geographical north and south.

Testimonies and Photographs

We are attaching some of the brief testimonies (translated into English) of our program fellows as well as photographs of Forum members from various meetings.

The “Neighbors Series”

The next adjustment was the establishment of a Zoom-based series of digital encounters that we called “**Neighbors – Pleasure to Meet You!**” In this series, Netanel Yechieli, a senior staff member of Beit Morasha’s Forum of Faith Leaders, interviewed leading personalities of Israel’s varied faith communities. Through “Neighbors”, we expanded our audience and offered the series to viewers in Israel and abroad. This enabled them to get to know – and learn a lot about – our multi-faith neighbors in Israel, and benefit from an unusual perspective of the commitment of Israeli faith leaders to promoting goodwill and peace among all Israelis. The interviews were conducted in Hebrew, with simultaneous translation into English. Participation was free of charge and the number of participants ranged from approximately 100 to 350 per session. We are attaching two examples of the notices and advertisements of the “neighbors” zoom sessions that we disseminated primarily via social media.

Responding to the May 2021 Outbreak of Violence in Israel’s Mixed Cities

The May 2021 unexpected explosion of violence and animosity threatened the very fabric of interfaith relations in Israel. Beit Morasha’s community of interfaith leaders spent a great deal of time deliberating how best to respond to such a complex and threatening situation. Some of the members of the Forum were themselves the subject of attacks, verbal and physical. Yet, all of the members expressed the burden of responsibility to cooperate and to

collaborate. As a response to this crises, the Forum issued a joint video entitled **“Violence Has No Place in my Religion.”** Here is the link to the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQKbQm1nYl0>. Attached you will find the email we sent the Foundation. We are also presenting one of the recorded ZOOM sessions from the Neighbors series of encounters that took place after the outbreak of violence entitled **“Neighbors or Belligerents - A frank discussion with faith leaders from Lod, Haifa and Akko”** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yG-uc5PvGhI&t=78s>). Finally, we are attaching the **“Statement of the Forum of Interfaith Leaders in Israel”** prepared by our Forum members calling for an end to interfaith violence and the application of the golden rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The statements and the videos represent how the voice of the Forum is reaching out to a much wider population. The dissemination of the video and statement via various social media reached an audience of approximately 100,000.

Udi Kedem – Project Manager

Unfortunately, during the course of the year our program manager, Udi Kedem, was diagnosed with having a degenerative eye disease. At first, he was able to continue via the computer and ZOOM meetings but that soon became impossible. Netanel Yechieli, the senior program facilitator increased his involvement and assumed many of Udi’s responsibilities. Beit Morasha CEO Shai Hershkowitz also took on increased responsibilities and worked with and in support of Netanel.

Partnerships

During the course of the year, two key personalities initiated their association with Beit Morasha and the Interfaith Leadership Center.

The first was **Rabbi Bruce Lustig**, the senior rabbi at Washington Hebrew Congregation, the US capital's largest and oldest synagogue (founded in 1852), and the senior Jewish cleric participating in the Abu Dhabi based “Abrahamic Family House” complex that is promoting religious tolerance and education (see link: <https://www.prnewswire.com/ae/news-releases/the-higher-committee-of-human-fraternity-includes-rabbi-m-bruce-lustig-as-a-member-300919787.html>). The Center will include a Church, Mosque and Synagogue. We are working with Rabbi Lustig to establish the Interfaith Beit Midrash in the Synagogue complex. He invited Prof. Ish-Shalom to a series of discussions on how to move ahead with the Interfaith Beit Midrash initiative.

The Center also sparked the interest and enthusiasm of **Mr. Henrique Cymerman Benarroch** (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henrique_Cymerman), a Portuguese born Israeli citizen and international journalist with a unique relationship with Pope Francis (whom he brought to Israel for a Papal visit in 2014). We have asked Henrique to join the project in 2022 as a senior advisor. His understanding of the uniqueness of this project is based on how it takes interfaith dialogue and study to actual grass roots activities in Israel's multi-faith communities. This is particularly significant to him in a country that is so multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious. He sees this project as having the capacity for replication on a worldwide basis and we are now working with him to develop this concept.

Public Relations

We had not originally planned a significant PR component to the project. It became necessary for us to increase our PR activities in order to overcome the Covid-19 and security related restrictions of the year. One of the desired outcomes was, and is, that it exposed the program to a much larger and wider audience. This also required a much more active participation of Netanel Yechieli who also became the researcher and moderator of all of the "Neighbors" series broadcasts. During the year, we produced written material, brochures, advertisements, etc.

Budget Report for 2020-21

Attached is the budget report, with explanations next to each of the budget line items, that compares the actual expenses and revenues with the planned expenses and revenues. The overall picture shows that actual expenses and revenues were down by 13% compared to the original budget. As explained in detail in the "comments" section of the report, the overwhelming factor was the Covid-19 restrictions on social contact between the Beit Morasha staff (including lecturers and facilitators) and the faith leaders of the program. An unexpected outcome of the modifications to the program in response to the Covid-19 restrictions was the opportunity to engage a much wider audience via ZOOM technology and social media. As you will see there was a decrease in government support that was picked up by Beit Morasha through its resource development. There were also fluctuations in the expense categories, but as mentioned above, the overall result was an average deviation of 13%.

Plans for 2021-22

- **Program Expansion**

It appears that the Covid-19 situation is improving and we are planning to build on the successes of Year 1 and continue to **expand our operations via social media and Zoom technology** in order to reach wider population in Israel and abroad. We will also anticipate returning to our original format of regular sessions of the Interfaith Center as well as holding public seminars. We will thus continue to engage the general community while at the same time enlarging the participation of Israeli Interfaith leaders. An additional development is a planned program of **experiential educational tours with the faith leaders**. The purpose is two-fold: (a) they will interface throughout the country with different faith communities and their leadership, and (b) by touring and living together for three days, it will create a dynamic of building and reinforcing interpersonal relations between the faith leaders in a way that goes well beyond holding discussions or having seminars for the exchanges of ideas.

In addition to the above, during the coming year we will move ahead with the development, detailed planning and recruitment for two new initiatives within the framework of the Interfaith Leadership Center.

- **MIN'AD - the Forum of Women Faith Leaders**

The Center for Interfaith Leadership is comprised of male faith leaders only. Women's representation and involvement is still absent. Beit Morasha's history includes pioneering of programs for advancing Jewish scholarship and religious leadership for and by women. **MIN'AD**, as a key component of the Center for Interfaith Leadership, will bring together a core group of 15 to 20 senior Jewish, Druze, Muslim, Christian and Baha'i women who are leaders in their respective communities. **MIN'AD's** ultimate goal is to bring to the forefront the voice of these women as they add new and critical dimensions and thinking to the activities of the Center. They will study and work together to bring a distinctive perspective and amplify the common denominators between the five religions as female social activists in their respective communities. **MIN'AD** will amplify this voice preparing Israeli women community leaders to project their moral influence, foster dialogue and set priorities for their respective faith communities, in a way that will be of benefit to all of Israeli society. Tzipora Guttman, a Haredi female social activist with an MA in Public Policy from Hebrew University will coordinate **MIN'AD**. Tzipora is an alumnus of the Mandel Institute for Educational Leadership, she founded and led "Haredim

against Deportation" for the welfare of refugees from Eritrea and Sudan, and she founded "Kfar Shira" in the Galilee, a boarding school for at-risk Haredi teenagers.

- **The International Interfaith Beit Midrash**

The Interfaith Beit Midrash will be a center for joint study of religious texts, and spiritual and cultural treasures. As mentioned above, we are working with Rabbi Lustig of the Abrahamic Family House complex in Abu Dhabi to house a branch of the Beit Midrash in the Synagogue in addition to the activities in Jerusalem. This program will provide a framework for the development of creative interfaith thought, dialogue between faith leaders, and the development of initiatives and solutions to crises. The Beit Midrash will hold conferences and seminars in both Israel and Abu Dhabi under the joint leadership of Prof. Ish-Shalom and Rabbi Lustig. The Beit Midrash participants will publish essays and position papers on digital platforms reaching wide audiences through social networks and the media. The following are sample topics for discussion and study

- Basic moral values and ethics common to all religions
- The foundations of shared beliefs and faith
- Religious tolerance – its roots in faith and liberal values
- Fanaticism and moderation
- Values of religion and tradition in light of modern world-values
- Jewish and Islamic law - and National Legal Systems
- Religious commandments versus moral imperatives
- The religious perspective of national conflicts
- The "clash of civilizations" – are they truly in conflict?
- Creating a shared future vision for believers in the Abrahamic religions

- **Finances**

We are attaching the operating budget for 2021-22 that also includes the development costs for the new programs as well as the adaptations and expansions described above. The overall budget for the year is \$190,000 and our request for support of Foundation for years 2 of the project is \$40,000. The total budget is higher than what we had planned a year ago – mainly due to the impact of Covid on the program, the new opportunities and program development that resulted from that, together with the need for program adaptation – all described in the above narrative. On the revenue side, we are also planning increased resource development for the program. We have not increased our request from the Foundation, which remains at \$40,000.