

# Spirituality without Borders

## Retreat

Alexandria Beach - Sinai, Egypt



Morning exercises to build awareness.

Between the 23<sup>rd</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> April 2009, in the midst of security alerts and travel warnings, 40 change makers gathered in the Sinai – Egypt to connect, build and sustain relationships, deepen spiritually, network and inspire one-another. The participants were diverse in religion, age (16-55yrs) and nationality coming from Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Israel, Austria, America, England, Germany and Peru.

Over three intensive days Arkan, an American Indian ceremonial leader and teacher from Peru with initiation into the Lakota tribal tradition, shared the wisdoms and practices of **Essential Spirituality - Beyond and Behind Religion, Earth Based and Universal**. The goal of this unique union was to help regional activists secure their own strength and unity as a global community, enabling them to become anchors in the midst of conflict, fear and violence.

*“The retreat was a unique experience of sharing and growth, a meeting of hearts and minds in a way which was invigorating and inspirational for the participants. For people working in the various related fields of social and environmental change, the opportunity to connect with peers from the region under the guidance of a person whom represents in his life and work a vision of a different and positive future was simply a great gift”.*

Elan (Israel)

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To achieve this goal, the group undertook an intensive process involving discussions, trainings in awareness and attention, and the participation in traditional Sweat lodge and Vision Quest ceremonies. The Sweat Lodge is a ceremonial sauna used by American Indian peoples for healing, cleansing and deep prayer. Over the course of the retreat the group worked together in building a Sweat lodge and two ceremonies was conducted. For most people, this was a first time experience and the unique inter-faith character of the group meant prayers were said not only in the traditional Lakota language but Arabic and Hebrew too. The whole process proved to be very strong and unifying.



Using locally available materials the group works together to build a Sweat Lodge.



A young Egyptian participant expressing his thoughts during one of the discussions.

On the second night of the retreat, 23 participants chose to experience a mini Vision Quest ceremony spending 12 hours alone, in silence and fasting on the beach in very stormy weather. The purpose of this time was for each person to establish their own direct connection to the divine, praying for guidance and visions. This was also an extremely powerful, new and unique experience. The remainder of the group remained in prayer and kept a fire lit all night. In this way our entire community was praying for the vision and healing of all.

*"I always thought I had a deep connection with myself, but after this retreat I feel an even deeper one, which comes with a feeling of responsibility to be wise and to truly be an element of change. This experience was a gift to me and now I must give back."*

Hanan (Jordan)

These intensive first two days helped create a soulful container for the third day, when questions and discussions arose around issues that were of more direct concern to the different people of the region. The issues included fear, trust, acceptance and pragmatic engaged spirituality for the well being of the Middle East. In turn the group discussed follow up projects and future collaborations. On the final evening of the retreat the entire group travelled to another camp to participate in sacred fire ceremony for the healing of Mother Earth.



The Israel participants of the group break out to discuss the main issues they face.

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Other very important goals of the retreat were to facilitate bridge building across divides, the nurturing of important networks between individuals and organisations, and the envisioning of future collaborations. Amongst the participants, the level of activism and extent of experiences with inter-faith or dialogue meetings in the Middle East varied considerably. For some this was a novel experience, and the opportunity to meet the “other” in a safe and peaceful space was both very challenging and healing. Yet, for the majority of participants this was an valuable opportunity to reconnect with people whom they had met in other regional peacebuilding or reconciliation trainings, programs, gatherings or workshops.

*“I was given the opportunity to sincerely connect to my Palestinian brother and open my heart without reservation, asking for forgiveness for the wrongs that my people have done to his people. I was moved when Nidal answered that not only does he have forgiveness for me, but love. Crying together was such a relief. This was no peace propaganda aimed at making an impression on the media. It was two people in the middle of the desert, in the dark, with only candles and stars to see by, yearning for trust and understanding”.*

Hava (Israel)

*“Such great diversity of people coming together was truly unbelievable. It's a unique event of spiritual sharing, but also one more step, however small, along the right path to making peace. I was delighted to attend this event”*

Mamduch (Egypt)

Some of the participants affiliated organisations include; the Palestine Peace Society, Arava Institute for Environmental Studies and the Arava Alumni Peace and Environmental Network, the Sulha Peace project, United Religions Initiative, Search for Common Ground, Youth Encounter Sustainability, ME Youth Leadership JAM, Tamera – the Middle East Peace Research Village, Gatherings of Unity and Light I & II - Dead Sea, Yad Be Yad, International Day of Peace Organisation, Havayati, Towo Group and Kabalove.



Jordanian and Palestinian participants.

Beyond the 3 days of the actual retreat most of the group stayed longer in Sinai spending almost one week together, this is a wonderful amount of time for deep relationship building and rejuvenation.

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*“This meeting was a significant turning point in my life. I have many dreams and ambitions and after this retreat I received a lot of tools, support and even partners to make these dreams come true. In fact we have already begun working on an initiative!”*

Hanan (Palestinian Israeli)



The group was diverse in nationalities and religions. In the picture are American, Egyptian, Palestinians and British participants.

**The Strategic Vision:** Now that a core group of individuals from the Middle East have experienced the benefits of the American Indian ceremonies and wisdoms and the power of going through such a process in a community, there was a unanimous desire from the group to continue this process of spiritual anchoring. The next stage will be a full 7 day retreat including a 4 days Vision Quest ceremony to be held in south Turkey in September 2009. This retreat will also be open to other Middle East change makers, from a wider range of countries that were not able to participate in the first retreat. The goal of the Middle East Vision Quest is for us as a community and individually, to find a common and creative approach to our peace work and clarity in what is our vision and calling in this time. These answers will come from a personal connection to the divine achieved by reaching a place of deep silence. In addition, 3 participants from the retreat were so inspired that they have already started a Palestinian - Israeli collaboration to organize a third Gathering of Unity and Light in June 09. It is expected that more collaborations will evolve as we continue along this process.

*“After being in Israel for 5 months without meeting any Muslims and hearing a lot of bad stuff about Palestinians and Arabs it was an 'eye opener' to meet people from the other side of the fence. I realized that at heart, despite our cultural, political, and religious differences, we are similar at heart, and all share the same want for a peaceful existence. It is my Prayer that more people from all sides will have an opportunity to meet their counterparts from other practices and cultures and realize their similarities.”*

David (UK)

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Members of the Musaique musicians for peace group connecting through their instruments.

**Musaique and Spirituality without Borders:** In Oct 2008 Lee Ziv (Israeli) co-founded with Jamil Sarag (Jordanian) the Musaique Musicians for Peace cooperation circle, supported by the United Religions Initiative. The project brings musicians from across the Middle East together for 5 days retreats using music and prayer through music, as a way to build bridges and then outreach to the local community through performances. In the past 5 months there were two Musaique meetings for regional musicians in Jordan. With eight of the core Musaique group participating in this retreat, it also became an informal third meeting, in fact Musaique and the Eco-Spirituality projects have developed together over the last 6 months and are in many ways interdependent.

**Words of Appreciation:** Immense gratitude goes to the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies ([www.arava.org](http://www.arava.org)) who has supported the work and vision of the Eco-Spirituality project and the people's peace fund ([www.peoplespeacefund.org](http://www.peoplespeacefund.org)) for their financial support which provided scholarships for 4 Palestinians participants.

### Biographies:

**Arkan**, was born Arequipa, Peru and is now living in the Arawaka ceremonial grounds in New Mexico. He has visited the Middle East (Jordan, Palestine, Israel and Egypt) on four occasions offering his experience in teaching Earth Based Spirituality and leading Vision Quests and other American Indian ceremonies for the past 20 years. On each visit it was evident that the universal wisdoms he shares, and the fact that he is coming from a neutral place, can act as a glue to bring people together to work on raising the collective consciousness and helping them to empower themselves through inner healing work. Arkan was trained in a traditional way by his Elders and given the responsibility and permission to conduct these ancient ceremonies as a service to all people. It is important to note that American Indian ceremonial leaders are not interested in converting others; their wish is only to **share** the wisdom of their ancestors to their relatives around the world, and offer this as "medicine" for all.

**Ilana Meallem** completed her MA with honours in Environmental Studies at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies (AIES), a unique interdisciplinary peace building program promoting Middle East cooperation in environmental protection. In 2007 she began work for AIES, focusing on numerous projects including renewable energy, environmental and public health in the Bedouin Sector and eco-spirituality.

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One of her major focuses is on bringing together young leaders from across the Middle East for intense retreats, inner sharing and exploration of spirituality and inner peace work. Within this realm and in response to the immense violence and suffering experienced in Gaza and Israel in Jan 09 Ilana co-organized with Hanan Jaffly two Gatherings of Unity and Light at the Dead Sea, bringing together over 250 Palestinians, Jordanians and Israelis for two days to pray, build new friendships, rejuvenate, heal, and find hope. She is currently a participant in the first Search for Common Ground-Young Social Entrepreneurs Program and a founding member of the Musaique musicians for peace project. For more information or to support her work contact; [Ilana@arava.org](mailto:Ilana@arava.org) or 00972-508737911

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