



# Crossing the Divide

By Miriam Rinn

In 2004, the JCC Association Israel Task Force, under the chairmanship of Ron Prehogan, presented its report, "Israel and the JCC: Partners in Jewish Discovery." The report recommended that JCCs should serve as forums for open discussions about Israel. "JCCs are ideally suited to provide welcoming, non-threatening space for airing differing views about Israel. According to educator Robbie Gringras, relationships that seek to transcend superficiality must be based on 'wrestling, not hugging'; hence the importance of fostering opportunities to grapple with genuine issues and differing perspectives about Israel, which can most appropriately take place in the neutral space of the JCC." We wanted to report on what some folks in the JCC Movement are doing to get the conversation started.

**I**f you ask Ann Gonski, director of JCC Association affiliated Camp Tawonga, why a program that encourages dialogue between Israelis and Arabs belongs at a Jewish camp, she has a clear and direct answer. "We have to give [children] tools to build a future," she said. "We do it in multiple different ways. For Jewish children who have seen nothing but despair, we felt we had to show them another model."

For the fourth September in a row, Camp Tawonga is running Oseh Shalom ~ Sanea al Salam, Peacemakers Weekend. Last year, 93 people attended the family camp, with about twenty attendees flying in from the Middle East. "This year we budgeted for 180," Gonski said, adding that they've already had 120 requests to come. They hope to bring more than fifty people from Gaza and the West Bank this year, but are limited by their fundraising. Len and Libby Traubman of San Mateo, California, co-founders of the Peacemakers Weekend, do

the primary fundraising. "They have been our indispensable colleagues," Gonski said. The camp began as a generic after-Labor Day family camp, but by "the third year we developed a tight and focused curriculum," Gonski said. The program revolves around compassionate listening and telling stories, while leaving judgment aside. "We're teaching the skills of dialogue, and as camp directors we're pretty good at that." Former Arab prisoners have connected with former IDF soldiers, and a Jewish-Arab teen theater group performed. According to Gonski, six families from the Galilee—three Jewish families and three Israeli Arab—get together all the time as a result of their interaction at the Peacemakers Weekend.

In addition to Arabs and Jews from Israel, participants come from North America. "We always get Israelis, particularly Israelis who have been part of the coexistence movement," Gonski said. The pastor of a Palestinian Roman Catholic church in San Francisco has

attended, and has told his parishioners about his experience. All the Peacemakers participants have come through personal connections. “It’s a little harder for us to reach Muslim Palestinians because we don’t have the contacts,” Gonski added.

Gonski had to educate her board about the program, convincing them that it was safe as well as important. “People are scared of this stuff, afraid there will be a huge backlash. We haven’t had any negative feedback. It’s been all good for us.” She’s heard from many small groups in Israel that are doing co-existence work. In fact, five different groups will be sending representatives to this year’s camp prepared to do some difficult and wrenching work. “This isn’t a vacation, we’re very clear about this,” Gonski said.

On the other side of the continent, when Queens College Professor Mark Rosenblum spoke about his innovative college class on the Mideast conflict at Meet the Author at the Central Queens YM-YWHA in New York City, the room was filled with eager and attentive listeners. Meet the Author is a program of the Hevesi Jewish Heritage Library that invites writers and speakers on important current issues. The revolutionary aspect of Rosenblum’s course is his insistence that students who come in as advocates for one side of the conflict thoughtfully prepare and present a powerful argument for the other side. It’s an intellectual and psychological exercise in crossing borders, and it can be distressing for people who are accustomed to staying on their own familiar side of the fence. “The students found it very arduous and quite painful,” Rosenblum said about the experience.

Audience members at the Central Queens Y were especially intrigued to learn that Rosenblum invited local older adults to audit the class. Many in the room were retired and knowledgeable about the political situation in the Middle East. They expressed their own opinions strongly during the question-and-answer session. Rosenblum told them that some of the seniors in the class were Holocaust survivors, who also had very strong feelings about Israel’s security. “The idea is to leave with a greater level of complexity that allows you still to be an advocate for your community,” said Rosenblum. He told the audience that local Queens high-school teachers were also invited to the class, with the hope that they would replicate the experience in their own classrooms.

After telling the audience about a very religious Muslim woman, active in her mosque, who wrote a compelling Zionist narrative, Rosenblum explained that his goal was not to change his students’ minds, but to push them to reexamine their assumptions and evasions. And everyone comes in with assumptions, he said. “That’s part of what the conflict is about—myths, self-deceptions, and lies.”

There are numerous opportunities for JCCs to organize innovative Israel dialogue programs that challenge people seriously to examine their beliefs and opinions. “Many Jewish people stay away from Israel and indeed even from the Jewish community because they are troubled by the [Middle East] conflict,” said Ron Prehogan, chair of the Israel Task Force. “Hosting a program like this demonstrates that the Jewish community recognizes the conflict that resides in many of us, and shows an openness to hear a different perspective. I believe that a program such as this in a JCC has the potential to connect many Jewish people to the Jewish community and Israel in a very powerful way.”

