



The Fifth Bi-Annual Meeting of the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders, Oxford (UK), March 2012

On the final day of the meeting, leaders were asked to reflect on what had been accomplished. They were asked to consider three questions:

- 1. What does Interreligious Friendship mean to you?***
- 2. How do you practise Interreligious Friendship?***
- 3. What messages and practices of Interreligious Friendship can you take back from this meeting to your community?***

Some chose to respond independently to each question while others integrated their answers.

Gilla Rosen



Interreligious Friendship Through the Prism of the Elijah Interfaith Institute

There is a human need and a human longing for friendship that is often bounded by ethnicity or belief or garb or prejudice. The first step is to allow for the non-essential to drop away in order for the essential being and person to connect to others in friendship which is probably (as far as science can make out today) a natural state for the human being. In other words, interreligious friendship may be viewed as a natural outgrowth rather than a battle to be won.

The one who is deeply involved in another faith tradition is a natural possibility for a friend. There is a journey we are both travelling; there are ethical issues we are both debating using as tools both our texts and traditions and our own consciences which have been formed in relationship with our backgrounds; our souls have similar longings. Sometimes it is also enriching to share happiness or sorrow with someone both a part of and apart from our immediate experience. The deep questions are shared – the ways that they can be perceived and worked on are enriched by the contact with difference.

On a personal level this is intelligible and does happen. But deep friendships can actually foster exclusivity – they are by nature creations based on a finite number of individuals (usually 2). What is the relationship between these deep and beautiful friendships and interreligious coexistence? Are they necessarily helpful?

Are 'loving your neighbour as yourself' and 'This is the Book of the generations of mankind' prescriptions for great individual occurrences of connection to a particular friend based on the self or of G-d in the other? Or are they demands to go beyond the natural need for friendship to attempt to relate to many (or all?) others in this way?



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‘Acquire for yourself a friend’ relates to the individual need; Rabbinic understanding of loving your neighbor relates to a broader attempt at friendship.

One takes back one’s friendship to one’s community because one’s friends are a part of oneself. In my case, I have students waiting for a discussion about the week scheduled for next week. In addition, my new friends’ ways of looking at ideas and emotions will influence my prayer and teaching. Some of my students who are [baalei teshuva] [newly religious] on their journeys are waiting to deal together with issues raised by these friendships. These relationships are different from academic relationships shared with very different others (also from other faiths) because of the levels of being and belief which are accessed in these relationships but not in academic ones. The importance of chemistry in particular relationships is similar to that found in other relationships both within family and cultural milieu and interculturally generally. The difference lies in the depth of the shared dimension despite its exceedingly varied, and at times even jarring, garb.

However, beyond the natural friendships there is the dimension and the demand to seek the possibility of friendship in as many directions as possible, in as organic a manner as possible in order to foster networks of positive relationships.

In this vein, we have exchanged ideas about programs in our different communities as well as problems and hesitations and sacrifices. We are also thinking about the difference between the possibilities for communities like Israel or the Sudan in which different religious/ethnic groups are in clear conflict and ones like the US or the UK in which work may be just as essential but easier. I would like to think in terms of at least two different types of interfaith friendships – ones in which faith plays an important part – essential for religious leaders – and one in which the recognition of the Godly humanity of the other is the essential goal and substance may vary.

The music and the view create a tranquility which foster the work that needs to be done. What about taking the whole of humanity on a trip?