

Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem

Religious Peace at the UN and at Home

On July 18th 2017, at the invitation of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), senior members of the Middle East Religious Peace Initiative and I presented our Initiative at the United Nations. Attending the extraordinary event were the new UN Secretary-General, Mr. António Guterres, the Spanish Foreign Minister Mr. Alfonso Dastis, who flew to New York for a few hours just to support the Initiative, the High Representative of the UNAOC, Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser and numerous representatives of institutions from around the world. We presented the fruits of the Initiative to date and our future plans in the areas of education, research, work with senior and young religious leadership in the region and our efforts to change the atmosphere and help enable peace between Israel and the Palestinians. The message and testimonies we presented attest to the fact that religion and tradition need not be considered as the basis for incitement, hatred and death, but rather the opposite. Our delegation represents a very wide range of senior religious leaders who are committed to working towards reconciliation, cooperation and peace. We were received with great enthusiasm. The religious leaders on both sides have taken upon themselves the responsibility to work within their communities in order to change the situation. They are committed to broadening the Peace Tent in order to bring in many of those who until now had lurked outside and tried to topple it.

In addition to myself, the UN Secretary General and the other dignitaries, presenting at the event were Rabbi Avi Gisser –Council head for the state religious educational system and the Rabbi of the city of Ofra, Sheikh Raed Badir – the senior adjudicator of the Islamic Movement and a member of the Palestinian Ulama (Religious Council), Rabbanit Adina Bar-Shalom who established the first Haredi College, His Beatitude Theophilus III – the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem and two senior Palestinians who were not able to get visas to enter the U.S. - Sheikh Imad Abed Al-Hamid Al-Falouji – Director of the 'Adam Center' in Gaza and one of the founders of Hamas and the El Qassam Brigade and Dr. Nasser Al Din Al-Shaer – Deputy Prime Minister in the last unity government of the Palestinian Authority representing Hamas and a senior lecturer on Islam at Al Najah University in Nablus.

After the event, we met with the UN Secretary General for over an hour and he committed to support the Religious Peace Initiative and to raise the issue in his coming visit to Jerusalem and Ramallah.

We returned to the Holy Land to face a terrible reality in which the sanctity of the land was in danger. It was precisely at a time when people in the region and beyond believed we were on the verge of a religious war. The lofty and meaningful words spoken and commitments solemnly made in New York at the glorious UN were immediately put to the test. We were asked to utilize our ties and the great trust we have established in recent years with both sides of the conflict. In particular, we worked with the Jerusalem Police, people whom I can testify to truly caring for the public's safety, and the many factions of the Muslim religious leadership of the Waqf,

with whom we have been working to form a coalition for Religious Peace in Jerusalem. While the government and the Shin Bet held talks with political officials, the people in the field had to come to an arrangement in order to end the affair peacefully. With the agreement and encouragement of the governments in both Amman and Ramallah Sheikh Raed Badir, Sheikh Safwat and I, with the help of Dr. Nasser a-Din a-Shaer and many others, worked with the Waqf.

But there were many extremist forces who were against the arrangement being reached and others who made additional demands in order to promote one agenda or another. For many, it would have been fine to have allowed the situation to explode completely, leading to a local and regional breakdown with levels of bloodshed the scope of which no one could predict. Of course, the bloodshed that did occur, including the horrific acts of terror are a great shame and there were no shaheeds (martyrs) nor heroes here. Let us speak clearly - It is clear to me that we reached an agreement at the last minute and that all of us, except for the most extreme, are relieved. The Waqf also openly stated that anyone who incites or practices violence in a holy place has no place in Al-Aqsa. I believe that this is an opening for hope for the future. We must live together. This is our fate and our destiny. This is true not only on the Temple Mount, but throughout the entire Holy Land.