

The Impact of Jewish-Arab Intercultural Educational Encounters: Qualitative and Quantitative Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper will report on the methodology and results of a pioneering course in Jewish-Arab Interreligious Dialogue involving both Jewish and Arab students undertaken at Bar-Ilan University, Israel under the auspices of its School of Communication and in cooperation with the Interfaith Encounter Association. The course was structured around joint discussion topics on commonalities between Judaism and Islam such as in customs, religious rituals such as prayer, family life and holidays. Based on qualitative and quantitative results, in two course cycles, the efficacy of the intercultural approach for promoting perception change, and relationship building and transformation between Jews and Arabs was affirmed.

Keywords: Dialogue, Israel, Jewish, Arab, Education, Intercultural, Interreligious,

1. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to describe and analyze the contribution of an on-going Jewish-Arab intercultural/interreligious course carried out at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, an institution devoted to Jewish tradition and a commitment to modern scholarship, that has been conceived and carried out by this researcher, in the role of a scholar practitioner. The course entitled “Jewish-Arab Interreligious Dialogue’ represents a cutting edge approach to dialogue and peace education as it has demonstrated the positive impact which inter-religious dialogue can have on mutual perceptions and relationship transformation. The evaluation will be based on both qualitative and quantitative perspectives.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical background of the course was conceived by the author against the background of field and research experience (Abu-Nimer, 2001; Bekerman 2002; Mollov 2019; Mollov and Lavie, 2001, 2006) over the years concerning the efficacy of the interreligious/intercultural approach to dialogue between Jews and Arabs. Researchers have contended that contact and dialogue between Jews and Arabs organized around common religious themes in Islam and Judaism can alter mutual perceptions towards positive outcomes and promote relationship building and transformation.

Although counter intuitive, we suggest in line with other research in this area that religion can indeed serve as a bridge between Jews and Arabs and not merely serve as an escalatory influence as is commonly assumed (Fox 1999, 2003; Huntington 1993; Jeurgensmeyer 1993).

However beginning in the late 1990’s researchers have tracked a variety of dialogues and religiously based intercultural encounters in which perceptions have changed to a more favourable position measured by both qualitative material and quantitative data based on before and after surveys (Mollov and Lavie 2001, 2006, 2016). Most interesting is the fact that the religious participants, who have generally been the most negative in their initial perceptions of the “other “ have undergone a significant process of positive perception transformation. Most of the efforts surveyed have been conducted either by the Israel Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA) and/or at Bar-Ilan University.

2.1 Case Study

This case study will consist of an evaluation of two course cycles of the Jewish-Arab Interreligious Dialogue Course, the first which took place during the 2018-2019 academic year followed by a second cycle in the 2019-2020 academic year.

In the first course cycle approximately 30 students from the English International Program under the auspices of the School of Communications at Bar-Ilan University, comprised of approximately 50% Jews, 30 % Arabs (all Moslems with the exception of one Christian Arab student) and 20% Christians or other religions, primarily from Europe and Asia; studied in a year long course entitled Jewish-Arab Interreligious Dialogue, which was also conducted in cooperation with the IEA and reflected its best practices. The Jewish students were either visiting students from abroad for their B.A. studies or had become permanent residents and/or citizens with some having completed service in the Israeli Army; the Arab students were all residents and citizens of the State of Israel.

The dialogue course was based upon three educational philosophic pillars of fostering “mutual respect, self respect and mutual enrichment”. The 23 session course was constructed around student presentations on common themes in Judaism, Islam and Christianity such as dietary laws, Halacha and Shariah, prayer, main festivals and observances and value oriented themes such as charity and proper interpersonal relations. Particularly poignant was a session devoted to pilgrimages in the three faiths, with Moslem students describing the powerful experience of the Haj to Mecca including the sense of solidarity with Muslims the world over; and Jewish participants describing the pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem; with one participant describing an interfaith visit to the Temple Mount and the transcendent spirituality experienced, which the Moslem students could readily identify with. In addition a number of joint holiday celebrations were held such as a joint Channukah candle lighting ceremony and a joint Iftar dinner. Particularly memorable was a course visit to the Arab locale of Kfar Kassem to have a tour and explanation of the main Mosque along with Moslem prayer rituals and also to hear about the terrible events of the massacre inflicted upon the Arab residents of the City by Israeli Border Police 1956 which has been memorialized and condemned by the State of Israel as a whole. This was preceded in the week prior by a tour of the Main Campus Synagogue to expose the students to Jewish prayer rituals.

Importantly, knowledge acquisition and intercultural relationships were furthered in the course by required research papers written by students in mixed groups of two or three, including Jews, Moslems, Christians and Confucians. High level papers featuring comparative analyses were produced on themes such as prayer, dietary laws, fasting, charity, marriage, and family life from an interreligious perspective.

As an additional feature of the course, each session began with a short lesson in basic Arabic terms and greetings for the Jewish and other non-Arabic students; and given the basic Hebrew fluency of the Arab students, short terms referring to Jewish religious rituals and terms in Hebrew were taught for their benefit. Conceptual tools of the course were based on the contact hypothesis (Allport 1954; Amir 1969), identification of commonalities as a basis for perception change (Rokeach 1960) and the promotion of sustained dialogue and relationship transformation (Lederach1997; Saunders 1999). Institutional support was also forthcoming particularly through a special visit to the home of the President of Israel, whose vision of “Hope for Israel” has sought to spearhead intergroup understanding in Israel, of the type advanced in the Bar-Ilan course.

2.2 Evaluation

Evaluation/impact of the course was measured by both quantitative data and qualitative reactions by the students who were required to submit written personal reflections on the impact of the course. The written reflections were most instructive and strongly attested to the efficacy of such a course organized around interreligious themes. A number of students recalled their initial anxiety when they began their participation in the course, fearing discord and conflict; however later were enthusiastic about the strength of relationships building which had occurred. Other students referred to the great knowledge of Islam, Judaism and Christianity which they had acquired along with an understanding of their commonalties and its impact on their perceptions of the “other”. One student in particular who had served in the Israeli Army and proudly identified as a politically conservative religious Zionist came to believe that “peace is an option”.

Although politics were not directly addressed the course offered an opportunity to more deeply appreciate the identity and core values of each group which were rooted ultimately in religion, which underlines the conflict and generated the realization that both Jews and Arabs need to coexist together in the same territory and on the grass roots level can be encouraged to visualize relationships of a different sort.

2.3 Quantitative Results

As indicated earlier, a quantitative survey based evaluation was also conducted. The survey utilized quantitative research questionnaires used previously (Mollov and Lavie 2001) and which were distributed to the Jewish students (designated as “J”) and the Arab students (designated as “A”) both at the beginning of the course (“Before”) and at the end of the course (“After”). The results appear below in Table 1.

Data Categories

The results of the questionnaires were analyzed and divided into five factors as dependent variables for an attitude and vis - a - versa.

Each factor was measured according to different questions.

- FACTOR (A)** Considered willingness of subject to have contact with other side (Direct attitude)
- FACTOR (B)** Inquired into the subject’s perception of him/her (Perception)
- FACTOR (C)** Considered willingness of subject to have contact in other areas (Contact willingness)
- FACTOR (D)** Assessed general attitude regarding the other side (General Attitude)
- FACTOR (E)** This factor examined how each side evaluates the other’s characteristics (Traits)

Each question could be answered on a scale from 1-5; with 1 representing the most favorable attitude.

Table 1

			N	Mean	Std. Deviation				
JBefore	FactorA_	1.00	9	2.0159	0.39412				
		2.00	10	1.5571	0.34634				
		3.00	11	1.7662	0.30821				
		4.00	3	1.4762	0.16496				
JAfter	FactorB_	1.00	9	2.5556	0.59658				
		2.00	10	2.3667	0.43780				
		3.00	11	2.5000	0.47434				
		4.00	3	2.2500	0.25000				
ABefore	FactorC_	1.00	9	1.8889	0.57434				
		2.00	10	1.6750	0.56581				
		3.00	11	1.7045	0.55698				
		4.00	3	1.2500	0.43301				
AAfter	FactorD_	1.00	9	2.1778	0.52387				
		2.00	10	1.9300	0.47152				
		3.00	11	1.8318	0.54142				
		4.00	3	1.5333	0.41633				
JBefore	FactorE_	1.00	9	3.4568	1.31872				
		2.00	10	2.7444	1.24727				
		3.00	11	3.0013	0.53115				
		4.00	3	2.9259	0.16973				

As evident, in almost all categories both Jews and Arabs in the course experienced positive perception and attitudinal changes with the most substantial registered by Jews in Factor A; Arabs in Factor C; and Jews in Factor E. Thus the quantitative questionnaire data responses indicated a substantial degree of perception and attitudinal improvement, attesting to the positive impact of the course, which bolstered the qualitative research feedback.

3.1 Second Course Cycle

The second course cycle held during the fall semester of the academic year 2019-20 was built according to a similar structure and methodology as the first cycle. The breakdown of Jewish, Moslem and Christian students was similar to the first year however the addition of an Israeli Druze student enriched the course discourse while absent were Confucian students from the PRC as in the previous year. Highlights included a joint Channukah celebration, a visit to the Campus Synagogue and once again a field trip to a Mosque-this time in the large mixed Arab-Jewish neighborhood of Jaffa adjacent to southern Tel Aviv.

While in this cycle we did not conduct a quantitative research survey, the students offered their qualitative impressions and experiences through the required reflection papers as in the first cycle. We refer here to a number of comments by the students which reflect once again the positive impact of the course. A religious Jewish student, originally from England who had served in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) recalled his initial negative mid-set towards religious Arabs based on his experiences as a resident of Jerusalem given the frequent terror attacks in the city, along with his service in the IDF on the Lebanese border. However with the progression of the course, he recalled that he would

“forget about politics” and “not just listen but hear and try to break down the barriers which had split the nations apart”. He cited as a highlight the class visit to the Mosque in Jaffa and particularly the “warm and welcoming” attitude of the Muezzin (Moslem prayer leader) as he gave a tour of the Mosque and explanation of the Moslem prayer rituals. He was also impressed by the layout of the Mosque and its similarity to some Jewish Synagogues along with the commonality of some Moslem and Jewish prayers. In sum he reflected that Islam was no longer “a distant and contradictory religion to his own” but rather Moslems as a “brother that had been separated from us at birth”; as “Yitzchak and Ishmael were brothers separated but ultimately and undeniability both sons of Abraham and monotheism”.

Another Jewish student recalled her uneasiness at the outset of the course then subsequently as a result of some of the activities such as the joint Chanukka celebration a more “relaxed feel to the course” developed and by the end she discerned a “general sense of comfortable spirit all around.” She also cited the visit to the Mosque in Jaffa as a major highlight and which contributed to the perception of closeness of the two religions and the experience of being “let into the sacred space” of the Arab students. She was also surprised to learn and impressed that Moslem women did not feel oppressed by the modest clothing such as the hijab (head covering) which many Moslem women wear by their own choice. This student was also pleased to learn of the close personal relations in Arab families and the family nature of religious celebration, as so similar to that prevailing in Jewish families such as her own. She reflected that as a result of the course and friendships formed that she found the gaps between Jews and Arabs decrease in perceiving the many similarities between the two groups.

Another Jewish woman in the course, religious in orientation was impressed by the discussion of modesty in both Islam and Judaism and how an appreciation of a Moslem woman’s voluntary decision to wear an hijab resonated with her as a Jewish woman who also observes the similar Jewish laws of modesty. She was “also fascinated to learn about many of the [Arab] students’ love for the month of Ramadan, and the enjoyment and spirituality they derived from the physical act of fasting, as opposed to being tired and exhausted, which is what I would have assumed.” She also cited the trip to the Mosque in Jaffa and the bonding with the Arab students which it engendered as highlights. She felt a particular bond with an Arab student who helped her don a headscarf in traditional Islamic style as two “equal, religiously observant women”.

Finally she felt grateful to learn a few important rudimentary Arabic words, an opportunity which motivated her to “study Arabic outside of the classroom”. Arab students too were greatly affected in a positive way by the course. One Moslem Arab woman student came to realize how similar Islam is to other religions, in particular concerning fasting and faith. She was impressed how Judaism assigns the Hebrew month of Elul, the last month of the Hebrew calendar, as “a time to meditate and work on oneself” in anticipation of the Hebrew New Year. She likened this to the period of moral preparation two months before the advent of Ramadan. She reflected on the similarities between Yom Kippur and Ramadan as the fasting and meditation in both religions “helps us be a better person and a better version of ourselves.”

She indicated that she came to campus from her home far away for the course on an inconvenient day of the week, but deemed the effort “worth it” given her deep enjoyment and satisfaction of the class including the opportunity of making close Jewish friends and encountering Jewish culture particularly around family oriented Passover rituals. She reflected that she gained a “better appreciation of the other group’s religiously based culture, while reinforcing my own”. A major highlight of the course for her was the experience of visiting the Campus Synagogue. She also was enriched by one of the class discussions on Jewish prayer, whose strictures and rules were both similar and different to that of Islam

Another Arab student cited the satisfaction which she had for her first opportunity to engage in discussion with non-Moslem students. She also cited the satisfaction which she had in learning about aspects of Judaism including Judaism’s laws of modesty, such as hair covering for women, similar to that of Islam, which she had no knowledge of before. However she recalled that the highlight of the course was the visit to the Campus Synagogue, as she had never seen the inside of a Synagogue before which was “an amazing experience..that she will never forget”. She was also pleased to learn about the similarity of certain prayers with those of Islam such as the prayer for rain in the winter.

An additional Arab Moslem woman student expressed her appreciation for gaining an understanding of the elements which “both Judaism and Islam share, such as: modesty, prayer... and the similarity between the Arabic and Hebrew languages.” She also referred most positively for the opportunity to learn more about the Druze religion which is considered “most private and unfamiliar” finding it the religion that is the most “unique, different and distinct.”

Finally, in acknowledging that the course afforded her an opportunity to learn more about her own religion she felt a "sense of responsibility" to portray Islam in an accurate and respectful fashion given the distortions in the media concerning the "image of Islam." This is in line with one of the goals of the course to enable the students to achieve self-respect as well as mutual respect.

Another very enthusiastic Arab woman student spoke about her excellent experience in gaining more understanding of the similarities between Judaism and Islam such as in fasting, prayer, humility and other religious rituals. In particular she cited the special and "beautiful feeling" in celebrating some of the Channukah customs in class. She also recalled her "pleasure in seeing her fellow [Jewish] students trying to learn some Arabic". She also felt fulfilled in helping to guide her fellow students during the visit to the Mosque in Jaffa.

4.1 Conclusions

This paper has reported upon the methodology, results and impact of a pioneering course in Jewish-Arab Interreligious Dialogue which has taken place at Bar-Ilan University in Israel. The course sought to promote relationship building and transformation between Jewish and Arab university students through the medium of commonalities between Islam and Judaism. Based on qualitative and quantitative results which indicated positive perception change and strong evidence of relationship building and transformation the efficacy of the interreligious/intercultural approach to dialogue and peace education between Jews and Arabs was affirmed. This further supported results in existing literature concerning the ability of religion and culture to serve as a force for reconciliation as opposed to conflict escalation.

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