

‘Religion is not a barrier’

By [SHARON UDASIN](#)

01/14/2011 00:07

He doesn’t pretend to have a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but S.A. Ibrahim has many suggestions on how to achieve religious harmony.

To an enraptured audience in a small Emek Refaim library last Thursday, S.A. Ibrahim shared his most strategic tactic of maneuvering through the more than three million pilgrims who attend the annual haj to Mecca.

“I put Stars and Stripes stickers on my haj bags,” he said. “The religious guards would say ‘American, American,’ and say ‘Come, come’ and give us all kinds of things. They look so stern but because we had Stars and Stripes stickers they left us alone.”

The audience of about 20 laughed unanimously, some visibly wearing black velvet kippot and others hailing from Israel’s Christian and Muslim communities – but almost all students and professionals involved in interfaith discourse and education. Ibrahim, a Muslim American chief executive officer of a US-based credit risk management company who is active in promoting interreligious dialogue, came to speak at Jerusalem’s Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel about his personal journey to Mecca, which he has made twice.

“The only mosque in the world where men and women can pray together is the holiest mosque in the world,” Ibrahim said. “The crowds are so fierce that I had my arms around Nina,” he added, gesturing to his wife in the audience.

“There’s no country in the world that’s not there.”

This was Ibrahim’s first visit to Israel. He had already been heading to Egypt to speak at a US State Department-sponsored entrepreneurship workshop, the third in a string of such sessions held by the US State Department in honor of US President Barack Obama’s historic June 2009 Cairo speech – which Ibrahim had been part of as well. Since he’d already be in the area, Ibrahim decided to stop by Israel at the encouragement of his friend Rabbi Dr. Ron Kronish, director of the ICCI, whom he had gotten to know about two years ago in conjunction with interfaith student trips to the Middle East that Ibrahim sponsors.



S.A. Ibrahim (left) with Rabbi Dr. Ron Kronish

“I had to come and see the great work he does in working with people of different faiths, in person,” Ibrahim told In Jerusalem after the lecture that evening.

Kronish added, “The reason he came to Israel was that he is a big believer in building bridges and bonds of friendship of people of different religions. He wants to help those of us who are doing this in Israel to do it better.”

Meanwhile, Jerry Wind – a favorite professor from Ibrahim’s alma mater, the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania – had encouraged him to come see the progress on campus at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, which he had cofounded.

“Being a strong believer that success and prosperity come through great education, I had to come and see this fine institution,” Ibrahim said.

The trips that Ibrahim began sponsoring two years ago, called the Ibrahim Leadership and Dialogue Project in the Middle East, bring a group of select Jewish, Muslim and Christian students from the University of Pennsylvania and Johns Hopkins University on an interfaith journey to the Middle East.

Now held annually each June since 2009, the group is led by Dr. Steven David, vice dean for undergraduate education and professor of political science at Johns Hopkins and former professor of Ibrahim’s son Winston. Expenses are entirely paid for by Ibrahim, and the project is administered by the Institute of International Education (IIE), a nonprofit organization founded in 1919 to promote the exchange of ideas among different peoples.

“As a very patriotic American Muslim who loves my country, I thought, How can I help my country? I would create an activity that breaks down the wall in these faiths,” Ibrahim said.

Both last year and the previous year, after a day-and-a-half orientation in Washington, DC, the students spent approximately three days in the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Israel, explained Mike McCartt, program director of Global Exchanges at the IIE. This year or in the future, Ibrahim and the other organizers hope to expand the trip to another Middle Eastern country.

“My whole goal in life is to promote tolerance and goodwill among these people and showcase something very special about the United States,” Ibrahim said. “These kids from the US, by doing nothing on this trip, are sending such a powerful message to people they meet in Israel, Abu Dhabi and Jordan. Religion is not a barrier.”

David, the trip leader from JHU, added, “The trip itself is a worthy endeavor. Unlike other interfaith efforts, it does not simply concentrate on hearing like-minded voices but deliberately seeks out passionate views on all sides of the spectrum. So, we talk to radical imams, Israeli settlers, Palestinian refugees and others who feel passionately about their views, to get an accurate sense of what’s going on in the Middle East.”

While in Israel, the students spend two days in Jerusalem with Kronish and one day in the Tel Aviv area – the morning at IDC Herzliya and the afternoon at the beach in Tel Aviv, Ibrahim said.

“He is exactly the kind of person that is needed to help deal with all the strife and rancor that surrounds Middle Eastern issues,” said David, who is accompanied on the trips by Ibrahim’s son Winston. “Mr. Ibrahim is a wealthy businessman who is committed to interfaith dialogue and who expounds a moderate view of Islam that is tolerant and committed to the peaceful resolution of disputes.

We need many more like him.”

During Ibrahim’s own four-day whirlwind trip to Israel last week, in between speaking at ICCI, delivering an entrepreneurship lecture at the IDC and meeting with an adviser to the prime minister, he was able to get in a few visits to the country’s major sites. On Thursday, his last day, “he insisted on going to Yad Vashem in the morning,” according to Kronish.

“I could go on forever about the things I liked,” Ibrahim said of his time here. “Experiencing the places where so many important religious events related to the great Abrahamic faiths happened, visiting them and feeling awed and inspired.

Spending a day at the IDC and finding that its reality was even more impressive than what I had imagined and experiencing the warmth of the people I met. More than anything else, meeting the caring and daring members of Rabbi Kronish’s board and seeing their commitment to building respect and goodwill among people of all three Abrahamic faiths.”

But Ibrahim made sure to mention one last favorite of his trip to Israel. “Oh yes, I

enjoyed the humous,” he said: “Jewish-style at lunch with the IDC team in Herzliya and Palestinian-style at lunch with Rabbi Kronish and two of his colleagues in Jerusalem in the Old City. I thoroughly enjoyed both.”

And he would love to share that ability to “enjoy both” with those who are not yet inclined to do so.

“We all reach a stage in our lives where we want to say what are some things about the world that bother us,” he explained. “For me, I have seen people from different faiths as my friends and connected to me. And when I see people separated by religion, it bothers me. In my book it’s the same religions.”

As to what the viable solution might be to breach these separations and contribute toward a peace process in the region, Ibrahim didn’t pretend to have an answer – though he was hopeful that there would be one soon. “I do not feel that I have the insight or expertise to comment on the Israeli-Palestinian solution,” he said. “My hope is that there will be a solution soon that brings peace, prosperity and security to all the people in the region.”

But in the meantime, he remains passionate about bringing people together and getting them one step closer to achieving that sort of mutual understanding.

“We don’t make distinctions between these books,” he said, referring to the Koran and the Bible. “But today we don’t live that way. It bothers me because I view all of them [Jews, Muslims, Christians] as my people. I genuinely find that I feel equally warm about all three of them.”

A devout American Muslim, Ibrahim and his wife left IJ with a quote from the Koran as they hurried to fit in one last prayer session at Al- Aksa before their flight to Cairo: “We believe in God, and in what has been revealed to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes, and in [the books] given to Moses, Jesus and the prophets from their Lord: We make no distinction between one and another among them and to God do we submit in Islam” (Koran: Surah al- Imran 3:84).

Printed from: <http://www.jpost.com/home/article.aspx?id=203536>