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Opposing sides peacefully kick off Year of Civil Discourse

by dan pine, staff writer

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For Siva Heiman, it was all about listening.

Attending the Dec. 12 kickoff event of the Year of Civil Discourse, Heiman learned the key to civility is to listen. Don't interrupt, don't contradict. Just listen.

Even if someone says something about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict you don't agree with.

"The listening experience impacts both parties," said the San Mateo math teacher. "It impacts the one who has a chance to be listened to because they understand that life is just a process. By being heard you move along in that process."



In a workshop at the Year of Civil Discourse kickoff event, participants engage in a conflict transformation process using interactive techniques and improv. photo/minh la

The Year of Civil Discourse is a project spearheaded by the Jewish Community Relations Council, the Northern California Board of Rabbis and the S.F.-based Jewish Community Federation. It combines public relations, institutional counseling and high-profile events such as the one Dec. 12 to foster more civil Jewish community dialogue when it comes to Israel and other hot-button issues.

About 225 people — among them rabbis, lay leaders and Jewish community professionals — attended the daylong string of panels and workshops. Each

invitee was asked to bring along two friends who disagree about Israel.

Titled "Loving Our Neighbors as Ourselves," the event was held at San Francisco's Congregation Beth Israel Judea and neighboring Brandeis Hillel Day School.

Contentiousness over Israel prompted the civil discourse project in the first place. But settlements, peace talks and Gaza were not on the menu for the day.

"This was decidedly not a town hall meeting to focus on substantive issues around Israel," said Rabbi Doug Kahn, executive director of the JCRC, "but rather how we talk about Israel and how we live together as a community at a time of increased polarization. It was focused on modeling best practices."

Attendees chose from among 20 workshops and panels. Topics ran a wide spectrum — from an interactive theater exercise and Jewish meditation to the challenges of building real Jewish community. The day began and ended with prayer, and each workshop began with a drash delivered by a Bay Area rabbi.

Session leaders included rabbis from across the denominational spectrum. The common thread was

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teaching methodology for respectful dialogue.

"There was an absolute commitment on the part of everyone who came to abide by the spirit of the day," Kahn said. To keep things confidential, the press was not invited.

Heiman, the math teacher, attended a panel that helped participants move toward more compassionate communication. "We paired off and were either listeners or speakers," Heiman reported. "There was an emphasis on listening, and letting your partner say his piece."

She also attended a panel titled "Crossing the Boundaries: When the Only Recourse is Difficult Dialogue." It focused on real-life examples of Jewish institutions, such as synagogues, facing polarized constituencies, especially over the Middle East.

"It was about how to have civil dialogue so we can recognize where we have actual agreement," Heiman said. "It wasn't about Israel so much as about a particular congregation and how they engaged with each other, learned to listen to each other. It's not about being right."

It's an uphill battle in the Bay Area, where the Israeli Consulate General is routinely picketed; the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel is always in full swing; and where activists on both sides call each other Nazis, pigs and worse.

Among those attending the event were representatives of the pro-Israel

StandWithUs and of Jewish Voice for Peace, which is critical of Israel.

JVP campaign director Sydney Levy said he appreciated the "ideological diversity" among the attendees, but had concerns.

"The elephant in the room not discussed was what are the limits of that ideological diversity," he said. "After all, this is a meeting sponsored by the federation and JCRC. They have very clear guidelines about what can and cannot be said about the nature of Israel."

Levy said he felt very welcome personally, but sensed those ideological limits because of his views, which many in the Jewish community might consider outside what is acceptable.

"There were moments, because of the guidelines, I felt like the gay man in the closet. [The Year of Civil Discourse] is not just one event, it's a whole year. My fear is they will steer it in such a way to force people like me into the closet or outside the circle."

Mike Harris, spokesman for the local chapter of StandWithUs, said it's too soon to tell how useful the civil discourse effort will prove.

On one hand, he said it is "absolutely necessary" for people to "get beyond the tension, so Israel can be talked about." But he considers JVP outside the bounds of the Jewish communal conversation, saying the group "does not accept the ground rules" of Israel as the Jewish state.

"There is a conflict between the imperative for civil discourse and the imperative to name and shame those who are anti-Israel," Harris said.

Still, all 225 attendees kept the day civil and, according to Kahn, productive.

"My overall feeling was that the day achieved our objectives and that the year was launched in the best way possible," Kahn said. "At the same time we know there is no easy fix here. This is a process."

JTA contributed to this report.

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