

Israel

Unity gives Jerusalem a prayer: Jews, Muslims and Christians join for worship

Eight religious leaders brought their congregations together for eight days in one room. It was a dangerous move



Hannah Ellis-Petersen in Jerusalem

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A member of the congregation is welcomed at the entrance of Amen by, right to left, Rabba Tamar Elad-Abblebaum, Waida Ibtisam Mahmeed, Father Alberto Fer and Sister Esther Salib. Photograph: Michal Fattal

In a small building in the foreboding shadow of Jerusalem's Mount Zion, Rabba Tamar Elad-Abblebaum looked upon a crowd sitting attentively before her. "We have had a long way to go to prepare for this evening," she said with a soft smile. "Today we all do something very brave."

Certainly this congregation was unlike any she, the leader of an Orthodox Jewish community in Jerusalem, was used to addressing. As well as the usual modest dress and kippah worn in her synagogue, there were some crosses worn around necks. Others sat in the traditional black robes of the Copts, another in the Muslim hijab and several nuns in their habits gathered together at the back of the room. Many were wearing no religious garb at all. But they were all there to pray.

Last week, and for just eight days, a music school in the lowest valley of Jerusalem was transformed into a communal house of prayer, named Amen, bringing together Jewish, Muslim and Christian religious leaders and their congregations to worship together in one room. It was a sight rarely seen in this segregated city.

The project, part of the Jerusalem season of culture, was initiated by Elad-Abblebaum and the Muslim Sufi Sheikh Ihab Balha almost a year ago. They reached out to six other religious figures – two rabbis, a Franciscan monk, a Catholic priest, a Coptic deaconess and a female Muslim community leader – who were very traditional in their beliefs and practices, but also open to discussions with other faiths.

Elad-Abblebaum said: "I never believed something like this would be possible in my lifetime. Jews who live in the territories publicly praying together with Palestinians, this is a big risk and a huge step. But this is not a political project; we wanted people to come from the right and from the left and to show that faith is beyond ideology. Here, we are reshaping reality and we are doing it through prayer."

She emphasised how Amen not only brought together Israel's discordant religions, but also men and women, which is almost unheard of in such inter-religious gatherings.



Waida Ibtisam Mahmeed ties up the strips of muslin that hang from the ceiling in preparation for an evening of prayer and song.
Photograph: Michal Fattal

‘We were all speaking the same language’

Over the previous six months, all eight leaders had met once a week to discuss how the project could be realised and even travelled together to the desert to rehearse praying together. For most, this was a completely new experience. Catholic Rev Rafik, who has used a different name in the programme to prevent a backlash against his family, who are originally from Lebanon, admitted he had not met anyone from the Coptic church before. Fr Alberto Fer, the Franciscan monk, had never spoken with a female rabbi.

Instead of merging prayers and traditions, each night the prayer house was hosted by a different religious figure, and most of the prayer done through music and song, a common uniter. The prayer book handed out was in Hebrew, Arabic and English.

Speaking after the first night’s event, Elad-Abblebaum said she was already working to make sure the project lived on beyond its eight days. “You realised suddenly we were all speaking the same language,” she said. “It can’t just be a memory, this has to be the energy for the next step. We will use this as the seed to build Jerusalem a permanent place where all faiths can come and pray alongside each other.”

In a first step towards giving Amen longevity, the eight religious leaders all met again on Wednesday for a special ceremony to mark International Peace Day.

Particularly significant was the cooperation of three imams, including one from al-Aqsa mosque – the most important site for Muslims in Jerusalem – and another Palestinian imam who travelled from the West Bank city of Nablus to participate in one of the prayer evenings.

In a climate where Arab involvement in any activity involving Jews leads to accusations of “normalisation”, such interfaith unity can be dangerous. The imams asked not to be named on the programme.

Ihab Balha admitted that building the project had been a “challenging step”, but that his work with these imams over the past decade had laid the groundwork to bring them into Amen and made it seem “more acceptable”.

“This project is a milestone because it shows other imams that there are devout religious Muslims who can play a role in projects like this,” he said. “Of course, accusations of normalisation are a challenge and the reality of Jerusalem today is hatred and people fighting, but it’s important at the same time to plant the seeds of people coming together and seeing each other. That’s what I am doing here.”



The eight religious leaders, alongside musicians, sit before the congregation. Photograph: Michal Fattal

Location, location, location

In a city where geography is politics, the location of the communal house of prayer was essential to ensuring the residents of Jerusalem accepted Amen. Elad-Abblebaum admitted it had been a formidable task, having been refused again and again by places in both the east and the west of the city – and on Mount Zion itself – for fear the project would incite anger.

The leaders eventually settled on the small music school, which teaches both Jews and Arabs and sits adjacent to Mount Zion, a holy site for all three religions. The building, which directly faces the poverty-stricken Palestinian neighbourhood of Silwan, is also directly below the secret zip wire once used to smuggle injured Israeli soldiers over the green line from East to West Jerusalem.

Modesty governed the interior design of the prayer house. Thin strips of white muslin hung from the ceiling, each bearing a quote from the bible, the Torah or the Qur'an in both Hebrew and Arabic and the religious leaders, and their accompanying musicians, sat on wooden chairs.

Rafik admitted he had been extremely sceptical when first approached by Elad-Abblebaum about the prayer house and had met some resistance in his community.

“To say the truth, I wasn't really convinced at the beginning,” he said. “The idea was very nice but I did not see how it could happen. But when we started meeting up, I was surprised at how real relationships developed between us all and I discovered there was something interesting there. And that friendship between us, I think, is the humble beginning we need to change people's hearts and from there, their minds.”

In an increasingly tense and sporadically violent political climate, Amen has not been an easy project to be publicly attached to.

But Waida Ibtisam Mahmeed, one of the eight organisers and a respected Muslim community leader in the Israeli Arab town of Fureidis, said she was unafraid of her

“It shouldn’t be taken for granted that a devout Muslim woman leaves her husband and her children and her community for a week to do anything, let alone this,” Mahmeed said, and her eyes filled with tears as she indicated her hijab.

“Sometimes people, when they see the way I’m dressed in the street they are afraid of me because they think that every Muslim has a knife to stab a Jew. It is important to emphasise there is a difference between what I read in the Qur’an and how people act in the name of the Qur’an. God didn’t tell me to stand up and kill people. I feel a lot of hurt and sorrow because of what’s going on between Israelis and Palestinians.”

She added: “For me Islam, Christianity, Judaism, it is all interconnected. We may pray in different ways with different texts but in the end we are all reaching for same thing.”