

## **Faith and Politics dominate Discussion among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Young People**

**Leora Ezrachi, 22, Anna-Liza Younan, 22, and Ghaleb Nashashibi, 24, have a lot in common. They're young, live in Jerusalem, and share a strong belief in God.**

They're modern in their mode of dressing and thinking and speak in a relaxed way to each other about religion and what role it plays in the conflict. Occasionally, the conversation heats up, for example when the subject of suicide bombers or Israel's right to exist comes up.

They represent the three faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which all consider this land holy and which all trace their roots to Abraham.

Many believe religion is the primary cause of the conflict in the Holy Land. That this is not the case is something the three agree upon.

"This conflict is between Israelis and Palestinians, not between Jews and Muslims, Christians and Jews, or Christians and Muslims," says Anna-Liza.

She is a Christian Palestinian and her father is the Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem. Anna-Liza works as a project assistant at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, a non-profit organization which aims to improve the social, political, and economic situation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"It means a lot to be a Christian in this country, to follow the steps of Jesus in this Holy Land," Anna-Liza explains. "I feel blessed as a Christian and I think Christianity has given me ethical values that exist in every religion. Belonging to a Christian minority is not as big a deal as the media tries to make out of it. I have the same right as a Muslim or Jew to go to church and pray."

Anna-Liza says that the most important thing she has learned from her Christian faith is forgiveness, despite all the humiliation and suffering present in this conflict. "It's important to forgive, even though it's hard to forget," she says.

Leora sees her religion as a part of everything she does. She studies Jewish History and philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and works as a counselor for young people who want to do community service after finishing high school. Leora also tries to go to synagogue once a week.

"Being Jewish is part of who I am. I can't define myself as being just a person and not Jewish. Now that I'm growing up I guess I'm also trying to figure out what kind of religious life I want to lead," Leora says.

She is a member of the Movement for Progressive Judaism in Israel which means that she, just like Anna-Liza, belongs to a minority. As a Reformed Jew she stands somewhere between the Orthodox and secular.

When asked about the differences between herself and her Orthodox friends, Leora replies: "First of all, I'm much more pluralistic. I'm open to more ideas; to different ways of doing things. I'm also much more critical and can, as a woman, play an equal part which is very important to me."

Ghaleb is a Muslim but grew up in an environment where religion wasn't very important. This has had an impact on his view of religion as something private, something that must not create a distance between him and other people. "I think of myself more as Palestinian than as a Muslim," he says. "My commitment to my homeland is stronger than my commitment to my religion."

Over the last few years, however, Ghaleb has become more religious. He has started to fast and pray more than he did before. "Various experiences have led me to become more religious," he explains. "A few years ago I was about to drown in the sea. At that moment, I asked God to help me and he did. Then I thought, 'wow, he really exists!' The closer I get to God, the better I feel."

Anna-Liza, Leora, and Ghaleb are affected by and confronted with the Occupation in their daily lives in different ways. When Anna-Liza studied at Bethlehem University, she passed the checkpoint between Bethlehem and Jerusalem everyday. She then experienced how the soldiers manning the checkpoint tried to create differences between her and her Muslim friends.

"They told the Christians they could pass while the Muslims had to undergo body searches," Anna-Liza says. "The majority of my friends are Muslims and I try to refuse any discrimination against Muslims or Christians. Many people think that the Christians are isolated from this society. Some Christians say that we are living under the occupation of Islam; that we have no rights....They're all lies. I feel united with my Muslim friends. Some wear a hijab; others prefer to wear a mini-skirt. I respect them, no matter how they care to dress."

That Leora could have been one of the soldiers standing on the checkpoint when Anna-Liza passed through it on her way to university is hard to imagine when the three young people chat with each other in a friendly manner.

When Leora was 18 she was called to serve in the army for a mandatory two years. Her faith was tested during that period of time. She was brought into an environment where she felt that she couldn't express herself as a fully active Reformed Jew.

"I got away from things a bit," Leora recounts. "But when I came back home, I took it right back again and returned to everything I believed in. I wouldn't say going to the army went against things I believe in. It sometimes made things I believe in a little harder since I was representing a minority opinion."

Leora believes her presence in the army was a positive. "You need somebody to be a little different; to say otherwise; to try to affect people from inside the system," Leora says. "There were some things I thought I could change; and I tried."

Ghaleb is a student at an Israeli institute and most of his classmates are Israeli. He doesn't define them as friends, but rather as people whom he knows and respects. He has a few Christian friends but it's nothing he gives much thought to.

"When I got to know Anna-Liza four years ago I never thought of asking her if she was a Christian or a Muslim," Ghaleb says. "She was wearing a cross, and that was an indication

that she probably was Christian.... But I don't judge a person by his or her religion. It's more important how the chemistry between us works."

Leora and Anna-Liza agree that it's the religious fanatics on both sides who are the biggest threat to peace.

"The settlers have a sick ideology with respect to human beings. No matter how many people are suffering and how many people are killed in this conflict, they still believe this is their land because it's written in a book that comes from God....," Anna-Liza says. "They are neglecting all human issues that religion is concerned with and deny anything related to human rights. The reason they're so strong, even though they're a minority, is that they are in power. Look at [Ariel] Sharon (Israeli Prime Minister). Is he a moderate person? He's supporting the settlements!"

Anna-Liza includes Christian fundamentalists, such as the so-called Christian Zionists, in her criticism. "They say shame on us Christian Palestinians who don't support Israel," she continues. "One of the most important commandments is not to kill. God did not send Jesus or any of his prophets to see all this bloodshed."

Another problem that Anna-Liza mentions is the mixing of religion and nationality. "When people start believing that this conflict is about rights and political issues there will be a progress," she explains. Sounding a somewhat pessimistic note, Anna-Liza does not believe such progress will happen in her generation or the next.

Leora also believes the conflict is about nationality rather than religion. That gives her hope that it might end someday. "I've been studying a lot of religion and history and I know that religious wars don't end well," she says. "When it's a question of the land being holy, that's when it gets dangerous. In my opinion there is no land that is holy. There is land we can make holy by the things that we do, the way we live, and the way we treat other people who live in this land. That's how we make it holy, but it doesn't mean the land itself is holy."

Ghaleb says that the whole idea of creating a state only for Jews is what has created the situation today.

"They totally ignored the existence of Palestinians in this country," he says. He belongs to a family that has lived in Jerusalem for more than 800 years. "Christians are asked to live in peace and forgiveness. But Muslims are asked to defend their land according to Islam. When the Jews came in 1948 they were considered invaders trying to capture our homeland," he explains.

Ghaleb, Anna-Liza, and Leora agree that there are many complicated issues in this conflict. The sensitive issues are the refugees' right of return, Israel's right to exist, and the suicide bombers. The three of them agree that the settlements must be taken away but when they start discussing which areas should be regarded as settlements, some slight disagreements pop up.

On the topic of Israel's right to exist, Anna-Liza and Ghaleb see its existence as a fact and therefore not something that needs to be constantly reaffirmed. "There were Jews living here before 1948 and I'm carrying an Israeli passport myself. We can't deny the existence," Anna-Liza says.

Ghaleb has a similar view. "There are now approximately five million Jews in the state of Israel," he says. "Personally, I see its existence as a fact. This means we have to find one way or another to live together."

This is difficult for Leora to hear. "I don't think my people are that evil," she says, "and I don't think the Israelis came here with the objective to humiliate and ruin Palestinian lives. It's hard for me to hear that people accept Israel because it's a fact, even though I understand why people say that. The Zionists made many mistakes that unfortunately I can't change."

Leora believes that it's right to have a Jewish state but that it should be different than the one that exists today.

"I believe we need a just state, fair to all its citizens," she says. "If Palestinians want to be part of our society, we should be fair. And we're not. I know we're not. We're not equal and that's my biggest disappointment in the Jewish people."

The discussion turns to the compulsory service in the Israeli army. Men have to serve for three years and women for two years minimum. Men then have to do reserve duty until the age of 45.

Quite a few people today find ways to get out of their service in some way. Leora's brother has recently been called in. He may be called upon to remove the approximately 8,000 settlers from Gaza, according to the current plan of the Sharon government which is to be implemented by the end of 2005. Or, he could be called upon to man checkpoints in the West Bank and Gaza. Whatever he is called upon to do, Leora is proud of her brother.

"I served in the West Bank and Gaza," Leora says. "I was not a conscientious objector. I did not object because I believe that if the army thinks I should be there I have to adhere to those rules even though I don't agree with it politically." Leora is aware that this might be hard for people who are not Israeli to understand. She's also aware that there are illegal actions taking place within the army.

Ghaleb thinks it might be the situation that creates the atmosphere under which immoral activity can occur, a point with which Leora agrees. Her job in the army was to teach soldiers to be more ethical and humane. "I see friends who come out of the army much more extreme than they were before," she says. "I can see how the situation will make you act like an animal. But I can't blame the soldiers since they're my friends. I blame the government."

"So you're saying it's right to obey orders?" wonders Ghaleb.

"Yes, unless you're in a situation where you're obviously going to do something morally wrong or illegal," Leora responds. "We have to accept orders because otherwise we would not function. Many soldiers will refuse to evacuate settlements. So how can I say it's o.k. for me but not for you?"

Anna-Liza says that if she were an Israeli Jew she might also be proud of her soldiers. "But what is happening here is injustice," she continues. "The Israeli army is one of the most powerful in the world. And the Palestinians don't have any weapons. What is happening at checkpoints is also injustice."

Ghaleb says it is this injustice that creates suicide bombers. “I don’t agree with it, but it is a way to hit back when you don’t have an M16,” he says.

Anna-Liza says that every action has a reaction, on both sides. “But we can’t justify these actions. Orders that come from the Israeli government are considered legal. But I believe what is happening is illegal. There’s no just war,” she says. “As a Christian and human being I am against violence. But if you lose your brother, your father is handicapped, you’re unemployed, live on a few square meters with 10 people in one room, and can’t afford water and food; these are the people who carry out the attacks. Sometimes I understand them. It’s true that they have their ideology which I’m against. But they’re people who are living in hell and will do anything. Each person has his own way to react – be it legal or illegal.”

It’s hard for Leora to hear that one can understand the suicide bombers. “I guess I can understand it too, but not when by all statistics I should be dead because all the bombs were about three minutes from my house,” she says.

“Nobody has a monopoly on pain,” Leora continues. “I think it’s all about finding the moderate part of religion. In Judaism, there’s a certain part that is more outspoken and they are the extremists. Eighty percent of Israelis are not extreme at all.” According to Leora, Israeli society is slowly changing. “If we put the extremists aside and concentrate on the majority of the people, they are changing towards realizing that we did something wrong and that we need to start thinking not only of ourselves.

“We all live in a world of stigmas and stereotypes and we never really try to see the other people. This is our first mistake. I see myself as somebody who will lead my people into change and thinking differently. That’s how I see my religion, to bring back the idea that all human beings are created in God’s image – B’tselem.”

“Since we have one God there shouldn’t be any differences,” says Ghaleb. “God doesn’t go against himself. He would say the same thing to Muslims, Jews, and Christians.”

Facts:

- In the Occupied Territories today there are over 4 million Palestinians. Within Israel there are over a million Israeli Arabs and approximately 5.2 million Jews.
- There are over 4 million Palestinian refugees living in other countries.
- Among the Palestinians living in the West Bank, 98 percent are Sunni and about 2 percent are Christian.
- Out of all Palestinians, including those living abroad, 6 percent are Christian.

Source: Passia 2005