

## **Interfaith Initiative in the Negev- Rabbi Michael Graetz**

Members of Congregations Magen Avraham in Omer and Eshel Avraham in Beer Sheva, together with their Rabbis Maricio Balter, Jonathan Sadoff, and retired rabbi Michael Graetz, gathered together a group of religious leaders which they had met and come to know during the years. These included Muslim Imams and the one Catholic priest in the Negev. Amirit Rosen, who had served as a rabbinic intern in Magen Avraham in Omer also agreed to act as coordinator. Amirit has a long and rich history in interfaith work around the world. The idea was to create programs that would introduce Israelis to creative and cooperative interaction between religious leaders of the major faiths, Judaism, Islam and Christianity. The general social life of the Negev may be the most receptive place in Israel to begin such a program. The interaction between Muslims and Jews is high, and the Beduin culture is very tolerant and open to people of all faiths. Over a year and a half this group has recruited more religious leaders, and has received approval by the ministry of education and by city governments to make its programs available in schools and other public forums. Recently, the Beduin community ran a week long program in all of the Beduin high schools in the Negev on tolerance as a major quality of life that we all must strive to implement. The subject of religious tolerance was a major concern of this week. Our group, the “Interfaith Initiative in the Negev”, was asked to be a major part of this program.

Last week we experienced “religious tolerance day” at the high school in Segev Shalom, a Beduin city close to Omer. Forty religious leaders mostly from the Negev, including some Christian leaders from the Galilee, met with all of the students in 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade in several groups during the whole morning. Then we all went to the local community center and met in a large panel with all of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. It was a most exciting day with a genuine feeling of listening to each other, and striving to show respect for the humanity of everyone, all created in God’s image. The students asked provocative questions, but the very experience of being with religious leaders who answered them with genuine concern for one another caused them to summarize the occasion with a large dose of optimism for a future of religious tolerance. We, the clergy, felt buoyed by their feelings. We all left on a high of good will and friendship. This was reinforced by a late lunch for all the clergy that had participated at a kosher restaurant in Beer Sheva. It was a day that energized the “Interfaith Initiative in the Negev” group to continue to break barriers and cultivate tolerance as a solid value in Israeli society.

