

The Advantages of Forums -- Interview of Hod Ben-Zvi of UPF-Israel

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A brother wanted to start an NGO in Jordan, which is very difficult. They said he needed a lawyer and \$30,000 to open an NGO. I said, "Why don't you do a forum? You don't need anything." But he couldn't even think about that. Everybody is under the impression that without being officially registered, you cannot move, you cannot do anything.

I find that the approach, a forum, is much lighter. It's like a lighter gear. A forum is very light. You can change it and you control it. In any country where you have NGOs or NPOs, whatever they call them, you have to abide by the nation's rules and the rules can be very strict, primarily bureaucratic -- many forms to fill and so on.

Normally you establish an NGO in a country where you can get some benefits, for example, governmental funds. So people establish NGOs in order to milk, usually, the government, or to fund raise. You can fund raise if you have a registered NGO, but I found it is difficult to fund raise even if you have a registered organization. We had a registered NGO, the Women's Federation, but it was very difficult anyway to raise funds.

The government doesn't even look at you unless you are connected. In most countries, it is like that. Only those who are close to the decision makers can get something. I thought, Why do I have to work so hard in that direction? So, let's go to the forum, and the forum also opened our minds. We realized we could connect to many people in this way.

I remember at first we struggled. Our members struggled. How can I approach people and say, "You are invited to a forum"? -- What forum? Whose behind it? Who is that? -- We were expecting those questions. So, I thought... OK. You know, there is a Hebrew term that's not easy to translate, chutzpah. That's Hebrew, it means something like being "brash." I thought, that should be our approach. We're a forum: If you like us -- come; you don't like us? That's OK. People became interested. You know, What is this thing, security? And they came. When they came, they met one another.

The interesting reaction to most of the forums was, This was so enlightening. They get inspired and say, I never learned so much as I learned at your forum. They learn from one another.

We are very happy when it becomes a platform for new friendships. We don't keep it [as our result], hold on and say, That's mine. We even encourage them to take ideas and run with them, especially in the interfaith forum.

When rabbis meet imams and they like each other. They might say, Could you help me contact that imam? I have a project in his neighborhood and I need him to come to give a lecture to my students. We say, Sure! We call the imam and make the connection. A lot of interaction can happen after that between them, and we want to be an open platform that provides opportunities.

We do not want to hold it as if it is our private asset, but create good interaction, sometimes a little more on the intellectual side. Because it is an exchange, it is not purely academic. It is semi-academic but it has a format -- like a panel where two people speak and we have two respondents and then we open it to discussion. We change the form from time to time.

One funny thing: I asked one of our sisters, she is a mother to five children, I said, "OK. You are in charge of Peace and Security." She said, "Peace and Security? I'm doing peace with my children. What do you want?" I said, "Just study a bit. It will be OK." So, she looked into it, and then she went right to the top. She got people like a former head of the Secret Service. These types of people were coming in, not small fry. We conduct those meetings, so we just had to set them one with another and look as if we know everything... and it works. We learned too, because we listen. We are growing our own understanding, so we can provide more and more input.



I have inspirations: There is an issue about Syria, let's talk about Syria; some issue arises about Egypt, let's talk about Egypt. So things related either to an ongoing issue or what I could predict would be the next "thing." That drew interest from among the experts and they come together.

Another point of strength was that it's interdisciplinary. In other words, we bring people not just from a very narrow field but from other fields close by. For example, economics and security, or people who were formerly in the secret service and the police. So different angles, different walks of life that we bring together creates stimulation in the discussion.

Over time, we became confident that we could put together a forum on any topic we like and set it almost anywhere. Now we do it with minimal expense because we can easily get a place in a university, a public center, or so on.

Question: Did you make any mistakes that you learned from?

Well, we tend to work on short notice; that is our character.

You get better results if you give people a little time to prepare. That's all I can think of. We never had any repercussions.

Question: How much time?

I think it is good to give them a couple of months' notice but normally we give them about two weeks. Some people make plans a year ahead. We have come to understand that serious people work that way. We need to be more compatible with the standards of society.

Another point: I don't think it's a mistake but a way we improved our strategy. The ideas were more sporadic in the beginning. We had an inspiration about this or about that, but if you have a consistent system, you can build up toward some direction. You build a track record: We spoke about this, that, this and this and therefore we are arriving now at this topic. That takes more planning. We are multitasking. The same sister who is a mother of five and running the peace and security forum, the next day she is

doing Women's Federation and the next day she is doing a whole other thing. That's how we all work.

What I would like to do more of, something we did in the beginning, is involve more of our second-generation members. For them it is excellent exposure and they see people that are considered to be experts by society, in important positions. They get used to them. They see they are just people and if we have good relations with them everything is fine. In the beginning, we involved them more but now can't always get everyone in. We run them on minimum power; two or three members at a time run a forum. The planning is done by one person and actually executing the meeting itself, maybe two or three maximum.

Question: Is there an audience?

We've done that too. The original format was just a closed circle, like about twelve people sitting together in a university around a table, but we did try to have it at a school where we had an audience. Actually, this is the next thing we want to do. We want to have more students, because they have an interest and the forum participants, the speakers have more interest when there is a crowd of students. We have done that, but the basic mode was convening privately, but the proceedings of the meetings were published.

Question: Do the speakers submit papers?

Rarely. Mostly they have their written notes, which we did not require them to submit. We took our own notes, which were the base for our own reports, mainly to UPF.



Sheik Samir Aasi, is imam of the El-Jazzar Mosque in Acre, and a member of the interfaith forum

Question: Do you ever record it?

No. We took photos, not video, because we did not want to disturb too much and we did not have a large enough staff. We didn't think of the content as being ground-breaking material or a new innovative idea that needed to be published. It is more of an opportunity for people to meet one another and for us to get in contact with them and build friendships. That was our basic view, and we came to know many people in this way. At a certain point, we might find it appropriate for certain forums. It needs more preparations -- submitting papers.... It will be more formal. People will be more articulate, more careful about how they present things.

Also, we did a lot. We did about sixteen forums a year, given the amount of human resources we have, it was a lot, but that was the pace that we set for ourselves. For this year, we are planning something similar.

We are still in the process of charting our path for this year, 2017, but we like this method. We think we can expand to cover other important topics, such as economics.

On the Abel UN

When True Parents talked about the Abel UN

the original idea was having another camera within the UN, which is mostly political -- the *hyeong sang* [external] side of things. We thought the religious side needed to be present there, so since it was not done, True Parents found a different way to do it. I thought that mostly in our movement we start things from the top down; sometimes from the waist down. If there is something on the international level, I thought you have to have something at the grassroots level, because usually it is like that, moving from the grassroots up. There was nothing like that, just the declaration from the top [to create the Abel UN]. I tried to fulfill the grass-root level. That was my motivation.

How do I create a national council that is a reflection of the Abel UN? We started with the forums. One was the Interfaith Forum and the other was on Peace and Security in order to create in miniature, two "houses" that are developing. At this point, we are bringing them together. We have had several conferences in which we brought the religious leaders together with the peace and security type of people. At first, it seemed very odd, but they enjoyed it a lot. That surprised us. For them, it was interesting -- two

completely different angles.

This has to grow. For the final level, we want to grow from that to a think tank. A think tank requires more. I got advice from Dr. Walsh, he said don't jump into it, because when you declare yourselves a think tank, it requires a lot of funding and so on. People want an institute and salaries, so don't go there. That was good advice.

Forums don't require that much expense, but we want to go from that to a sort of virtual think tank, and from there my goal is to have a national advisory board. It would be a copy or the image of the idea of an Abel UN -- a board that advises the government on what is the right direction to go, based on experts from both the external field and the internal field.

Decision makers are always looking for new ideas; they don't always have ideas. So, why not give them good ideas? I have already had this experience with legislators. I gave them an idea and they took it, because it is useful for their career, but it is useful for me to give them something from within my own beliefs -- something that has to do with better morals or the betterment of the lives of the people. They take the idea and they keep the credit for themselves, which I am fine with, as long as they do something good for society.

I want to use it in that way, to have an influence that can improve the quality of life, the moral field, everything that has to do with our ideal image. That's the purpose. From a forum, we want to go all the way to a national council.