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A decade of Jerusalem peacebuilding bearing fruit for YDS alum

By Emily Judd '19 M.A.R.

In one of the most contentious places in the world, the Rev. Nicholas Porter '94 M.Div. has sparked a peace movement.

Porter, also a Yale College alumnus (Class of 1986), is the founding director of the interfaith non-profit organization [Jerusalem Peacebuilders](https://www.jerusalempeacebuilders.org/) (<https://www.jerusalempeacebuilders.org/>) (JPB), which offers summer institutes and classrooms in the Holy Land and United States to educate and train Israeli, Palestinian, and American youth and educators on peacebuilding.



Program participants embracing after interfaith worship

While 25 years have passed without any significant diplomatic progress in the Israel-Palestine peace process, Porter has provided hope for reconciliation by building up a grassroots peace movement based in the disputed city of Jerusalem.

Launched in 2011 with 11 participants, JPB has now directly impacted thousands of people, including an estimated 2,400 people from 100 communities in 2020 alone. Yet, Porter measures his organization's success in more than numbers, citing the numerous stories of changed hearts and the achievements of program alumni.

For example, former JPB camper and counselor Jiries Elias, a Palestinian Christian, credits the organization with making it possible for him to effectively address the Israeli parliament.

Elias, now a law student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, delivered a contentious speech to Israeli lawmakers in 2017 about the systematic underfunding of Arabic-speaking schools in Jerusalem. He received a standing ovation.



Nicholas Porter addressing student peacebuilders

“Right after he finished the speech, Jiries sent me an email that said, ‘I only was able to do this because of Jerusalem Peacebuilders and its mentorship and investment in my leadership development.’ That’s what this is all about,” said Porter.

In addition to hosting peacebuilding camps, JPB collaborates with Israel's Ministry of Education to lead school programs that bring together Arab and Jewish students in Jerusalem.

"It's the first step of desegregation in Israeli schools. Conflict, transformation, and dialogue is our curriculum," said Porter, who devoted much of his undergraduate coursework to Soviet and Middle Eastern studies before matriculating at the Divinity School and pursuing the Anglican Studies program at Berkeley Divinity School, the Episcopal seminary at YDS.

"It's as if these two [Israelis and Palestinians] walk around with blinders on, only seeing themselves," he said. "We hope to widen their view."

Answering God's call

Porter said he was on track for a diplomatic career when he heard God calling him to redirect his path and turn to Jerusalem. He went on to serve as the international chaplain to the Anglican Archbishop of Jerusalem, but "all the time there was this idea of a Christian ministry of interfaith reconciliation," he said.

"The real galvanizing moment was on the tenth anniversary of 9/11, when I witnessed in the United States such hatred of the 'other,' people of the Middle East, and Muslims. My wife and I said we have to do something. That was when we said, "Enough praying, it's time for action,"" Porter recalled.

Porter and his wife, Dorothy, also a member of Yale College's Class of 1986, set out to develop a summer camp program in Jerusalem where participants would return for four years in a row.

“We wanted to create a series of experiences that create lasting change so that we can hold these young people and nurture them, and have them nurture each other,” said Porter.

Jerusalem and beyond

JPB now has programs outside Jerusalem, from New Haven to Houston to Vermont. But Porter said the efforts in Jerusalem—a city claimed by both Israeli and Palestinian leaders as the capital of their respective states—set the tone.

What happens in Jerusalem and the Holy Land is big news around the world —“a light to the nations,” Porter observed.

“Sometimes that light burns beautiful, and sometimes it burns ugly,” he said. “If Jerusalem Peacebuilders can contribute to the reconciliation of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Druze peoples in Jerusalem, then it can happen elsewhere.”



Nicholas Porter with summer students following awards presentation

Porter said not a day goes by when he doesn't use his Yale education in the work of JPB. He said that the friendships he developed while at YDS have been “key” in helping the organization.

JPB gives back to YDS through a [fellowship funded by the H. Boone and Violet M. Porter Charitable Foundation](https://berkeleydivinity.yale.edu/news/st-georges-college-jerusalem-partners-bds) (founded by Nicholas Porter's parents). The program provides residencies for YDS/Berkeley graduates at [St. George's College in Jerusalem](https://www.saintgeorgescollegejerusalem.com/).

“It gets them into the nitty gritty of what’s going on out here and introduces them to other languages and cultures,” said Porter.

Israeli-Palestinian conflict ‘a spiritual challenge’

As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict enters its 73rd year, the official peace process seems to have stalled indefinitely. The Palestinian militant group Hamas regularly fires rockets from the Gaza Strip at Israeli territory; Israel responds with strikes on Gaza. Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vows to annex Jewish settlements in the West Bank—land recognized by the international community as belonging to the Palestinian people.



Peacebuilders students engage in problem-solving during ropes course exercise.

Porter says the role of religious identity in the conflict—with Israeli Jewish people juxtaposed against Christian and Muslim Palestinians—is just as important to address as the ethnic or national aspect of the conflict. His programs include interfaith ritual

weekends that bring students to a Muslim Friday afternoon prayer service, a Jewish Friday night Shabbat service, and a Christian Sunday church service.

“We take away the fears by exposure to different faiths,” he said, adding that wide-open Q&A sessions allow participants to learn first-hand from people of other faiths and, ultimately, overcome their misunderstandings and suspicions about them.

When it comes to peace in the Middle East, and around the world, for that matter, “it’s as much a spiritual challenge,” Porter said, “as it is an ethnic or national challenge.”

Emily Judd '19 M.A.R. is a journalist based in the Middle East, covering religion and politics. Her work has been published in leading outlets including The Associated Press, the Huffington Post, and Al Arabiya. In addition to her Yale M.A.R., she has a master’s degree in journalism from Georgetown University.

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