

Hadassah Presents: Women of Vision
Season 1, Episode 2: Dr. Georgette Bennett: The Power of Interfaith Alliances

Zev Brenner:

Thank you for tuning into TalkLine with Zev Brenner, the TalkLine network in conjunction with Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America, is pleased to bring you a new radio series, *Hadassah Presents: Women of Vision*, a series of interviews conducted by Hadassah CEO Janice Weinman, which highlights women whose visionary leadership and innovative approaches to the challenges in their respective fields have resulted in newsworthy successes for their organizations. And now your host, Janice Weinman.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

To say that Georgette Bennett is a trailblazer in the field of coalition and intergroup relations, doesn't begin to do justice to what she has accomplished over nearly 30 years of reaching across religious and ethnic divides. Her dedication and persistence and success are well known and universally admired. In 1992, she founded the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, in honor of her late husband, Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, a pioneer in interreligious relations and a prominent human rights activist. She created the Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees, known as MFA, to address the plight of the Syrian war victims. The organization has since raised awareness and more than \$160 million in humanitarian aid. Through her visionary leadership, she has shown the world that by uniting many faiths, by working together, individuals can have enormous impact. When asked in a 2020 interview, what compelled her to undertake a project of this scale, she said that when she learned of the plight of Syrian war victims, she was, and I quote, "absolutely stunned by the magnitude of the crisis, and the silence of the world, in the face of it," adding, "Leviticus, 19:16 kept reverberating in my head: 'Thou shalt not stand by idly while the blood of your neighbor cries out from the earth.'" Georgette has never stood by idly and the world is immeasurably better because of it. And I must add, and I'm immeasurably lucky to be able to call her my friend.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Georgette, you have dedicated a large part of your life to helping groups see what they have in common rather than what divides them. In addition to founding the Tanenbaum Center and the Multifaith Alliance, you co-founded the Global Covenant of Religions, Global Covenant Partners and develop recommendations for the US State Department on how to counter religion-based violence. What inspired you to dedicate your life to this work?

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

Well, first of all, Janice, let me thank you for your very generous introduction. And to affirm that gratitude for this friendship cuts both ways.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Thank you.

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

You are a pretty inspiring figure yourself.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Thank you.

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

But in my case, my family and I were refugees, Hungarian refugees, and as such, we emerged from a place that had the worst of two worlds, that is both fascism and communism. When we finally arrived in the US, and it was a wait of years to get the papers that allowed us to come, we settled in Kew Gardens, and that was the start of a childhood that was really immersed in multi-religious exposure. We had a very kindly Christian science neighbor who took us under her wing. And I would attend Christian science Sunday school with her daughter who became I guess, one of my first friends in the US. And when I was in my preteens, I started attending a summer camp where I was in a touring church choir that would perform in churches in New England over the summer.

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

I did eventually get around as a teenager to attending Hebrew school and immersing myself in my own religion. But I think that background of experiencing other religions certainly started laying the groundwork for what I've been doing in the second half of my life. But certainly the greatest inspiration was my late husband, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum. He spent his life building bridges at a time when that was a risky thing to do. And there were a number of important bridges for which he was known. One of them was his outreach to evangelical Christians and his very close and longtime friendship with Billy Graham. He was I think best known for serving as an important back channel during World War II and working on the document that became known as *Nostra aetate*. And there he developed a number of very close friendships with Catholic prelates, Cardinal Bea probably being the foremost among them.

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

He built bridges between Martin Luther King and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. He's the one who introduced them to each other. And he gave Martin Luther King one of his first national platforms when he organized the national conference on religion and race and Heschel and King met each other. And the rest I think is captured in that iconic photograph of Heschel

marching with Martin Luther King in Selma, AL. He also used episodes that act of bigotry, maybe intentional, maybe unintentional, but he used those as opportunities to build bridges. For example, the Hymietown episode, which those of us who were old enough to know what that was in which Jesse Jackson made some disparaging comments about New York as a Jewish city using the term Hymietown, but rather than shaming him, Marc debated him. It was a people to people debate that took place at Queens College and it ended up being a very constructive experience that actually affirmed the bonds between African Americans and Jews.

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

And he did this of Jerry Falwell who had proclaimed that America is a Christian nation. Now, I don't know where that leaves the rest of us who were Jews and Muslims and Sikhs and Hindus and Buddhists and so on. But again, Marc debated him at a rabbinical assembly conference, as a matter of fact, and Jerry Falwell ended up retracting that statement, which was a very, very important step forward in terms of interreligious relations. Well, Marc's life was full of stories like this, and I'm going to shamelessly commend you to read a biography of him that was published just about a year ago, called *Confronting Hate: The Untold Story of the Rabbi Who Stood Up for Human Rights, Racial Justice, and Religious Reconciliation*. It's a very good place to take a deeper dive into these issues.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Thank you so much, Georgette. That was really fascinating. So, on a personal note, I must divulge to you something that I never shared before, because I didn't know about the Hymietown quote. And that is that the Hymie he was referring to was my uncle's...my husband's great uncle (I am a Shorenstein) who lived in Brownsville and who delivered the largest number of votes to Lehman and to Roosevelt. And so it's a very interesting reference. May I also say that I have read the book and I find it fascinating and really meaningful, so I too recommend it. So you have spoken about the victories. What I'd like to ask you about is what have been the greatest obstacles you faced in working to build partnerships with people of different ethnic and religious persuasions? How have you been able to create alliances and prove that your only goal is the common good not to place one side above the other?

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

I think I can answer that by giving you some examples, as well as a couple of general observations. The most difficult part of dealing with the other, whomever the other happens to be, is listening, learning to listen deeply because on the face of it, it's often very hard to truly listen, especially when you perceive the other as unreasonable. So, listening deeply, to try to understand their perspective, that is always an obstacle when listening deeply to build trust. Now, one example is the Tanenbaum Center's Peacemaker In Action program, which demonstrates that religion is so often the cause of the conflict, and not just part of the problem. In Northern Ireland, for example, it's difficult to think of a situation in which there was more hatred between two groups in this case. And yet it was two clergymen who were able to

use their deep religious links in order to create reconciliation. On the Catholic side, it was Father Alec Reid and on the Protestant side it was Reverend Roy Magee.

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

Now Gerry Adams and the others with the bold face names are the ones who get all of the attention and all of the credit for what eventually became The Good Friday Agreement that resolved the troubles in Northern Ireland, but it was these two clergymen who made it possible for The Good Friday Agreement to take place because each of them negotiated peace fires, excuse me, ceasefires. Actually, peace fires is a good word, even though it was a slip because these ceasefires made peace ultimately possible and they did it by invoking religious beliefs in each instance, invoking the notion of violence from killing, not being something that God wants us to do. And because they each have worked on the front lines with their respective groups, they had the street cred to be believed and they had the street cred to put the fear of God, as it were, back in these very violent militias.

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

I think the example that is closest to me is what the Multifaith Alliance was able to do in terms of building partnerships between Syrians and Israelis like Northern Ireland. They were sworn enemies for decades. And yet we were able to bring them together in the service of alleviating terrible suffering, delivering humanitarian aid, and in the process of doing that, they started to see each other as human beings. So the spirit that had been taught (indoctrinated is probably a more accurate word), indoctrinated to believe that Israel wanted to kill them and drive them off our land, that Jews were the devil because they supported Israel, that Syrians have killed Jews and Israelis before they themselves got killed. And working with Israelis they came to realize, "Hey, if nothing's really pushing us and driving us off our land, it's our own government. So this was a lie. What else was a lie?" And on the Israeli side, they too got to see Arabs as human beings. And this was just an extraordinary experience.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Georgette, you have mentioned so many different groups that are challenged to work together, and we live in a very divided world, but you mentioned Martin Luther King and Rabbi Heschel. You mentioned the Israelis and the Arabs. How do you see our society, bridging not only religious and ethnic boundaries, but also racial, economic and social boundaries over the next few years?

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

I think, first of all, it's very important to find ways to make common cause with the other. And one way to do that is to form multifaith coalitions around issues that we all care about. I think it's especially important for Jewish organizations to make common cause with Muslims and Muslim organizations. And I'm on, I'm involved with two of those that are doing very good work

around hate crimes, for example, The Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council and the Inter Jewish Muslim Alliance. It's also to find or to recognize where there's an alignment of interests. And this is very evident right now in the Middle East, where you have a tremendous shift taking place because the Sunni world and Israel have a set of common interests, namely Iran, defeating Iran, and its influence in the Middle East.

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

And one of the groups with which I've been working is the Arab Council for Regional Integration. This is a group made up of Arabs from 15 countries across the region who have come to the conclusion that BDS hurt only the Arab countries, and so they work hard to promote full integration of Israel into the region. They work hard to advocate for changing curriculum in Arab schools, to get rid of the preaching of hate. And these are all things that a few years ago, one would never imagine would be initiated by Arabs. And of course we're seeing the fruits of those kinds of efforts in the Abrahamic Accords that have recent or Abraham Accords that have recently been signed, normalizing relations between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan. I think it's also important to identify those with whom one can build bridges because you can't build bridges with everybody.

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

And there one finds some unexpected allies. For me, I had an absolutely life-transforming experience in Northern Ireland shortly after the signing of The Good Friday Agreement. I was in Belfast and I was in a meeting with released political prisoners, both IRA and royalist paramilitaries. Now the fact that they were in a room together, the murderers of each other's loved ones were in a room together, practicing reconciliation, was extraordinary to me, that they, these released political prisoners actually became leaders in their respective communities. Now, why did that happen? It happened because while they were in prison, they had acquired the skills that would allow them to do that. First of all, negotiation skills, because if you recall, they were, when they were in prison, it was as common criminals, and they spent years engaging in hunger strikes and all kinds of other activities in order to change their status to political prisoners.

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

Through that process, they acquired negotiation and community building skills. Similarly, with Palestinians, my husband and I spent a day with Sari Nusseibeh, who at that time was president of Al-Quds University. And he, he was from a very prominent Palestinian family. So prominent that they actually are the keeper of the keys to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The way that he started our day with him on the campus of Al-Quds, was by taking us to the prisoner museum on campus. And as we walk through the museum, we were really surprised at the absence of hate in that museum. Yes, there was a wall that had photographs of torture in Israeli prisons, but everything else in that museum was about the craft, the letters, what the prisoners had done with their time there. And Sari said something to us, which I've never forgotten, and

he said, something the Israelis need to understand is that their most promising partners for peace are the prisoners that have come out of their jails. Why? Because in the time that they spent in those jails, they learn the language, they learn something about the culture, they learn something about the other, that made it possible, and makes it possible, to build bridges. Now I could go on with other examples. So, you have to stop me when you've had enough, Janice.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Sure. Well, let me, let me extend this question a little bit to the more personal. You've talked about the other, so to speak, and I wonder, has your being Jewish been a help or a hindrance in your work or both? Especially in the Middle East.

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

My being Jewish has been a tremendous help. One way in which it has been a help is that my engagement with the other helped to debunk stereotypes about Jews and changes expectations, but the way in which it's been the most help is because I lean on my Jewish values. Now in your very kind introduction, Janice, you mentioned Leviticus 19:16, thou shalt not stand by idly while the blood of your brother cries out from the earth. Well, that's what drove me to set up the Multifaith Alliance, but there are other Jewish values as well, thou shalt not kill. And that comes from, that's really the greatest contribution that Jews have made to civilization. This idea that every human being is made in the sacred image of God and worthy of infinite respect and dignity, it's a foundation of all human rights and we were the first religion that outlawed women's sacrifice.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

I'm so sorry. Did I interrupt you?

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

Well, a couple of other values and there is the, the Jewish value about not gossiping and about not destroying anybody's reputation because to destroy your reputation is akin to murder. That's the value that goes direct to countering hate speech. And then finally *tikkun olam*, the idea that Jews have a special responsibility to repair the world.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Thank you so much. That was actually not only beautiful, but it was really important and inspiring for the audience this evening. I have one other thing to ask you, because Hadassah is such a wonderful feminist organization with so many Jewish values embedded in its practices and its policies in the behaviors that we undertake in all of our work. So as a women's organization, I can't help but ask you, has being a woman played a role in your professional life as well?

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

Being a role, being a woman, being a woman has played a huge role in my professional life, but perhaps not in the ways that that one would expect. Unlike many women who have felt discriminated against. And that discrimination is very real. For me, it's created extraordinary opportunities. Starting in the early 70's when I was a member of The Women's Advocacy Committee, which was a smaller committee made up of some extraordinary women. In fact, I was a young nobody at the time, and I had no idea why they would include me in this committee. This committee which was made up of Betty Gannon, Ellie Guggenheimer, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Ronnie Eldridge, Carol Greitzer, and women like that, just 12 of them. That was a huge inspiration for me. And we were eventually designated an official mayoral committee by John Lindsay, who was mayor at the time, loved working in the Lindsay administration and almost through a process of drawing straws, I ended up at the police department and my job was to advocate for women as victims, colleagues and criminals. Well, the work that I had the opportunity to do at the NYPD because you couldn't address these issues without first addressing the masculine ethic and the man of action image that dominates policing.

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

I eventually built a whole career as a criminologist as a result of the work that I did there. My career as a broadcast journalist, I encountered sexism trying to break into it, but once I was there, it was the men who gave me great opportunities. And in terms of my work with Syria, it was the gender violence there that first drew me in and motivated me to act because there's tremendous gender violence in the Syrian war.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Thank you so much. That has been fascinating. I mean, the route from going through the police experience to Syrian experiences is a fascinating route that you took. So let me ask you one last question. What has made it possible for the MFA, which you're so committed to, to succeed where so many non-profit organizations have not where so many NGOs have not, and also where the American government has not. Could you give us a sense of how that has been possible, where others have failed?

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

Well, as you said, in your introduction, Janice, we have been able to deliver more than \$160 million worth of aid. Most of it directly into Syria. And I think what has enabled us to survive, I'll use the word survive rather than succeed, is that we have a very tight focus. We are focused strictly on Syria. We are a Multifaith Alliance. We focus on what's doable. If you keep your eye on the big picture, you just get paralyzed. You have to pick the doable piece of it. Our doable pieces that we operate in, in the crevices where others don't. And we have worked with Israel, which is something that almost nobody else has done in addressing the Syrian crisis. And what

we've been able to do that the government has not, is because of the partnerships that we have on the ground, both in Syria and Israel. And where as the government provides aid mostly through UN agencies, which are subject to tremendous restrictions that NGOs are not. For example, chapter seven of the UN charter, which if there is a government in place, forbids you from delivering aid except through the government. Well if you do that through the government in Syria, it doesn't even get to any areas they don't control. But if you are not the UN, then you can deliver aid directly.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Thank you so much, Georgette. Your range and your commitment to coexistence based on Jewish values is absolutely amazing and inspiring. And I think the people who have heard you today will really be moved, not only moved, but moved to action by your words. And we're so delighted that Hadassah could host you and that I could be the one to interview you. Thank you so very much for everything you do for humanity.

Dr. Georgette Bennett:

And thank you for what Hadassah does, including its medical help for Syrians.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Thank you.