

# The Israel Connection: Possibilities for Partnership

By Dr. Björn Krondorfer

**T**he work of the **Martin-Springer Institute (MSI)** is widely known at our university. Founded by Ralph and Doris Martin fifteen years ago, its educational mission is to offer (public) programs on the history and legacy of the Holocaust and to attend to current experiences of social injustices. What most people do not know, however, is that there is also a “**Martin-Springer Center for Conflict Studies**” at Ben Gurion University (BGU) in Israel.

Soon after I joined MSI as director in 2012, I learned about the existence of our dizygotic (fraternal) twin center in Israel. I thought it important to reach out. Steadily paving the way for establishing a base for conversations, in January of this year a small NAU delegation finally had a chance to visit BGU in the southern city of Be'er Sheva.

**Let us take a step back and first ask why there is a Martin-Springer Center for Conflict Studies in Israel.** It has, of course, everything to do with Flagstaff residents **Ralph and Doris Martin**. Doris, nee Szpringer, survived the Holocaust in Poland. She and her husband Ralph have always embraced



Overview: View of Jerusalem.  
Inset: Michael Vincent, Liz Grobsmith, and the author

the humanitarian values of courage and tolerance and have pursued the idea of improving relations between communities in conflict. A few years after they had founded MSI at our university, they learned about the work of Israeli psychologist **Dan Bar-On**. As a faculty member at BGU, Dan Bar-On spearheaded qualitative studies on children of Holocaust survivors and German children of Nazi perpetrators. He later initiated and led dialogue groups for descendants

of survivors and of perpetrators, eventually expanding the group to include other conflict zones, like Ireland and South Africa. Eventually, Professor Bar-On teamed up with a Palestinian scholar and they turned their attention to Israeli-Palestinian relations. Bar-On's important work was cut short by his untimely death of brain cancer, but Ralph and Doris secured a continuation of the work he started by setting up the Martin-Springer Center for Conflict Studies at BGU.

Today, the center is headed by **Professor Shifra Sagy**, Chair of the Educational Psychology department and trained in the sociology of health.

Shifra Sagy and I had a chance to meet in person in the summer of 2015. I had traveled to Talitha Kumi, a retreat center in the Palestinian territory of the West Bank, to facilitate a multi-day encounter between Israelis, Palestinians, and Germans. This interactive

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seminar focused on “borders” (political and personal, real and imagined borders), and we led the group through a process toward greater understanding and reducing levels of mistrust. For anyone following the events in Israel and the Palestinian territories, it comes as no surprise to hear that mutual fears, suspicion, and acrimonies mark the human-to-human and communal relations in this relatively small strip of contested land, where religion and politics often intersect in unholy ways. In such a volatile situation, it is important to strengthen those who are willing to engage in honest, self-discerning, and respectful conversation.

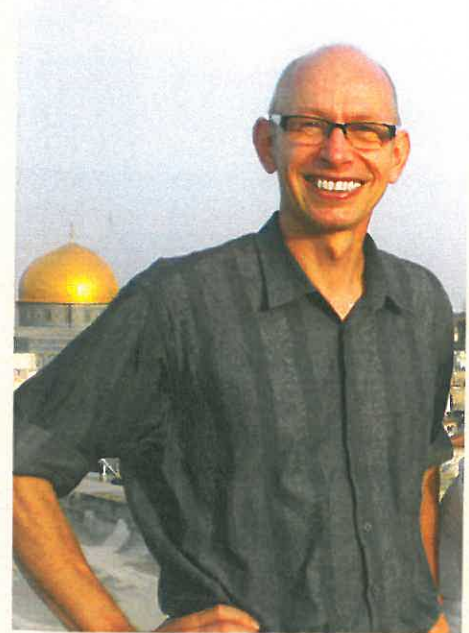
Professor Sagy attended the last session of this interactive seminar. The next morning, she and I had a chance to discuss possible collaboration between our “twin” institutes. We recognized the common grounds, shared values, and the compatible nature of the work of our Martin-Springer initiatives. We felt strongly that our universities at large should be included in this conversation, given the potential of a NAU-BGU partnership on a broader scale.

On January 9, three of us boarded a flight to Tel Aviv. **Liz Grobsmith** (Interim Director of the Center for International Education), **Michael Vincent** (Dean of the College of Arts & Letters), and I were on our way to Ben Gurion University to discuss ideas and proposals with our counterparts. The Martin-Springer Center for Conflict Studies also arranged a guided tour to learn about the plight of unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev desert. We enjoyed a chance to explore the old city of Jerusalem and visit a non-governmental organization in Bethlehem, whose founder, **Sami Awad**, will speak at NAU on April 11, 2016.

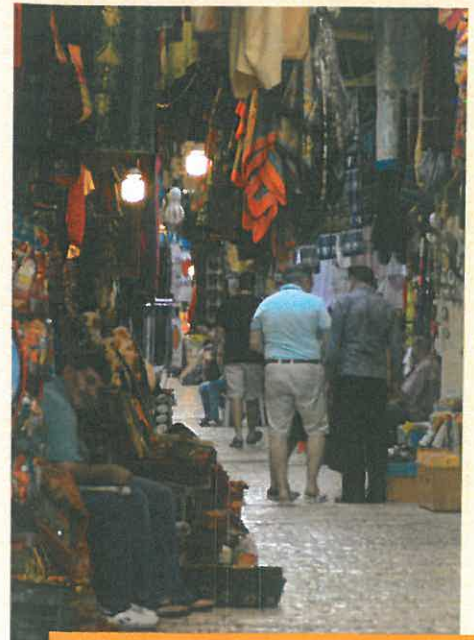
At BGU, everyone we met greeted us with enthusiasm about possible projects and exchanges, from President Rivka Cami and the Director of the International Office to faculty members from a variety of disciplines. We talked, for example, to people from the medical school about joint efforts on global health education, especially about cultural transference of medical knowledge to marginal populations, like the Bedouins in southern Israel and Native Americans in the American southwest. We tentatively explored ideas of research exchange on sustainability and water resources, since both NAU and BGU are located in desert environments. We looked into ways of how NAU’s Hotel and Restaurant Management school might collaborate with BGU’s Hotel & Tourism school at its satellite campus in Eilat. Furthermore, we talked to faculty in the fields of social studies, anthropology, psychology, archeology, and religious history. Most intriguingly, we recognized our shared institutional commitments to global education, diversity, and outreach to underserved communities.

Let me, in the end, return to the Martin-Springer Institute at NAU and the Martin-Springer Center for Conflict Studies at BGU. Prof. Sagy and I are now in an early stage of designing a summer program for a joint group of students from both universities on the theme of “social identity and space.” This program will look at how historical forces have shaped spatial and social arrangements between majority and minority populations: Bedouin, Arab-Palestinian, and Jewish communities in southern Israel, and Native American, Mexican-American, and European-American in the Southwest. While traveling and studying together in Israel and in Arizona, the make-up of the student group will reflect, it is hoped, the diversity of “social identities” that are at the heart of this project.

*Björn Krondorfer is Director of the Martin-Springer Institute and Professor of Comparative Religious Studies*



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Marketplace scene, epitomizing the rich cultures that mix in the Middle East