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Jew vs. Jew: A more dangerous conflict than the one with Palestinians?

Moti Bar-Or believes that the conflict between Jews is as great a threat if not greater to the existence of Israel than the conflict with the Palestinians.

"The First and Second temples were destroyed because of inner strife and hatred among Jews," said Bar-Or. "The press puts our external conflict with the Palestinians at the center, but I don't think so; I believe that the internal Jewish question is more important, as the conflict with the Palestinians will be resolved sooner or later."

Bar-Or is the director of Kolot — www.kolot.info — an Israeli organization that is trying to bridge the gap between religious and secular Jews. It is also a leadership organization, not much different than the Wexner Heritage Foundation Fellowship in the United States. Bar-Or describes Kolot as "a center for Jewish studies focused on secular leaders who want to be positive Israeli Jews, not only anti-Orthodox."

Bar-Or, who was in the Bay Area last month meeting with Wexner fellows, is an Orthodox rabbi who is also a strong advocate for pluralism.

He began Kolot with seed money from American foundations, including the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund.

Recently, Kolot got some attention for trying to bridge the gap between the secular majority in Israel, which favored the Gaza withdrawal, and the settlers in Gaza, who were largely demonized by the majority.

"The atmosphere in Israel was largely that the [settlers] deserve it," said Bar-Or, who met with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to talk about his work in Gush Katif.

Adding that he personally favored the disengagement, he said the settlers were treated poorly by the government.

The government owed the settlers an apology, Bar-Or charged, as the politicians were the ones who sent the settlers into Gaza in the first place.

The fact that the government didn't apologize "is a sign of an unhealthy country."

"A few groups [of Kolot fellows] traveled down to the Katif area and studied [Jewish texts] with people there," he said. "This created intimacy and a powerful process of unity in the middle of this major disagreement."

Bar-Or lived in a Gaza settlement for a few weeks, trying to do what he could to bridge the gap between the two peoples.

With several others from Kolot, they were able to get settlement rabbis to meet with the high army officers before the evacuations, so they were able to see each other as human beings.

"We were creating rituals where the soldiers and settlers, on the very day of the evacuation, were singing together, praying together and saying 'Hatikvah' together," he said. "This happened even though the television wasn't there. And sometimes the same soldier that sang songs with the settler carried him out half an hour later. It was a unique scene, and we had a role in creating these bridges in the midst of this chaotic experience."

Kolot fellows participate in the program for two years and leave with a sense of the importance of charity and tikkun olam, the concept of healing that is a crucial part of Judaism in America, but not widely thought about in Israel.

"Our alumni have created a major soup kitchen in Tel Aviv, funded by Israelis, and three of our women lawyers have created a shelter for sex workers, where they are taken care of and offered therapy before being sent back to Moldova," he said.

Bar-Or said that he always looked forward to visiting the United States, not only to fund-raise but to learn from American Jews.

"I'm always startled to see the initiatives happening here when it comes to Jewish education and pluralism. Israelis can learn so much from what's going on here."