

Desert Storms

Can a trek across the desert help Muslims, Jews and Christians understand each other better? Not without a few snags.



Michael Greenspan / Breaking the Ice-Abacapress.com

New York City firefighter Dan Sheridan (left) compares his tattoo with Latif Yahia, an Iraqi, during their orientation session in Jordan

WEB EXCLUSIVE

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April 20, 2006 - As a captain for the New York City Fire Department, Dan Sheridan is used to bonding under stressful, often dangerous circumstances. He's accustomed to living day in and day out with people he may not have much in common with except the task at hand. But the last time Sheridan, 44, drove a fire truck was while crossing the Sahara Desert as part of a multicultural peacebuilding expedition. The team—two Americans, two Israelis, an Iraqi, an Iranian-American, a Palestinian, a Ukrainian and an Afghan—was a motley crew whose goal was simply to get along.

Sheridan is exactly the kind of American that Heskell Nathaniel, co-founder of [Breaking the Ice](#), the Berlin-based group that sponsored the trip, was looking for. In fact, Nathaniel actively sought him out. In 2004, Nathaniel led a group of four Israelis and four Palestinians, strangers and novice climbers, on a history-making trip to a never-before climbed mountain in Antarctica. After some infighting, the team named it "The Mountain of Israeli-Palestinian Friendship." For the organization's second expedition, Nathaniel widened his sights to the clash between Islam and the West. The team would trek from Jerusalem, across the Sahara Desert, to Tripoli—a final destination the group never reached.

Ominously, the group faced conflict the first time it met, for training in the Jordanian desert. At a welcoming dinner, Palestinian imam and team member Sheikh Ishaq Abd El-Jawwa Taha made an unsolicited speech against American support of Israel, a diatribe he would later repeat at the group's first press conference. While this dismayed some team members, it did not surprise the Breaking the Ice organizers, who say they value free speech. Sheikh Taha withdrew before the trip even began, after a Palestinian newspaper incorrectly claimed that Shimon Peres was financing the trek.

He was not the last to part ways. Strong feelings were expected from the team, which included four members who had served in their country's armed forces. Two suffered torture: one forced to undergo plastic surgery to become Uday Hussein's body double; another at the hands of his Syrian captors after his Israeli fighter jet was shot down over Lebanon. All had lost family and friends to violence.

As the trip set out from Jerusalem last month, in their 1960s German fire trucks, the team bonded over moments of unexpected lightheartedness. They nicknamed the Tibetan Buddhist monk accompanying them for spiritual inspiration "Cupcake." They shared recipes with each other and the world, through their [online diary](#).

Unexpected alliances emerged and were tested. The Israelis found they had more in common with Mohammad Azzam Alarjah, a Palestinian team member half their age, than with the Americans. Neda Sarmast, an Iranian American, bonded with Latif Yahia, an Iraqi who fought against her country in the war that killed her 16-year-old best friend. It was an international game of "Survivor," but no one could be voted off the island, though some voted themselves out.

Sarmast chose not to take part in the kick-off press conference, for fear that pictures of her on a dais with Shimon Peres would bring reprisals from the Iranian government. Yahya Wardak, an Afghan Muslim living in Germany, left the trip after the Israelis were denied entrance at the Libyan border, despite nearly a year of contact between Breaking the Ice and high-level Libyan officials (the country does not recognize Israel). Wardak felt they'd failed. After coming almost 1,500 miles, the group was forced to retreat from the border. Already one team member down, they decided to stay together and spend the rest of the month traveling in Egypt.



Tensions flared between Sheridan and Yahia when the firefighter's mention of his 343 colleagues killed on 9/11 turned to heated discussion of America's occupation of Iraq. Yahia, exhausted and frustrated at the group's grueling schedule, later left the group in Egypt, but returned a day later.

Even after planting their symbolic olive tree of peace at the base of Mt. Sinai, the group was offered a final slap in the face. They were forced to return to Tel Aviv minus two team members: Yahia and Alarjah had been denied visas to reenter Israel. It was a bittersweet ending to a bittersweet trip.

So why did the participants sign up for an admittedly insane journey? Galit Oren, a 40-year-old Israeli, lost her mother in a 1995 suicide bombing and has been involved in a Palestinian-Israeli family bereavement group since. The expedition was a natural choice for her, as it was for Yahia: "Without even thinking, I said 'yes.'" After escaping the repressive regime of Saddam Hussein, he welcomes the opportunity for free speech and open dialogue, something he worries many Muslims living under dictatorships and despots have not known. Over the past year, Ray Benson, a former Army colonel and military attaché, has gotten involved with Muslim-Christian talks in Indonesia. For him, this trek was just another adventure.

But for Sheridan, the decision to travel halfway around the world as the guest of sometimes hostile governments and complete strangers was not so clear cut, and was as much about finding answers as adventure. Prior to 9/11, he had not done much international traveling, but "I had to see for myself," he says. His family was worried for his safety, and some colleagues were suspicious. "Living in New York, I guess we hear a certain spin on stories," he explains. "The mindset is there will never be peace [in the Middle East]."

After spending a month in the desert with four Muslims, he says he is no closer to understanding their culture or their religion, although he's convinced that the conflicts rocking their countries—and his own—are the work of governments, not people. "By the second week I saw vast differences, especially with the Arabs," Sheridan says. "I could never sway them to think like we do in the West." His solution? "Let's agree to disagree."

While that may not work in the greater conflict of civilizations, it may be the only answer on the interpersonal and even regional levels. That's what Nathaniel, the group's organizer, is hoping for. Breaking the Ice is already tossing around ideas for its next expedition. They've done ice and now sand; keeping with the elemental theme, the next trek may be done by air. Perhaps North and South Koreans can join in an extended trip by hot-air balloon.

Meanwhile, speaking by satellite phone from Egypt, Sheridan doesn't expect to be back in this corner of the world again, and that's fine by him. "I'm gonna kiss the ground when I come home," he confides, in a thick New York accent. "I'm very happy to be an American." He does hope, however, to stay in touch with some of his fellow trekkers. As his teammate, Gil Fogiel, a 49 year-old ex-fighter pilot explains, "I shared with them my intimate stories and my intimate life; part of me is within each of them." As Nathaniel says, "At the end of the day, it's a journey of individuals."

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