



Interfaith prayer breakfast focuses on music as a bridge between people

By ERIN ANDERSEN / Lincoln Journal Star | Posted: Friday, April 20, 2012 2:30 pm

In a world often defined by extreme points of view, distrust and fear, one language bridges all divides.

The language of music.

On Friday, several hundred people representing Lincoln's diverse cultures and faiths got together for the Mayor's Interfaith Prayer Breakfast. By the time they left, they all were making music -- singing a multilingual song of peace.

This year's "speaker," Yuval Ron, spoke very little.

Instead, the Israeli Jewish musician and Oscar-winning composer, along with his seven-member ensemble of Christian, Jewish and Muslim artists with Middle Eastern roots, performed their unique, soul-stirring cultural blend of music.

Music always is part of the prayer breakfast, said Mayor Chris Beutler, but this year, it was the focal point.

Music brings a message of harmony, he said.

"A message needed not just in war-torn nations, but here in Lincoln, Nebraska."

Music is a universal language known for its ability to bridge divides.

"Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and cannot remain silent," the mayor said, quoting Victor Hugo.

That perfectly describes the genesis and heart of the Yuval Ron Ensemble.

Each member is a noted musician in his or her own right.

"But they have come together to make something better," Beutler said.

And they inspire those who hear them.

"We need to come together and create something larger than ourselves," Beutler told the crowd.

Formed in 1999, the ensemble aspires to end national, racial, religious and cultural divides by uniting the music and dance of the opposing people in the Middle East into a mystical, spiritual and inspirational music celebration.

The goal, Ron said, is to create harmony and beauty through collaboration.

"There is a power to music that bridges between people," he said. "It's non-verbal. Words can divide us. They are used by people to divide. Words very often are misunderstood. Words ... make clear barriers and rules that divide.

"Words can be used for peace as well, but very often they are not used for peace.

"(Music) speaks to the lost paradise we have in each of us," Ron said.

It speaks to lost innocence -- to a time before people were aware of money, a time before they were aware of racial divisions, stereotypes, war, crime and poverty, he said.

"The pure innocence of early childhood is in every piece of music. ... that is why music can unify," Ron said.

"Music is a feeling."

And history shows that music always has been used to build bridges between people of different cultures, languages, customs and beliefs. Ron talked of the ancient silk roads in China, and how traveling caravans would gather around campfires and play music. Travelers from other countries and tribes drawn by the light of the fire would join them.

In Africa, tribes sent messages to one another by music.

And even NASA used music in the 1960s and '70s in its search for life on other planets, Ron said. The experiment was the inspiration for the hit film, "Close Encounters of the Third Kind."

"Music is a great tool," he said.

To demonstrate its subtle power, the Yuval Ron Ensemble closed its program with an old love song that has been embraced by both the Jewish and Muslim cultures. Twenty years ago, a Muslim Sufi Mystical Order in California added two words to the otherwise instrumental song: Shalom and Salaam -- the word for "peace" in Hebrew and Arabic.

Ron revised it again -- adding a third word: Hallelujah -- thereby representing all three Abrahamic faiths.

As the annual event drew to a close, Rabbi Craig Lewis of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun (South Street Temple) encouraged the crowd to carry on the music.

"Music becomes the bridge that helps us not to fear. Let it reverberate from Lincoln to the four corners of the world as sound of shared purpose."