

A Story of Hope Amidst a Humanitarian Crisis

An Interview with Georgette Bennett, PhD,
 Founder, Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding and Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees

EDITORS' NOTE Dr. Georgette Bennett has spent nearly 30 years advancing interreligious relations. A sociologist, author and advisor on philanthropic and public affairs matters, she is founder of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, as well as the Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees. In these roles, Dr. Bennett works globally with top interfaith leaders to delegitimize the misuse of religion to justify violence. She has served on many task forces and committees to promote conflict resolution, including with the U.S. State Department Religion and Foreign Policy's working group on conflict mitigation for countering religion-based violence. Earlier in her career, she received awards for her work as a criminologist, and was a network correspondent for NBC News, as well as host of Walter Cronkite's PBS current affairs series, *Why in the World?*. Among many honors, Dr. Bennett has been recognized by the Syrian American Medical Society for her work on behalf of Syrian war victims and has been awarded the prestigious AARP Purpose Prize. In 2021, she was named as one of Forbes 50 Over 50 Women for Impact and was specifically cited, along with Condoleezza Rice, Dr. Najat Arafat Khelil, and Susan Rice, as one who "shaped the course of modern American foreign policy and human rights." In the private sector, Dr. Bennett serves as Managing Director of Government Relations and Public Affairs for Emigrant Bank, the oldest and largest family owned and operated private bank in the nation. She works closely with Emigrant's Chair, Howard Milstein, and the Milstein family on public affairs, civic, and philanthropic matters.



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refugee policies; raise awareness of the contributions of the Syrian people; and make a tangible difference in restoring their lives.

In addition to your work in public policy and related fields, you also founded the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding and the Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees, and you are very active in humanitarian causes. How does all of this experience fit together?

A starting point is my history. I'm a child of the Holocaust and a refugee. The experience of displacement, injustice, and prejudice is imprinted in my psyche, so I feel driven to respond. Another common thread flows from Jewish values. It's no accident that the title of my new book borrows from Leviticus 19:16: "Thou shalt not stand idly by while the blood of your neighbor cries out from the earth." My religion commands me to respond to suffering, to care for the stranger, to refrain from hate speech, to do my part to repair the world. A third thread is the inspiration I drew from my late husband, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum. Marc was one of the most charismatic and impactful religious leaders in the U.S., a pioneer in the interreligious movement, and a committed human rights activist

with a special commitment to refugees. That's why I founded the Tanenbaum Center and the Multifaith Alliance after his death, and now work closely with my husband of 20 years, Leonard Polonsky, who is the inspiration for my philanthropy and works tirelessly to execute on this vision.

Your new book, *Thou Shalt Not Stand Idly By: How One Woman Confronted the Greatest Humanitarian Crisis of Our Time*, describes how you built unprecedented partnerships across national, tribal and religious boundaries to alleviate suffering of war victims in the brutal conflict in Syria. How did you come to write the book?

I felt this was a story that needed to be told, in which unprecedented and improbable partnerships between sworn enemies alleviated terrible suffering. If Syrians and Israelis can bridge their divides, there's hope for conflicts everywhere. I hope to encourage others who want to tackle a crisis to find an entry point where they can make a difference. Sadly, refugee policy has been driven by fear. I wanted to replace fear with facts, so that well-intentioned people can find realistic ways to offer help. I also wanted to show that small organizations can move faster in the face of urgent needs. Government organizations are subject to bureaucracy and regulations that often hamper

ORGANIZATION BRIEFS The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding (tanenbaum.org) is a secular nonprofit organization that works to promote mutual respect and combat religious prejudice in workplaces, schools, healthcare settings and conflict zones. Headquartered in New York, the Center was founded to build on the work of Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum (1925-1992), ranked one of the country's most influential and respected religious leaders and a renowned human rights activist.

The Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees (multifaithalliance.org) was founded to harness the collective power of faith-based and secular partners to deliver aid to Syrians whose lives have been disrupted by war; advocate for rational U.S.



Dr. Bennett with a family at the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan.

their efforts. Ultimately, I sought to illustrate in detail how and why humanitarian diplomacy works – and why it's critical for dealing with disasters in the future.

What does your work in business, in philanthropic enterprises, and in humanitarian arenas teach us about the power of networks and personal diplomacy?

My work and our family philanthropy have brought me into contact with people in many spheres: entertainment, journalism, politics, government, diplomacy, business, charity. Many have become good friends. Others are colleagues and acquaintances who form various networks through which I've been able to advance my passion for conflict resolution and intergroup relations. The Multifaith Alliance and the Tanenbaum Center are great examples of networks that can operate at the grassroots level. They serve as models for how religion can be used as a means to resolve conflict instead of being its source.

I'm also a great believer in people-to-people diplomacy. Our work on behalf of Syrian war victims included a two-year process in which a small group of influential Syrians and Israelis met secretly in European capitals to identify areas of partnership and lay the groundwork for future relations. Agreements at the government-to-government level often can't succeed unless supported by dialogue at the people-to-people level – this is a lesson for both business and life. The peace between Israel and Egypt, and Israel and Jordan, are just two examples. These are “cold” agreements because they lack interaction between the people. The normalization agreements between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco are the exact opposite. The ground is prepared for people with cultural, business, and educational exchanges.

You are a woman of achievement. What leadership lessons have you learned along the way?

In addressing any issue, I always start by identifying the gaps – either through mapping, research, observation, or just plain gut instinct. I go with my gut because instinct is the highest form of knowledge. It is the whole, made up of the sum of parts, that have been synthesized at an unconscious level in the brain. I also always try to view a problem from an angle that isn't

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duplicative of what others in the same space are doing. The key is to find an entry point and that's what I've done in my entire career as a change agent. In my prior life as a criminologist, for example, we were able to bring about tremendous reforms in criminal justice through community policing. Today community policing is an international movement – practiced even in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. In those early years, two of my colleagues and I also succeeded in lobbying the NYPD for the first sex crimes unit in the country. Today, these “Special Victims Units” are ubiquitous and the TV show of that name has had a 23 year run. I also came up with the idea for the first federally funded victim rights center in the country – and that helped launch the victim rights movement.

After the death of my first husband, I transferred the approach that had enabled me to kick-start movements in the criminal justice system to interreligious relations. The Tanenbaum Center pioneered programs that address the religious dimension of diversity in the workplace. As such, we work with many Fortune 500 companies to deal with issues of workplace accommodation and culturally sensitive marketing. Tanenbaum, literally, wrote the book on religio-cultural competency in healthcare settings where we do grand rounds and audits. We were the first to create coexistence curricula and teacher training for the primary grades – programs that were recognized as an International Best Practice. Our case study methodology has enhanced the role of grassroots peacemakers in conflict zones around the world.

When I have a vision, I run with it and share it with like-minded people. These people are the wind beneath my wings. Along the way, I've learned the importance of being generous and public with sharing credit, while remaining measured and private when attaching blame.

Emigrant Bank has a unique history in that it was founded to support the needs of an early wave of refugees to American soil and has always supported new communities of immigrants seeking a better life in the United States. Will you highlight the bank's history and how its work relates to the topics covered in your book?

Emigrant was founded as a response to The Great Potato Famine in Ireland in the mid-19th Century. The two million Irish who arrived on our shores were the most impoverished of all the immigrants to come to the U.S. They suffered enormous discrimination, and few had access to resources of any kind. The Irish Emigrant Society founded Emigrant Bank to provide banking services and economic opportunity to this community. Today, under Howard Milstein's leadership, Emigrant continues that legacy, as new generations of immigrants seek the promise of America. With Howard, Emigrant Bank has broadened its philanthropy – especially in response to crises. In the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, for example, Emigrant did something unheard of: After Katrina, the bank sent money to every Emigrant client in the impacted region. After Sandy, it sent a check to every first responder whose own home was damaged.

The work I am doing to help displaced Syrians is entirely consistent with the Emigrant legacy and Howard has been supportive of that work. He has provided office space and financial support for the Multifaith Alliance, and Howard funded a Harvard Law School report that made a strong case for overcoming misperceptions and welcoming Syrian refugees to our shores. Such support allows us to keep operating costs low in relation to the value of the aid we deliver – with an annual budget of under \$2 million, we've delivered \$175 million in aid over the past few years, benefitting 2.3 million Syrian war victims. This is a testament to visionaries like Howard who quietly support efforts like ours. ●

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