

Ron Duncan Hart (continued from p. 9)

Jewish community went from sixteen thousand to four thousand.

"It was both the para-military right-wing army groups, in that chaos, and with the student guerilla groups, there were too many things happening from too many directions. The thing is, being out in the countryside, being in *campesino* (farming) communities, but being a North American, the leftist guerillas thought I was CIA, and the right wing thought I was aligned with the leftists. Being a foreigner, neither side trusted who I was where I was, trying to be a neutral observer. There is no neutral ground – you're assigned a status whether you want it or not."

Raised in a secular Jewish American household in the Bay area as Ron Duncan, he later added his mother's name Hart, as is the custom in Colombia. His keen appreciation of Sephardic history brought him to Oxford University to do postdoctoral work, and his growing interest in bettering Westerners' understandings led him to travel further into the Muslim world, from Morocco to Central Asia.

He gave the 2008 Neustadt Lecture at Oklahoma City University, titled "Cain's Question and the Arab-Israeli Conflict." The preface, by Dean Mark Davies of the OKCU theological center, reads "I am thankful that Ron heeded the wisdom of his grandmother who taught him when he was just five years old that it is wrong to objectify and demonize persons who we might see as the "other." She had stopped him from playing cowboys and Indians saying, "You don't shoot Indians."

Hart wrote a book *Islam and Muslims* [Gaon Press, 2011], dedicated "To Jews and Muslims / Who have lived together / With respect and mutual acceptance / for more than a thousand years." The book includes incisive critiques of Western views and demographic analyses.

Hart explained that "In Egypt, the Palestinian territories, and some other Arab countries, there is a big population growth, fifty percent of the people are under eighteen, the economy is not growing fast enough to absorb them. Young men are unemployed and unemployable, so they cannot get married, can't move into the adult mature next stage in life, there is the potential for people to engage in violence."

Hart does believe that, over the next thirty to forty years, changes that will improve the situation will come, largely through greater education of and leadership by women. Simply put, with literacy, birthrates drop.

"A lot of people who are professionals in the field, scholars, people in peace studies and international conflict resolution, say it's going to take time. Their view is basically, they do not expect (the conflict with Israel) to be resolved now, but in the next forty years. Until these generations are gone it will not be resolved.

"What is interesting to me is the rise of women, a new generation of educated women. As these women emerge, their voices are different from the men's voices. If women came into power with elected positions they might approach the whole thing with Israel in a different way. And in the process, the more women in [leadership in] Israel, maybe the women can find a way to resolve this that men can't – that we men can't see."

Since first coming to Santa Fe in 2005 and finally moving there in 2008, Hart has become deeply involved in many aspects of the Jewish community. He has established a growing publishing house, Gaon Books, which in the last six years has published thirty-six titles. Hart's interests continue to lean towards Jewish non-fiction women's voices.

With this year's successful launch of Gloria Abella Ballen's art monograph *The Power of the Hebrew Alphabet* that was recently featured in *Hadassah Magazine*, the press is becoming a recognized force in the publishing landscape. Gloria's beautiful and insightful publication features her paintings of the Hebrew letters taking flight – inspired by her studies of medieval Sephardic illuminated manuscripts and the Kabbalah.

As program director the past four years on the board of the NMJHS, Hart's tireless work culminated in the highly successful 26th Fall Conference in 2013 held in Taos, "Sephardic History from Spain to New Mexico." And, from its inception at HaMakom in 2010, Hart also has worked on the advisory committee of the Santa Fe Jewish Film Festival with Festival Director Marcia Torobin. The festival has quickly become a stellar annual event with sold-out tickets at all shows.

Hart is now involved in work on a major exhibit and book, "Sephardic Legacy," that will open in May 2016 at the New Mexico History Museum in Santa Fe. Hart explains, "This is the first time really that an exhibit of this kind has been done, showing when Jews had to go into hiding, to give insight into how people who were hiding their Jewish identity lived. The exhibit and book will trace the Jewish story in Spain, then – after the expulsion – bringing it into Mexico and New Mexico, and the crypto-Jewish story here where it was illegal to be Jewish up to contemporary times."

The project began as the brainchild of Frances Levine, former director of the museum, in discussions with donor Helene Singer Merrin. Then another gift from Stephen and Jane Hochberg made the book possible.

Duncan Hart is co-editor of the Sephardic Legacy book for the exhibition