

Shemot 5770 Jewish-Muslim Connections
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Shabbat Shalom.

Has everyone here heard the one about the two rabbis and the imam who meet in a mosque? No? Well, the rabbis go in to a mosque and the imam welcomes them and tells them to feel at home. So they take off their shoes.

All right, that wasn't the joke. The rabbis see the Muslims praying and since they don't know Arabic, they cannot follow along with the Muslim prayer and so they start arguing. What else would two Jews do?

Well, this isn't really a joke, but what actually happened to me this week. A group of 15 rabbis met with imams and Muslim religious leaders in the Islamic Society and Boston Cultural Center in Roxbury. I attended this program not because I am taking any political stand nor do I want to comment on the controversies that have been associated with this mosque and its funding, but simply because I wanted to participate in the third session of a Jewish-Muslim dialogue and, as many of you know, I am a big believer in talking. We have held other sessions with these Muslim leaders at an Islamic cultural center in Cambridge and in a shul in Newton and now I was going to have my first opportunity to witness Muslim prayer in person.

After two other rabbis, two Muslim leaders and I sat down to study texts from the Quran and the Torah (which are fascinating in their parallel, especially since Hebrew and Arabic share so many linguistic similarities), we went on a tour of the mosque. We saw the room where they perform *wudu* – washing of the face, hands and feet before they pray which is strikingly similar to the way the Levites used wash the *Kohanim* when the Holy Temple stood in Jerusalem, akin to the way we still wash our hands and recite the blessing *netilat yadayim* before we eat.

We walked into a room where they wash dead bodies, preparing them for burial in a ritual that is similar to the way we perform *taharah*, the ritual purification and washing of the body after death and before burial.

Then it was time to pray. When I received the schedule for this program, I saw that *minhah*, our Jewish afternoon service was scheduled at 1145 AM; I looked up the time of sunrise and sunset – 1145 was the midpoint of the day and according to Jewish law, we could not daven *minhah* until almost 30 minutes after that so I asked the organizers if they could switch and have the Muslim prayer at 1145, so we could daven at 1215. But it turns out the Muslim tradition is the same as ours and they could not daven their "*minhah*" called *duhr* any earlier than 12:13 PM either! Muslims pray five times a day: before sunrise, at midday, in the mid-afternoon, sunset and at night – the times resemble our distinctions and times when we pray as well. Historians teach us that this is

not surprising, since Islam is built on a huge foundation of Judaism; the similarities are everywhere.

Back to that afternoon – I watched the Muslim prayer and I took some pictures and video, which I hope I can find a way to share with those of you who would like to see them. After their prayer, a few rabbis got into a discussion about where we should daven *minhah*. The Muslims had given us the honor of praying in the main prayer area of the mosque. Since there are no symbols in a mosque (unlike some churches that have crosses and Jews are not allowed to pray before a symbol like a cross), there was no *halakhic* – Jewish legal objections.

But there were other issues and it did not feel right to me and some of the other rabbis. First, Muslim prayer does not allow shoes, since they prostrate on the ground (a practice that comes Jewish prayer in the Temple as well; a practice we still utilize on Yom Kippur). But Jewish prayer occurs with our feet covered; praying without shoes is a sign of mourning, reserved for times when we are mourners sitting *shiva* or observing a day of national mourning. With that, a debate among a number of us rabbis began.

I shared what I thought was a larger problem: that it was disrespectful to their sacred space to usurp it and impose our service there. Especially since there were other Muslims still in the space who were not part of our dialogue whom I did not want to offend, I thought the group should pray in an outside hallway. And after some “conversation,” that is what we did.

But, all in all, it was a powerful experience of learning and sharing in both directions.

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Our parashah, *Parashat Shemot*, is one of the greatest in the entire Torah. In just a few short chapters, most of the core narrative of the birth of our people is delineated. We have lost the power when Joseph was viceroy of Egypt, become slaves, suffered immeasurably, and had all our male children sentenced to death in the Nile.

Suddenly the spotlight narrows in on one nameless male infant born to nameless couple, descendants of the house of Levi (for a parashah entitled *Shemot*/names, it’s striking to see how much anonymity there is among many of the characters).

The baby, whom we will know as Moses, is placed in the Nile, rescued by Pharaoh’s daughter, also nameless. After he grows up, he sees how his people suffer, strikes an Egyptian taskmaster and has to flee to the land of Midian where he marries Tziporah, becoming a shepherd (the occupation of ancient leaders). He encounters God at the burning bush and reluctantly agrees to take on the mission of freeing his people from Pharaoh.

One of the most striking elements of this narrative is the help Moses receives. Much of it comes from women: his mother, sister, Pharaoh's daughter, his wife, but this morning, I want to point out how much help he receives from those who are not his people who are not Hebrews.

First, while it is not 100% clear from the text if the two midwives who are mentioned, if Shifra and Puah, are Egyptian or Hebrew, most commentators feel that they are Egyptian (why would Pharaoh trust the killing of the Hebrew babies to their own people?), making them the first righteous gentiles. As the Torah states: "The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live." (Exodus 1:17).

The next person is Pharaoh's daughter who risks her own life in violating her father's decree to save Moses. From there, it is Yitro, Moses' future father-in-law who invited Moses in to break bread with his family and gives Moses his daughter Tziporah as his wife.

While conversion is not formalized in ancient times so it's hard to say if one would consider Tziporah as full part of the people or a convert or not, but it is clear that not only is she Moses' partner and mother to their children, but she also saves his life (and perhaps their sons as well) in the mysterious night encounter where she circumcises their sons at the end of chapter four.

This final person is Tziporah's father, Yitro (though, in this week's reading, he is called Yeter) who gives Moses permission to back to his people. Yitro says: *lekh le'shalom* – go in peace – and these words are still used as a Hebrew salutation. In a few weeks, Yitro will again help Moses organize a system of courts and justice that will help the Israelites function as a cohesive group during their years of wandering in the wilderness.

It is striking to see the role of many non-Jews in the reading, as well in other places. Our people have benefited greatly from learning from those of other faiths and the help that other peoples have provided. Even in the narrative of our people's birth, the Exodus, we learn of the kindness and key role others played.

Of course, the Exodus goes on to help others. Through the Torah and its teaching and the inspirational narrative of our people leaving Egypt has lifted up many peoples throughout history. Think of African-American slaves who looked to the Exodus as they yearned and toiled to be free. Judaism has brought the Torah to the Christian and Muslim worlds and it serves as the bedrock of the Western legal system. Jews benefit from the non-Jewish world which in turn, benefits from us.

This is a true symbiotic relationship – *ze neheneh v'ze aino haser* – from which both parties benefit. Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Conservative rabbi, scholar and philosopher was once asked about his close friendship with Reinhold Niebuhr, the great Christian theologian who taught across the street from him at the Union Theological

Seminary. He said that among the reasons for their closeness was he needed to have someone to call. When he lived in Germany in the 30's, he had no one to call; now, he could call Neihbuhr if someone came after him.

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I have one other experience I wanted to share with you. Just over a week ago, my family and I took a cab from the airport back home. It was getting late and snowing and the driver was quite helpful. He and I got into a conversation about his life. His name is Richard Muyombya and he is from Uganda. We started talking about his life there and how he fled to Boston nine years ago to escape political persecution.

I told him we had a Ugandan rabbi, Gershom Sizomu with us six weeks ago and he had heard of the Abayudaya – the small Jewish community near Mbele. He then told me of his father who fought against Idi Amin, who was the cruel dictator of the country in the 70's. I told him that my memory of Idi Amin was Entebbe, which I remember as a young boy, since I was living in Jerusalem that year and can recall the celebrations.

Then he said something incredible – Entebbe had a profound impact on his life, inspiring him to keep fighting Idi Amin; after all he could be defeated, as Israel did. His father spent his life fortune on sending resistance fighters to Israel to be trained. He told me Israel was his inspiration and the story of Entebbe was so powerful, he named his son Yoni – after the great Israeli commando, Yoni Netanyahu, who lost his life at Entebbe. He named his other son, Bibi, to honor Yoni's brother who is the current prime minister of the State of Israel and who came to Uganda in the 90's to remember his brother.

Richard told me that he hopes to return to his country and help it rebuild, following in the footsteps of Israel and Yoni and Bibi.

I was blown away. But, as we learn in the Torah, we can all learn from many places and our story can inspire others. I pray that we speak with all peoples and learn from our Muslim, Ugandan and all our cousins in the world.

May the connections among our people and all peoples of this world grow stronger and bring us all together. *Oseh shalom....* May the One who makes peace in the heavens make peace on us, on Israel and all humanity and let us say: Amen.