

A Rabbi, The Jewish Theological Seminary, and Jewish-Muslim Engagement: A Field Report

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Abstract

For the past four years, I have been representing the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in a variety of dialogue and social action projects with the Muslim community in the U.S. and abroad. These engagements have been conducted on the local, national, and international levels. This essay surveys those efforts and offers some brief assessment of preliminary outcomes. The essay is a personal view, as I have been involved as a participant in every program described here, up to the time of this writing (Dec. 31, 2008).¹ But the personal is necessary in the development of genuine interfaith relationships.

Article

In November, 2004, JTS was invited by Dr. Stephen P. Cohen, director of the Institute for Middle East Peace and Development, to host a session of his “Summit for Interfaith Respect,” a program he ran in conjunction with the United State’s Department of State’s International Visitor Leadership Program. The session took place at JTS, first in the synagogue, and then over lunch. In the synagogue, our visitors were greeted by JTS Vice-Chancellor Rabbi William Lebeau, and I taught a session on “The Binding of Abraham’s Son in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Traditions.” The program was attended by American Jewish and Christian clergy, but notably incorporated Muslim leadership from Jordan and Egypt. The Jordanians included Sheikh Izeddin al-Tamimi, Chief Justice of the Islamic (*Shari’a*) Supreme Court, and Imam Hamdi Murad, *Waqf* minister and assistant secretary-general of the World Muslim Congress. The Egyptian delegation included the Sheikh of Al Azhar University in Cairo, Mohammad Seyyed al-Tantawi, and the president of Al Azhar, former Grand Mufti of Egypt, Ahmed al-Tayyeb. They were accompanied by Egypt’s Assistant Foreign Minister, Dr. Sallama Shaker. At the end of my teaching session, I invited all present to come up and see an open Torah scroll, as we discussed commonalities and differences among the peoples of the Book.

Over the kosher (*halaal*) lunch, Dr. Shaker and I discovered that each of us had a child who attended Oberlin College. Of such bonds, interreligious dialogue is made. Coincidentally, in December, 2004, I vacationed with my family in Cairo. Dr. Shaker graciously hosted us at a luncheon, which included visits from Egyptian cabinet ministers and a welcome telephone call from Dr. al-Tayyeb. This luncheon advanced my entrée into the Muslim world, leading to my invitation to Doha, Qatar in June, 2005.

In 2003, the Emir of Qatar, Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, invited representatives from the Anglican community to engage in Christian-Muslim dialogue in Doha. In the second year of this dialogue, the Emir invited representatives from the

Vatican. For year three of the Qatari interreligious dialogue, 2005, the Emir included Jews. He did this against the protest of local radical Muslim clerics. I was part of a delegation of four American Rabbis and one French Jew. The Arab television and print media covered our attendance extensively. In Doha, we had to revise some naively held preconceptions about our interlocutors. First, a significant proportion of the Christians in the dialogue were Arab Christians, not Europeans. Second, the dialogue was co-sponsored by the University in Qatar and so was led by the chair of the Department of *Shari`a*. Fully covered in *hijab* (except for face and hands), she ran the conference with brisk authority.

There was a fifth member of the American delegation to Doha, Islamic scholar and jurist Dr. Muzammil al-Saddiqi, chairman of the *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) Council of North America. In July 2005, just after the Doha conference, the *Fiqh* Council issued a *fatwa* (Islamic legal opinion) against all forms of terrorism. This was just one of the fruits of the inter-religious cooperation which the Qatar conference engendered. Subsequent inter-religious conferences in Qatar, from 2006 onward, have also had Israelis in attendance. As will be explained, Israel plays a significant role in international interfaith endeavors.

September is always a busy month for the international community, when they all gather in New York for the U.N. General Assembly. In September 2005, King Abdullah of Jordan spoke at the Riverside (Protestant) Church, in upper Manhattan. At his request, faculty and students of JTS were invited to attend, making the evening a Muslim, Christian, and Jewish inter-religious event. Later that month, again under the aegis of the State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program, JTS hosted a group of Imams from Kuwait. That same week, Rabbi Jose Rolando Matalon and I dined with the Qatari Assistant Foreign Minister to help him plan the 2006 interfaith conference in Doha. Rabbi Matalon has since joined the Doha planning committee.

I also went to Washington, D.C. in September 2005, to meet with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and then Foreign Affairs Minister, Nasser al Qudwa. The discussion took place before Hamas was elected or took over in Gaza. This was a very frustrating meeting, as the Palestinian delegation was unwilling even to admit aloud that there had been a Jewish historic presence in Jerusalem before the 19th century. While I understand the politics involved in such a hard-line stance, it did not engender openness or good faith. It also brought home to me the extent to which international inter-religious work is also a form of second-tier diplomacy, advancing both U.S. and Israeli interests.

In September 2006, this observation was underscored when a group of Saudi Arabian Imams visited JTS under the auspices of the U.S. State Department. As has become the custom, we began in the synagogue, moved to the library (where I proudly showed off the Arabic language section), and then to a conference room to play, "Ask the Rabbi." The State Department interpreter had to intervene at one point to explain to me that when I told them I was a Zionist, what they heard me saying was, "I am proud to condone the oppression of the Palestinians." I clarified that I personally (not speaking for JTS or anyone but myself) supported a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and thought that King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia's proposals, along with those of the Quartet, could serve as a basis for such a solution. When I redefined Zionism as the right to a Jewish homeland in its historic setting, there was a palpable sense of relief – we had found a definition of Zionism that was apparently acceptable within the purview of Saudi politics.²

In fall 2007, I had the opportunity to engage in local Jewish-Muslim dialogue. I was invited to an *Iftar* dinner, marking the end of the daily fast in the sacred month of Ramadan. The dinner was hosted by Union Theological Seminary, again making it a truly Muslim-Christian-Jewish inter-religious event. There, I had the honor of sitting next to Debbie Almontaser, founder of New York's Khalil Gibran International Academy (KGIA). At the time, she was embroiled in a controversy stoked by right-wing anti-Islamic elements in the New York community. At their urging, certain local media beat a drum of opposition against her appointment to head KGIA, a public school, despite Debbie Almontaser's distinguished career as a New York educator and an active dialoguer with the Jewish community. I was proud to share the podium with her and stated my personal opinion that she should be reinstated as head of the school. I have since had the pleasure of greeting Debbie in the synagogue where I pray, and I regret that she has not regained her leadership role in KGIA.

In October 2007, I dialogued with Muslim feminist activist Asra Nomani at a Washington, D.C. Conservative synagogue. She is a former Wall Street Journal reporter who was a close friend of the late Daniel Pearl. Pearl had been gruesomely murdered by Muslim extremists, and Nomani spoke movingly about his mission and her work to bring the circumstances of his terrible death to light. Nomani was very well received by the overwhelmingly Jewish audience, many of whom had never been in contact with a member of the Muslim community. While this is a very positive development, Nomani hardly represents mainstream American Islam, given her feminist militancy. Still, she has been instrumental in helping Islam in the U.S. move towards its own self-definition, which includes active leadership roles for women.

In 2007, I also responded to JTS Chancellor Arnold Eisen's request that I open relations with a local New York Mosque. Since Dr. Eisen sits on the advisory board of the Tanenbaum Center for Inter-religious Understanding, he recommended that I contact his colleague Shamsi Ali, who serves as the Imam of the Islamic Cultural Center of New York (ICC). The ICC is located in one of the most beautiful sanctuaries in New York City, the 96th Street Mosque. In the initial six months of meetings with Imam Shamsi and his Muslim community members, we held repeated small group dialogues, culminating in an invitation to Imam Shamsi to speak during a prayer service in the Synagogue of the Jewish Theological Seminary (March 2008). He reciprocated by inviting me to speak at the Friday (*Jumaah*) prayers at the ICC (April 2008). Moving beyond dialogue, during the summer of 2008 we ran pilot programs, and now have a monthly joint social-action program in which members of the ICC join with the JTS community to volunteer working side-by-side at Broadway Community, Inc., a soup-kitchen housed in the Broadway Presbyterian Church. That program has proven such a success that we are expanding Jewish-Muslim service projects to other areas. The JTS Director of Community Outreach, Tani Schwartz, has provided thoughtful and energetic leadership in furthering this important web of relationships with the members of the ICC.

In February 2008, Imam Shamsi Ali brought the leadership of Indonesian Islam to visit JTS: Dr. Hasyim Muzadi, head of Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama, and Dr. M. Din Syamsuddin, head of Indonesia's Muhammadiyah. These two organizations count

combined membership of between 70-80 million Muslims. Indonesia has the largest population of Muslims of any country in the world.

Later that month, Chancellor Arnold Eisen and I (along with Rabbi Stuart Altshuler, of Mission Viejo, California) met in Washington, D.C. with the leadership of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). Over a getting-to-know-you lunch with ISNA's interfaith director, Dr. Sayyid Syeed, and their director of communications, Mohammed Elsanousi, we agreed to embark on an ambitious three-part program. First, we agreed to join with ISNA in trying to match ten Conservative synagogues with ten North American mosques to further local inter-religious dialogue. JTS has undertaken this initiative with the Rabbinical Assembly, the organization of Conservative rabbis, and the National Council of Synagogues, a joint inter-religious-activities arm of the Conservative and Reform movements. Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal, director of the latter organization, successfully recruited thirteen Conservative synagogues to be part of what ISNA calls their 10/10 effort. ISNA runs a similar program under the auspices of Reform Judaism.

To further raise awareness of Muslim-Jewish dialogue and social-action programming, I next undertook to survey the approximately 1,200 rabbis of the Conservative movement on their commitment to dialogue and Muslim-Jewish programming. Under the joint banner of the Jewish Theological Seminary and the National Council of Synagogues, we sent a short online survey to the membership of the Rabbinical Assembly in October and November 2008. We were delighted to receive three-dozen positive replies describing Jewish-Muslim interfaith contacts, large and small. Since I am aware of at least another dozen synagogues engaged in such programming, I feel confident that there are fifty or more Conservative synagogues involved with local Mosques.

Our third effort is in the active planning stages. It envisions an academic conference on "Judaism and Islam in North America in the 21st Century." JTS and ISNA plan to partner with Hartford Seminary. Hartford houses the Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations. The director of the Center, Professor Ingrid Mattson, currently serves as president of ISNA. Now in the planning and fundraising stages, we anticipate that the conference, which will have both academic and public sessions, will take place in late-spring or early-summer 2010. Yehezkel Landau, an associate in inter-religious relations on the Hartford faculty, who specializes in Jewish-Muslim dialogue, has assisted us in the planning process.

Shortly after establishing a relationship with ISNA's director of communications, Mohammed Elsanousi and I served together on a panel in April 2008, at the University of Florida at Gainesville. We traveled there to combat an effort by right-wing Jews and their political allies to demonize all Muslims as "Islamofascists." Our presence, along with that of other religious leaders, helped lower the temperature between Muslims and Jews on that campus. I had served on a comparable panel with other religious and academic leaders at Columbia University during October 2007, when a similarly despicable "Islamofacism Awareness Week" required a reasoned response.

In July 2008, I traveled to Madrid, Spain, at the invitation of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. King Abdullah sponsored the first ever Saudi inter-religious conference, hosted by King Juan Carlos of Spain. This event marks a watershed in Saudi Arabian Islam. Since the Saudi kingdom began, it has been intimately associated with Wahabi Islam. Formerly they

had exported a version of Islam that required exclusive adherence to their vision. Earlier in the summer, the Saudis hosted an intra-Islamic conference in Mecca, to set ground rules for this far-reaching inter-religious dialogue. In Madrid, representatives from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam met with leaders of many other world religions. In Madrid I also had the opportunity to perform interviews for Saudi television. I was delighted that a positive interview with a rabbi was made available to the broad Saudi Arabian audience.

In the weeks immediately following the historic Madrid conclave, I traveled to New Haven, Connecticut, where the Yale Divinity School co-sponsored with Prince Ghazi of Jordan a Muslim-Christian conference on the inter-religious document, "A Common Word." That conference entailed a private workshop followed by public sessions. I spoke as the Jewish representative at the private workshop. Although my talk was entirely irenic, it was met with a tirade from Tayseer Rajab al Tamimi, head of the *Shari`a* court of Palestine. Before I could even respond to al Tamimi's political salvo, Prince Ghazi gently rebuked him for his diatribe. I was grateful to Prince Ghazi, and equally gratified to see in New Haven a number of Muslim dialogue leaders whom I had met previously. I name them here because I believe they are genuinely interested in advancing inter-religious relations: Grand Mufti of Bosnia, Dr. Mustafa Cerić; Dr. M. Din Syamsuddin, mentioned above as head of Indonesia's Muhammadiyah; Prince Bola Ajibola of Nigeria, former judge in the International Court of Justice at the Hague; and Dr. Sallama Shaker, Assistant Foreign Minister of Egypt.

In August 2008, I hosted at JTS a number of Turkish Imams under State Department's auspices. They were greeted by JTS Vice-Chancellor Rabbi Michael Greenbaum, and then we toured the synagogue and had a question and answer session. Over Labor Day weekend 2008, ISNA held its annual convention in Columbus, Ohio. The ISNA convention draws 30,000 Muslim attendees and in 2007 was addressed by the President of the Union for Reform Judaism, Rabbi Eric Yoffie. In 2008, JTS and Conservative Judaism were represented by our Columbus colleague, Rabbi Harold Berman, who has long involved his own congregation in Jewish-Muslim dialogue. I look forward to addressing the upcoming ISNA convention, scheduled for the July 4th Weekend 2009, in Washington, D.C.

In the same late summer months of 2008, I joined with Intersections International, a global initiative of the Collegiate Churches of New York. Intersections was working with the U.S.-Muslim Engagement Project to help build better relations between the U.S. and Islam, both internationally and locally. I served on the Advisory Board for the wonderful website: www.ChangeTheStory.net. The website is designed to help Americans and others see the broadest possible scope of Muslims, in order to combat stereotypes. The U.S.-Muslim Engagement Project (<http://www.usmuslimengagement.org/>) itself produced a very important policy study and set of recommendations, "Changing Course: A New Direction for U.S. Relations with the Muslim World," which one hopes can serve as a guide to the new U.S. administration.

Late September 2008 also brought us to Ramadan, when I was privileged to attend an *Iftar* dinner at Imam Shamsi Ali's other mosque, in Jamaica, Queens. There we also lobbied New York City to make Muslim festivals part of the public school holiday calendar, along with Christian and Jewish holidays. If we are to engage in genuine inter-religious

dialogue, we must insist that each partner in the dialogue receive the same rights in our broader community.

In November 2008, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia followed up on his pledge in Madrid and came to New York to address the U. N. on the importance of inter-religious cooperation. He invited Israeli President Shimon Peres and foreign minister Tzipi Livni to be present for the address. This recognition was a first for the Saudis, underscoring the seriousness of their commitment. The following evening, King Abdullah held a reception for inter-religious leaders. We spent nearly two hours with the King, hearing his views and engaging in lively dialogue. The Saudi shift is a significant change in world-view, on par with the Catholic Church's adoption of "Nostra Aetate" during Vatican Two.

In December 2008, I was again in Washington, D. C. Kazakhstan's ambassador to the U.S., Hon. Erlan Idrissov, gathered representatives of America's various religious communities for dinner at the Kazakh Embassy (with the assistance of Intersections International). The dinner was attended by U. S. Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and other religious leaders in preparation for the Third Congress of Leaders of World Religions to take place in Astana, Kazakhstan during summer 2009. This Congress is held every three years. The first two congresses were notable in that they invited the chief rabbis of Israel as part of the Jewish delegation.

Conclusion

This litany of Jewish-Muslim engagement represents a significant increase in dialogue efforts during the past four years. Locally, we have undertaken dialogue and social action projects between JTS and an important local Mosque. This has led to a successful building of relations between two communities that might otherwise be at odds with or ignore one another. It is deeply gratifying that members of the New York Muslim community are engaged in this project and seeking to expand opportunities for joint community service. Imam Shamsi Ali gets enormous credit for his tireless outreach efforts.

JTS has regularized these contacts so that it is becoming as commonplace for our students to engage in inter-religious programming with Muslims as it is with Christians. JTS is also offering a class in "Arabic for Hebrew Speakers." I am participating in the class, testing my embarrassment threshold along with undergraduates and rabbinical students, as a demonstration of my growing commitment to Jewish-Muslim inter-religious engagement and my deep respect for Islamic sacred texts in their original language.

On the national level, ISNA is fulfilling its role as the largest umbrella organization of Muslims in North America. Under the leadership of President Ingrid Mattson and inter-religious activities director Dr. Sayyid Syeed, ISNA has reached out in an effort to "normalize" relations between the Jewish and Muslim communities across the country. On both a national and international level this budding relationship has born fruit, as it was Dr. Syeed who made sure that there were appropriate Jewish representatives at the Saudi conference in Madrid. We are grateful to him and his colleagues at ISNA for their vision and fortitude in pursuing this important path. Jews and Muslims have a great deal to learn from one another about being "normalized" yet minority religions in the majority American

Christian culture. We look forward to regularizing these contacts so that Jewish communities across the country will engage with the Muslim community in both dialogue and social-action programming.

Internationally, the picture is much more complex. In the past four years, JTS has engaged with religious representatives and leadership from Jordan, Egypt, Qatar, Kuwait, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Turkey, and Kazakhstan. I should state two obvious corollaries about these engagements. First, JTS is not a sovereign country. We are a small Jewish institution playing host to or participating in a much larger moment. It is a source of pride that we are one of the many Jewish organizations doing so. Second, for the most part the countries with which we are engaged in dialogue do not separate Church (Mosque) and State. This means that there will inevitably be a mixture of the political with the religious. This was amply demonstrated when, upon our arrival in Doha, among the first people to greet us were the U.S. ambassador to Qatar and Israel's trade representative, who acts as their ambassador.

In each of the international meetings, JTS and I have been responding to overtures either from the U.S. State Department, or from Muslim governments, or particular participants. We have, then, always been the recipients of international contacts and have not actively initiated international engagement. In virtually every instance these relations have been affable, open minded, and in good faith; the sad exception being with the Palestinians. This latter problem reflects the terrible state of Israeli-Palestinian relations (Israel is engaged in hostilities with Hamas in Gaza, even as I write) and clouds prospects for significant progress in international inter-religious engagement. But, when American Jews do engage in such dialogue, we represent Israel to some degree.

I can only pray that JTS will continue to be invited to participate in international inter-religious dialogues. Ongoing engagement will allow us to move beyond what I would characterize as "first date" politesse, and carefully move on to embrace the hard issues of religious and political differences. This requires a commitment to long-term confidence-building and mutual respect. I look forward to Jews, Muslims, and Christians continuing inter-religious dialogue and doing good works together for the betterment of all humanity, *in-sha-Allah*.

Notes

¹ I serve as the JTS liaison to the Muslim community. Other colleagues at JTS, such as Rabbi Daniel Nevins (Dean of the Rabbinical School), Rabbi Dr. Judith Hauptman (Chair of the Talmud Dept.), and Rabbi Dr. Alan Mittleman (Director of the Louis Finkelstein Institute for Religious and Social Studies), *inter alia*, are also engaged in Jewish-Muslim dialogue programs. I write here solely of my own experiences, individually and representing JTS.

² In spring, 2007, I served as Master Visiting Professor of Jewish Studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. As such, I was absent from Jewish-Muslim dialogue in the U.S. Even so, I had two Turkish Muslim students in my class at the Gregorian.