

METZORA 5774 -- "MUSLIMS, JEWS, PESACH AND THE PARASHA"

This past Sunday I attended a conference at U of M – Dearborn, sponsored by the AJC and the Michigan Muslim Community Council. It was entitled, “A Shared Future: Jews and Muslims in Metro Detroit.”

I love interreligious work, so I was in my element. I was particularly excited to be privy to discussions about the Muslim-Jewish relationship. Though wrought with conflict concerning the Middle East, the relationship has such fertile possibilities due to the similarities between the two traditions and the proximity of the two communities here in the Detroit area.

The highlight of the conference for me was the long discussion I had with the executive director of a large Islamic Center in Dearborn. We reflected on the shared challenges and costs of parochial school education, how to teach values to our children in an age of continuous, open information, and issues of membership. Interestingly, they rely completely on several established families and two annual fundraisers for their financial support, but are now considering membership fees.

The launching point for the conference was the presentation of the results of a survey in the metropolitan area of Jewish and Muslim dual-community perceptions. The survey was commissioned by the Kalamazoo-based Ravitz Foundation. I took away the following conclusions:

- A strong majority of Jews and Muslims respondents, Muslims more than Jews, have engaged the other in some regard.
- A strong majority, again Muslims more than Jews, are also *willing* to engage the other. Those with past experiences are even more willing to take further steps.

- Members of the Jewish community who have less experience with Muslims are likely to be more apprehensive than their Muslim counterparts.
- Individuals who regularly apply their religious teachings and who are regularly influenced by their religion are more interested in broader engagement and programming.
- Both populations prefer to engage in casual settings such as family visits or mixed sports teams.

Overall, I am quite surprised by the majority willingness in both communities to engage each other. Frankly, I would expect that the Middle East issue, with all its rancor, would be a bigger inhibitor to interaction than it is. To me, the survey results demonstrate the power of our American context -- which is open to dialogue, curious inquiry, and where, as importantly as anything, people understand they must put down the swords and use the ploughshares instead. The survey also reinforces to me how much Muslims and Jews have in common here in the United States -- shared policy concerns, common challenges as religious minorities, amongst other things -- and how those commonalities in the day-to-day override the more remote activity of Middle Eastern conflicts.

I was surprised, at first hearing, that Muslim respondents are so enthusiastic about engaging Jews. We tend to color Muslims by the activity of their extremists, who are, of course, anything but interested in engagement with Jews. But they are only a tiny percentage of the Muslim population.

The Jewish apprehension is understandable. Some Jews worry about being stabbed in the back as it happens so often in Israel. We are wary of the increased anti-Semitism of the Arab world and how that translates into Diaspora communities in the United States. Muslims bring the confidence of their majority status in so many locations across the globe to the interaction, whereas we bring the persistent insecurity of a minority, both here in the United States and facing the Arab world in Israel. There are many other reasons, I am sure. Residual wariness of the outside world is a gift of our national memory, for better or for worse.

That brings me to Pesach.

The Pesach story points our way as Jews beyond that wariness -- to a world of constructive memory, hope and redemption. And it has done the same for countless other peoples throughout history. It is a story that binds peoples together, directs us in moral and national mission -- under the wings of our shared one God. It's a story that bestows upon us our national identity, and generates our sensitivity to the national identity and experience of others. We remember the suffering of the Egyptians, their humanity, at the very moment we could otherwise gloat over their downfall.

Even at the seder's most particularistic moment, when we give in to the weight our negative memory and beseech God's wrath on the nations that torment us, we still recognize the possibilities for coexistence. As we say שפך חמתך, "pour out your wrath," we target only the nations that "have not called upon your name." אשר שמך לא קראו. But to the nations who have called upon God's name, although not detailed in the formal prayer, we recognize the possibilities for an entirely different kind of relationship.

Engaging the other is God's work, and it's part of the challenge for Pesach. כל דכפין ייתי. וייכל, כל דצריך ייתי ויפסח. *All who are hungry, come in and eat. All who are in need, come join in the Pesach meal.* We can also understand כל דכפין to mean all who are covered, as in the word כפה. Who is covered? We all are -- by God. However it is translated, American Jews have responded to these dictates by inviting people of all backgrounds to our seders. We recognize how Pesach speaks both particularly and universally. The seders are a wonderful means for engaging others, teaching them about us, and enabling them to have a very personal experience. The Pesach story helps humanity as a whole weave the world into the mosaic it needs to be, founded both on difference and interdependency, instead of into a contemporary Babel, which eliminates our uniqueness as peoples and ultimately separates us.

This brings me to Metzora, our parasha. There is an important differentiation made in parashot Tazria and Metzora between tzara'at habayit, the scaly infection plaguing a house, and tzara'at of the skin and clothes. In this parasha, God declares that God will generate tzara'at habayit when B'nai Yisrael enter the land, whereas the other types of tzara'at are "if" propositions that *may* happen in the natural course of events. The problem of tzara'at habayit is guaranteed, whereas the others are not.

My drash on this is that individuals are more easily diagnosed and cured from their failings -- their personal tzara'at -- than are communities and institutions from their tzara'at habayit. Individuals can more easily change and cross bridges than can entire communities. In fact, the actions of individuals catalyze communities, repairing some of their foundation-stones in the process.

This is certainly the case with Jewish engagement of Muslims. Individuals need to take the lead, demonstrating how relationships can be built even in the case of conflicting stances on the Middle East. Whole communities will follow.

I am happy to make copies of the survey results for anyone who is interested. It details some of the steps we can take to engage Muslims in the Detroit area -- such as visiting a mosque, inviting a group of Muslims from a mosque to visit BI, generating mutual visits to community museums, having multi-faith discussions as we break bread together, and participating together in community service activities.

Engaging Muslims is our birthright as American Jews - a gift of the American soil we share. It's also a birthright of the memory which continually redeems us and others -- the experience of Pesach. May our doors be wide open this Pesach and beyond.