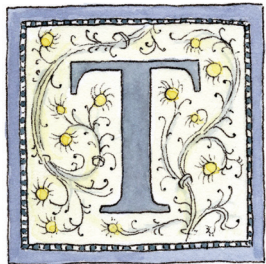


# Muslim-Jewish Reconciliation



THE Christian-Jewish dialogue that began in earnest in response to the Holocaust is arguably history's most successful experiment in interfaith relations. Though many tend now to take it for granted, there was nothing self-evident about its success.

Two faith traditions that had been pathologically estranged from each other for nearly two millennia courageously explored their suppressed commonalities. The result was a radical reformulation of Christian theology, especially in the Catholic Church, affirming the ongoing validity of the covenant between God and the Jewish people and undoing the foundational "supersessionist" belief that the church had spiritually displaced the Jews from their own story. That theological transformation is hardly shared by all Christian denominations; nor has the dialogue been spared significant setbacks, especially over Israel. Still, the Christian-Jewish dialogue challenged a seminal source of antisemitism and helped Jews achieve fuller social acceptance in the West.

The great interfaith challenge of the 21st century is to renew the severed relationship between Judaism and Islam. Despite their second-class status (and sometimes even more degraded), some Jews also engaged in profound encounters with Islamic civilization. They included philosophers and poets in medieval Spain, mystics in medieval Egypt, musicians in modern Iraq. While the relationship between Muslims and Jews was rarely as idyllic as pro-Palestinian apologists claim, neither was it as relentlessly grim as anti-Muslim polemicists insist.

The Muslim world is undergoing a deeply schizophrenic moment in its relationship to the Jewish people and to Israel. While anti-Jewish hatred, often based on the most outrageous conspiracy theories and genocidal in intent, is spreading among many Muslims, others are experiencing a combination of fatigue with the Arab-Israeli conflict, along with curiosity and even admiration for Israel as the most successful society in the Middle East. Just recently, more than 300 Iraqi public figures, defying Iranian death threats, held an unprecedented meeting calling for normalization with Israel. Israelis involved in social-media outreach to the Arab world report widespread regret among young Arabs for the destruction of their countries' ancient Jewish communities, a disaster they link to the decline of the Arab world.

At this time of radical uncertainty in the Muslim-Jewish relationship, strengthening Muslim goodwill is a core Jewish interest. As Israel becomes home to the majority of world Jewry, the locus of Jewish history has shifted back to the Muslim world. The growing Muslim communities in the West are an additional incentive for positioning Muslim-Jewish relations close to the top of the Jewish communal agenda. The French experience is a sober warning of what can happen when Muslim-Jewish relations reach the breaking point, which has called into question the long-term viability of a venerable Jewish community.

In 2013, together with Imam Abdullah Antepli of Duke University, I helped found the Shalom Hartman Institute's Muslim Leadership

Initiative (MLI), which has brought more than 150 emerging Muslim North American leaders to Hartman's Jerusalem campus to study Judaism, Israel, and Zionism. Our goal is not to challenge participants' support for the Palestinians, but to deepen their understanding of the central role Israel plays in Jewish identity and values. Graduates often refer to MLI as life changing. That extraordinary educational experience—unfortunately all too rare—has taught me to appreciate the potential of a contemporary Muslim–Jewish encounter.

The challenges we face in teaching about Jewish identity to Muslims are formidable. The Christian-Jewish dialogue was based on Christian penance toward the Jews, but Muslims in dialogue with Jews tend to regard themselves as the aggrieved side, expecting Jews to atone for the Palestinian tragedy.

But even before we are able to unpack the complexity of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, we have to overcome misconceptions among our students about Judaism. The absence of a shared sacred text between Muslims and Jews contributes to widespread Muslim ignorance of the significance for Judaism of peoplehood and of the Land of Israel. Instead, Muslims tend to regard Judaism as only a religion. They attribute Israel's existence to supposed Western guilt over the Holocaust, rather than seeing it as an organic result of the Jewish historical attachment to Zion.

On the first day of our first MLI cohort, in Summer 2013, a lecturer was explaining the roots of the Jewish attachment to the Land of Israel, beginning with Abraham and Sarah. A prominent young journalist raised his hand and asked, “So are you saying that your attachment to this land isn't because of the Holocaust but because of a 4,000-year tradition?”

Imam Abdullah, sitting beside me, leaned over and whispered, “Dayenu.” If we achieved nothing more than helping our students understand the profound Jewish connection to this land, the program would be a success.

The story of Israel that we teach in MLI, then, is not primarily the Zionism of refuge, but the Zionism of longing. And we tell

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the story of Jews from Muslim countries, including their uprooting and re-rooting in the State of Israel, where their descendants now form the majority of the Jewish population.

MLI is a test case for what can be achieved in Muslim–Jewish relations. To effectively nurture that relationship, though, would require a permanent institution with global reach.

I am proposing the creation of an intellectual and spiritual center, an institute where Muslim and Jewish scholars, artists, and religious leaders would collaborate on renewing and deepening the historic encounter between our faiths. This would range from scholars uncovering the Sufi mystical path embraced by Maimonides's sons, to theologians exploring new ways of interpreting each religion's complex attitudes to the other, to musicians examining the interface between Hebrew and Arabic music. (Israeli musicians such as Dudu Tassa, Omer Adam, and Sarit Hadad are widely popular in the Muslim world.)

The institute would also focus on the practical challenges facing the dialogue, such as how to deal with the return to Zion and the occupation. It would seek to expand the reach of the encounter, for example, identifying potential new partners across the Muslim world and attracting Orthodox Jews who are (religiously if not always politically) natural partners for traditional Muslims.

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The institute would maintain branches in Western countries with strong Jewish and Muslim communities, and in those parts of the Muslim world receptive to its mission (for example, the countries of the Abraham Accords). The natural home for the institute would be Jerusalem, the most intense meeting point of Muslims and Jews in our time. Precisely because Jerusalem is so fraught for both sides, it is where the Muslim–Jewish encounter can happen in its most authentic way. In Jerusalem, it is impossible to maintain what Imam Abdullah wryly calls “hummus dialogue,” the polite interaction that seeks to avoid hard questions. The MLI experience confirms that the more honest the encounter, the greater potential for breakthrough.

The Jewish interest in encouraging relations with the Muslim world is self-evident: There are 2 billion Muslims, while the Jews are not even 15 million; both for Israel and the Diaspora, lessening Muslim enmity could be a matter of life and death. But Muslims, too, have much to gain from this relationship. Embattled Muslim communities in the West need allies; when a relationship of trust is established, the Jewish community is a loyal ally.

And far from impeding a solution to the Palestinian problem, Muslim–Jewish “normalization” can help create the conditions

for a solution. Only a regional-based peace process can break the current impasse; the more that Muslims and Jews are engaging with one another, the more opportunity for political relations to evolve. And Muslim acceptance of Jews can help Israelis face the Palestinian problem more forthrightly, by easing the sense of siege and existential threat—based on the trauma of the Oslo precedent—of deceptive peace processes. That is the transformation I personally experienced: My MLI encounter helped commit me, despite my Israeli skepticism, to efforts to heal the Palestinian–Israeli wound.

The institute will not only address the Muslim–Jewish divide; it can also help bring together Jewish “tribalists” and “universalists” in a shared vision. It will speak to those whose primary concern is the safety of Israel and the Jewish people, and also to those whose primary concern is increasing understanding across divides. Muslim–Jewish dialogue is good for Jews, good for Muslims, good for humanity.

Finally, deepening the relationship between Judaism and Islam is not only a pragmatic necessity but also an opportunity for spiritual growth. The encounter stimulates what the late interfaith theologian Krister Stendhal called “holy envy,” the ability of one faith to learn from the beauty and insights of another.

In my encounters with Islam, I have experienced the power of the Muslim prayer line, the immersion of the body in a choreography of surrender to God. My own capacity for prayer has deepened as a result. For their part, MLI participants passionately embrace the traditional Jewish method of *hevruta*, or paired study, in which questions are valued no less than answers. Their exposure to the freewheeling nature of the Jewish study hall empowers them to explore their own tradition more deeply.

Maximizing the potential of the Muslim–Jewish encounter will require a sustained and multifaceted approach. The opportunity exists; a wise people knows how to respond. \*