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Action: The Art of Muslim-Jewish Dialogue

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One snowy Shabbat afternoon in the midst of last winter's Gaza War, Rabbi Joshua Davidson and a handful of congregants from [Temple Beth El of Northern Westchester in Chappaqua, New York](#) joined a crowd of 50 people on the west side of South Greeley Avenue holding placards that read: "We stand with Israel" and " Hamas are Murderers." On the east side of the same Chappaqua street, a local pro-Palestinian group of similar size was protesting against Israel's actions in Gaza. "Among those across the street," says Rabbi Davidson, "stood faithful participants in Temple Beth El's dialogue with the Upper Westchester Muslim Society—friends who share our dream of two peoples living peacefully together in the Middle East."

That friendship had begun about five years earlier, when two lay leaders in the local Muslim community, Nada Khalife and Miyase Katirciogolu, joined Rabbi Davidson and other religious leaders on the Chappaqua Interfaith Council. Before long, the two women had become familiar faces at Temple Beth El, breaking the Ramadan fast in the *sukkah* and celebrating Thanksgiving with the congregational family; for its part, the society's mosque hosted a joint 9/11 memorial service.

In an effort to deepen the relationship, a group of approximately 30 people—half from each community—began to study together using parallel texts from the Bible and the Koran. Framing their discussions with the "[Children of Abraham: Jews and Muslims in Conversation](#)" curriculum developed by the Union for Reform Judaism and the Islamic Society of North America (a 2007 URJ Biennial initiative), the group discovered that the story of how Joseph maintained his faith while in Egypt is remarkably similar in both the Koran and the Torah. Sitting around the table, Rabbi Davidson says, "people's eyes lit up with mutual recognition and excitement at our sacred history and common narrative." Over the months, group interactions expanded to include

discussions of “what our faith demands of us” and “God’s role in our lives,” as well as celebrations of festivals and lifecycle events. Still, Rabbi Davidson and Khalife put off any discussion of the Middle East, sticking to the goals of getting to know one another and gaining a better understanding of each other’s faiths.

“Everything was going great,” says Rabbi Davidson, until December 2008, “when Israel determined that eight years and thousands of rockets was enough already and sent the IDF into Gaza.” At the next group meeting, to steer the discussion away from war, leaders asked the participants to imagine what the Middle East might look like once Israel and its neighbors finally made peace. Afterwards, Rabbi Davidson told Khalife that he thought the meeting went well, but she disagreed. “It was too nice,” she said. “All of us are terribly upset about what’s going on, and we never really shared how we felt. It’s not honest dialogue unless we do.”

Two days later, the group’s members found themselves—literally—on opposite sides of the street in downtown Chappaqua.

Following the rally, Rabbi Davidson and Khalife designed a dialogue session that invited participants to talk about the present reality in the Middle East. “By asking each [one] to share only what the conflict felt like to him or to her,” he says, “we created an environment in which people could speak honestly without challenging the legitimacy of anyone else’s pain....Lots of things were said that our members didn’t like, and I’m sure their members felt the same way. But that’s dialogue. [It’s] about sharing your sorrow, and feeling the other’s hurt—and recognizing that both, at once, can be true.”

While this type of conversation is “not easy,” Rabbi Davidson admits, “only honest, open dialogue will resolve the conflict that stands in the way of peace in the Middle East.”



In February 2008, five members of [Temple Shalom in Dallas](#) and five from the Islamic Association of Carrollton began an 18-month-long “rigorous dialogue” about religious differences using the “Children of Abraham” curriculum. They met regularly—sometimes every two weeks over an extended period—thereby demonstrating an “authentic commitment,” without which, Rabbi Jeremy Schneider says, “trust and relationships will not grow.” They refrained from simple dialoguing, which, he says, “doesn’t work,” because the negative stereotypes both Jews and Muslims hold about the other can create an atmosphere of fear that “allows us to dehumanize each other.” To break this pattern of misconceptions, the participants learned about the other’s faith before engaging in dialogue.

By Sukkot, the group had established enough cohesion and camaraderie for the Muslims to feel comfortable conducting their *magrib* (evening) prayers in Rabbi Schneider’s living room.

Going deeper, Jewish participants began sharing intimate stories of what Israel meant to them; Muslims spoke of Jerusalem’s importance to Mohammed as detailed in the Koran. By the time of the Gaza conflagration in January 2009, “we had already completed 10 months of dialogue about our religious differences,” Rabbi Schneider says, “and having framed [the conflict] as political—

not religious—we could leave it alone.” Azhar Azeez, president of the Islamic Association of Carrollton, also attributes the group’s success to “focus[ing] on our similarities and address[ing] our differences in a professional, civilized manner.” The dialogue has continued.



Last spring, when news of the plot to bomb Riverdale Temple in New York reached the airwaves, one of the first calls of concern received by Rabbi Robert Nosanchuk, then spiritual leader of [Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation in Reston](#), was from Imam Mohammed Magid, spiritual leader of the neighboring All Dulles Area Muslim Society.

The congregation and the mosque had been partnering in various ways for more than a decade, including, more recently, the bursting-at-the-seams mosque leasing space from the synagogue for *jumma* services.

But the essence of the communities’ relationship is much more about “exposing differences and exploring questions in depth,” says Rabbi Nosanchuk. The two groups—sometimes in “trialogue” with the Christian community—discuss what each faith teaches about such issues as human rights, women’s rights, and their common ancestor, Abraham. In one session, says Rabbi Nosanchuk, Imam Magid shared a *hadith* (a saying from the Prophets) illustrating the Islamic view of God as “hidden treasure revealed through human action,” which relates beautifully to the Jewish teaching that humans are created *b’tzelem elohim*, in God’s image. Guest instructor Rabbi David Forman, an Israeli Reform rabbi, reminded participants that core human rights teachings of any faith are only of abiding relevance if they mean something during conflict and pain. The rabbi and imam also have engaged in “pulpit swaps,” such as when Rabbi Nosanchuk and a Holocaust survivor spoke to hundreds of Muslims at the All Dulles Area Muslim Society at the same time that Iran was holding a Holocaust denial conference.

Like other groups engaged in Muslim-Jewish dialogue, Rabbi Nosanchuk acknowledges that “we’re not hashing out West Bank issues together,” but, he says, we do want to “keep building bridges and thoughtfully raise questions with each other.” Among the questions members have raised: “What do individual Jews and Muslims do to act on their faith values to pursue justice and understanding in the world?” “Is there a prayer that crosses Muslim/Jewish/Christian religious boundaries?” and “When Jews and/or Muslims advocate for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, does each side respect Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state?” In the process, Rabbi Nosanchuk has learned that fostering relationships with the Muslim community entails “patience, taking small steps, and concentrating on what our faiths teach us—not on convincing each other about right and wrong.” At the same time, he says, “if the groups conclude that we’re exactly the same, the dialogue doesn’t work. In the end, we’re not all the same, and when you explore the ‘other,’ you know yourself better.”

He, Imam Magid, and two other colleagues—a Baptist minister and an evangelical minister—are now planning a trip to the Middle East to discover what their faith communities are doing in the region and share experiences with one another.



[Wilshire Boulevard Temple in Los Angeles](#) participated in its first religious pilgrimage with the Islamic Center of Southern California in 2005, when approximately 30 temple and Islamic Center members joined 15 Christians on a journey to Israel, the Palestinian territories, and Jordan, exploring the commonalities of each other's Abrahamic faith tradition. Once back home, the Muslim and Jewish participants came together for a combined seder, using a *haggadah* developed by Rabbi Stephen Julius Stein, founding director of the temple's Center for Religious Inquiry, which included a pause for *magrib*, evening prayers. Two more pilgrimages to the Middle East followed, in 2006 and 2007. Today, the pilgrims from the inaugural journey continue to meet every few months and the Muslim-Jewish seder is a "hot ticket" L.A. event, 120 people attending each year.



Other Reform institutions are also engaged in ongoing dialogues.

For the last seven years, five Jewish women (three of whom are members of [Temple Beth Emeth in Ann Arbor](#)) and six Arab women (two of whom are Muslim) have participated in the Zeitouna ("olive tree" in Arabic) dialogue group, meeting every other week in one another's homes to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In their first year, the group circumvented confrontational issues. Once trust and safety were established, a member trained in dialogue taught the others conversational protocols and conflict resolution strategies, such as using a formal structure that includes an agenda, a rotating "topic owner," and a scribe. The group limits itself to 12 members to fit into the average living room and allow everyone to participate. Such strategies help the group get past the rough patches that naturally arise from time to time.

In conjunction with Myers Park Baptist Church and the Masjid Ash-Shaheed Mosque, [Temple Beth El in Charlotte, North Carolina](#) has hosted a tri-faith "Sabbath of Dialogue" of prayer and "sermonettes," potluck dinners, and such discussions as "The Binding of Abraham's Son through the Eyes of Our Three Faiths" and "Progressive Trends in Our Respective Faiths."

Rabbi Steven Moss of [B'nai Israel Reform Temple in Oakdale, New York](#) and Nayyar Iman, president of the Islamic Association of Long Island in neighboring Selden, have developed "We Are Friends," a presentation they co-deliver in local public schools.

The Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, in conjunction with the Omar Ibn Al Khattab Foundation and the University of Southern California, has established the [Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement](#), which provides university faculty and students in Muslim countries with resources that present full, honest portrayals of Jewish thought and life, and supplies resources about Muslims and Islam to colleges and universities in Western countries for the same purpose.

In November 2009, the Union for Reform Judaism's Biennial and Women of Reform Judaism's Assembly in Toronto highlighted the importance of interreligious dialogue: His Majesty King

Abdullah II of Jordan, Dr. Eboo Patel (of Interfaith Youth Core), Dr. Sayyid M. Syeed (of the Islamic Society of North America), and Dr. Izzeldin Abuellaish, (U. of Toronto Dalla Lana School of Public Health) addressed packed plenary sessions. And the North American Federation of Temple Youth promoted dialogue between temple and Muslim youth groups as part of its 2008–09 study theme, “Love Thy Neighbor as Yourself.”



Is your congregation ready to begin listening to voices that differ from “our own”? If so, Rabbi Nosanchuk advises learning about local Muslim groups’ activities and responses to world events in order to identify a partner organization that demonstrates a commitment to peace. The Union’s [Commission on Interreligious Affairs](#) and/or the [Foundation for Ethnic Understanding](#), he suggests, can be useful resources in reaching out to Muslim groups that “share a commitment to Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state and condemn terrorism...making for the opening of fruitful discussion.” To receive the Union for Reform Judaism’s “Children of Abraham: Jews and Muslims in Conversation” curriculum, [visit the Union's website](#). To find a dialogue partner, contact Liz Piper-Goldberg, the Union’s Eisendrath Legislative Assistant for Interreligious Affairs, at rac@rac.org. To consult with Mark Pelavin, director of the Commission on Interreligious Affairs, about beginning or expanding a dialogue in your community, email mpelavin@urj.org or call 202-387-2800.

—Jane E. Herman (*JanetheWriter* at rj.org), writer and assistant to URJ President Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie