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Seeing each other as ‘one of ours’

By Rabbi Victor H. Reinstein



Rabbi Victor H. Reinstein is the spiritual leader of Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue in Jamaica Plain.

I am proud of The Jewish Advocate for publishing the warm letter of Pesach greeting from Yusuf Vali, executive director of the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center, and Imam Ismail Fenni, imam of the Islamic Society of Boston. These two men represent the face of an emerging Muslim leadership that seeks to build bridges and engage together in interfaith efforts to repair our society and a world so torn by strife. Allowing Muslim voices to be heard directly among us is an important first step toward countering stereotypes by introducing real people to each other. From within the pages of our communal newspaper, we have received an invitation to “come and visit.” We can begin the process of which Yusuf and Imam Ismail speak, developing mutually positive views of each community through personal relationship with individuals.

I first met Yusuf when he was an organizer for the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization. With great care and sensitivity, he helped my young congregation to become part of the important interfaith social justice work of the GBIO. Entering my synagogue, located in a large Victorian home, he noted the similarity with the small, home-based mosque in which he grew up. Imam Ismail is a close friend, a long-time partner in fostering Jewish-Muslim dialogue. With late night phone calls, we work through last minute logistical details in preparing for a program, and we cry with each other in the face of tragedy and strife. I have listened to Imam Ismail’s passionate preaching against violence, and I have been honored to offer in his mosque my own prayers for healing and hope. In a recent personal greeting, Imam Ismail wrote, “As we approach Passover, we can’t help but remember its religious and historical significance in all three of our Abrahamic faiths. We also can’t help but remember our wonderful discussions and dialogue about the same early this month during our Bridges gathering.”

During a time of ugly controversy a Muslim colleague and I started Building Bridges through Learning, seeking to create a different reality by bringing together imams and rabbis to learn with each other. A few weeks before Passover, we gathered to explore a fascinating, little known bond between Jews and Muslims, our common celebration in sacred text and calendar of Israel’s exodus from Egyptian slavery. Muslims celebrate the freeing of the Hebrew slaves on the fast day known as *Ashura*, the tenth day of the month of *Muharram*. During our learning, a Muslim woman at my table said that when she fasts on *Ashura* she “feels like we are in solidarity with the Jewish people.”

Its own teaching on solidarity, the program began before it had started, in the chance encounter of two people standing by the threshold of an open door. Shlomo had arrived, delivering kosher Middle Eastern food. It used to be when I would place the order and request delivery to the mosque, there would be a moment of confused silence at the other end of the phone. Now it seemed so natural. As I stood with another rabbi greeting Shlomo, Mohamed, a partner in dialogue, walked briskly across the tiled floor of the grand foyer of the mosque. There, at the threshold he extended his hand and began speaking to Shlomo in Arabic. Without missing a beat, the Jewish deliveryman responded in animated Arabic. As the two men began to laugh, Mohamed exclaimed, “I thought he was one of ours.” Others having joined us, drawn to the sound of laughter, Shlomo explained that he had grown up in Libya speaking Arabic. In the relaxed atmosphere and good humor that filled the entry space, we were all, each to the other, as “one of ours.”

The Jewish Advocate has contributed to the important process of fostering friendship through familiarity. Standing at the threshold of an open door, hands extended as through words upon newsprint, we realize that we all speak a common tongue, the language of the heart.

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