



Challenges Facing Jews and Muslims in America and Israel

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I recently conducted a public dialogue with my friend and colleague Professor Mehnaz Afridi, an American Muslim woman of Pakistani origin, who teaches at a Catholic college—Manhattan College—in a Jewish neighborhood of the Bronx in New York City. The dialogue took place at Conservative Synagogue Adat Israel Riverdale in the Bronx.

Professor Afridi teaches courses about the Shoah and other genocides, as well as about Islam, and she directs an amazing center at this college known as the [Holocaust, Genocide and Interfaith Education Center](#). In addition, she is a religious Muslim with the highest ethical standards and with great compassion and consideration for people of other religions and ethnicities, as we saw when she organised an important demonstration on the day after the massacre of 11 Jews in a synagogue in Pittsburgh several weeks ago. (see my blog post about this event: [After Pittsburgh—Hope Instead of Hate](#)).

We discussed the major challenges facing Jews and Muslims in America and in Israel, and what can and should be done to address these challenges.

The first challenge is ignorance, due to a lack of education. It is shocking but nevertheless true that most Jews in Israel and America are abysmally uninformed about the true nature of Islam, the diverse range of views about their religion and culture within the Muslim community, the relationship of Muslims to their holy sites, especially in Jerusalem, and the strong identification by Muslims with the suffering of the Palestinian people, most of whom are Muslim.

The same thing can be said about Muslims' ignorance and disinformation about Judaism, the pluralism with the Jewish community, the relationship of Jews religiously, culturally, historically and emotionally to the land and state of Israel, and more.

It is simply amazing how little we Jews and Muslims know about each other, especially since we are neighbors and fellow citizens, in both America and Israel. Neither side teaches much about the other in our synagogues or mosques, or in our schools. This cannot be allowed to continue if we are to live together in some form of shared citizenship model or in any form of peaceful coexistence in either society!

The second major challenge we addressed is the growing problem of rising fear and hatred in each community, leading all too often to either Anti-Semitism or Islamophobia.

The vast majority of Jews in America and Israel fear Muslims and see them as the enemy of their people and their religion, based mostly on misinformation or disinformation. They tend to see Islam and Muslims as the religion of terror and suicide bombs in the name of their God. They have virtually no idea that true Islam teaches about ethics, justice, peace, love and tolerance, as does Judaism (and of course Christianity).

The same can be said about the fear that Muslims have about Jews, especially Israeli Jews, and especially Israeli soldiers and settlers. They think that Judaism is a religion of occupation and

oppression, not one about loving kindness and righteousness.

Much of these mutual misunderstandings result from negative stereotypes spread via the internet and on social media and in their respective communities by word of mouth. They are not the results of any systematic attempt to really learn the truth about the other.

The third challenge that we discussed is the very serious problem of governmental policies and purposeful polemics on the part of the “leaders” in America and Israel. This leads to an atmosphere of deep divisiveness, rather than multicultural acceptance and constructive cooperation.

The right-wing ultra nationalist leaders—in both Israel and America—are inciting to hatred and violence all the time. This includes the Prime Minister of Israel and the President of the USA and many of their friends and colleagues.

They do it every day on their twitter feeds, sometimes multiple times a day. They do it in election campaigns. They are very dangerous people since they use their bully pulpit to teach and preach hatred all the time. They set the tone for the general public and for their political “bases”. And unfortunately, the media cover their hateful rhetoric all the time, and deem it “newsworthy”, thus adding fuel to the fire.

All of these challenges form the background for the current attempts at Jewish-Muslim dialogue within both American and Israeli societies in recent decades.

What, if anything is being done to meet these challenges head on? And what should be done in the future?

First, there is a desperate need for serious and systematic education about the other. Jews need to learn about Islam and Muslims ought to learn about Judaism. e meaningful and relevant curricula.

Secondly, we will need more and better Jewish-Muslim dialogue groups, with good facilitators. I have done Jewish-Muslim dialogue for many years in Israel and I have seen it transform people’s lives. In America, people like Professor Afridi and others are leading the way in this dialogue from the Muslim side and they are doing pioneering groundbreaking work.

Third, we need more coalitions of cooperation between Muslims and Jews, like the ones we saw in Pittsburgh and in other American communities. We need the same thing to happen in Israel, with the help of many civil society organisations which promote Arab-Jewish coexistence within Israel.

In the question and answer portion of the program regarding a comment and question about the need to listening to the narrative of Palestinian suffering, Prof. Afridi responded by saying:

"Even though it is painful, we need to listen to each other’s narrative and acknowledge the suffering of the other."

Also, she added another important reminder for all of us when she said:

"In order to create better Jewish-Muslim relations, we need to speak up for each other in times of need."

I could not agree with her more on both points.

In addition, in reflecting on our dialogue, [Rabbi Barry Dov Katz](#), the rabbi of the synagogue, said:

"In a world where it can seem that dialogue is impossible, it was good to hear two people from different faith traditions speak with respect towards each other and to everyone in the room."

This public dialogue addressed not only the challenges but the opportunities facing Jews and Muslims in Israel and America, and suggested directions for what needs to be done in the future. To paraphrase Rabbi Tarfon, the work is great and the needs are urgent, and we must begin now, wherever and whenever we can.

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