

When I received the invitation to speak at the Islamic Education Center of Potomac, less than two miles from where I am standing right now, I must admit that I was curious, dubious, and suspicious. I drive past the IEC every single day, sometimes multiple times a day. It sits in on a very prominent, well trafficked vista on Montrose Road; its sprawling campus visible to anyone who traverses Montrose between Seven Locks and Falls Road. Almost immediately after I arrived here at Har Shalom and began surveying the interfaith scene in this community I was *warned* about the IEC. It seems that I was not the only one who was leery about that mosque and school in the neighborhood.

In case you haven't realized this, I am an inveterate defender of Israel. While I was a real peacenik in college, I became disillusioned by a left wing politics that became, in my mind, overly critical of Israel disproportionate to any other nation; too uncritical of Palestinian leaders who proved less than committed peaceful negotiations and abundantly fair compromises; and a progressive wing in this country that increasingly and bizarrely became bedfellows with those who are the most repressive to women, minorities, non-Muslims, and basic civil liberties. Moreover, this particular mosque and school is overwhelmingly populated by **Iranian** Shiites. Iran today poses the most existential danger to Israel and to the Jewish people. Its Shiite supreme leader regularly makes pronouncements against America, against Israel, against Jews...and Iran's president is an unrepentant Holocaust denier and anti-Semite. What about the people who attend that mosque? Do they share those ideologies? What about their Imams? Do they, in sermons or writings, promote the convictions of the current Iranian regime? Are they in the business of radicalizing Americans to support jihad or to become home grown terrorists?

All of these questions swirled in my head as I wrestled with whether or not I felt that I could appear there. And how many of those questions, I asked myself, did I need to have answered ahead of time before accepting their invitation?! Now I must tell you that the program itself was intended to be entirely non-political. Conceived in partnership with the mosque and the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, the idea was to explore a subject common to all three Abrahamic faiths...So they decided to focus on the family. The question that the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish representatives were asked to speak on is the role of family in our respective faith traditions and what our communities do to support strong, healthy family life. Lovely, right? Nothing about Middle East peace; nothing about extremism; nothing controversial at all. But that too gave me pause. Are we just sidestepping these critical issues or pretending they don't exist? Worse, was I being used as a pawn so that the mosque could say that they are engaged in interfaith activities or that they are part of the mainstream while at the same time pursuing more sinister endeavors? I thought long and hard before I responded. I received some emails from one of the imams...*We haven't heard from you, rabbi. We want to publicize the event...will you be joining us?*

Finally I decided to say yes. I realized that I had a lot of questions, and even some fears, but really not much evidence to substantiate them. I wanted to see this place for myself--To see the inside rather than perpetuating my uneasiness from the outside. The exposure seemed limited enough just in case I encountered something that supported my concerns. When the notice that I was attending was included in the Shabbat messages over the past few weeks, I received emails urging me to change my mind. One morning I arrived in my office to find several articles faxed to me about allegedly unscrupulous funders of the mosque, and citing anti-American and anti-Israel sentiment at its associated school in the aftermath of 9/11. I immediately began to have second thoughts. I forwarded all of my questions to Imam Rasoul Naqavi, with whom I had been communicating. He patiently responded to each of my questions, explaining that the mosque and its board have made a conscious effort to avoid political discourse. He told me that the senior Imam never included political messages in his weekly

sermons, and that while there may be certain differences of opinion about Israel within the community, he had never encountered hateful or anti-Semitic sentiment from anyone. To tell you the truth, I was half-hoping that these questions would have given me an out. But, being true to myself, I did not believe that they were sufficient reason to back out of the program.

When I arrived, I was relieved to see one of the Episcopal clerics parking and entering the building at the same time. I was so happy that Leon and Nancy Weintraub came to support me as well! Upon coming through the door, I immediately found myself in an embrace by Imam Rasoul. Though we had communicated extensively by email and never yet in person, he knew immediately who I was—probably because of the kippah. And he was unmistakable. He wore the traditional Shiite garb: turban, a long tunic and robe, sandals, beard...*And he was hugging me*—enthusiastically, like he was greeting a relative or friend he hadn't seen in years. Still a bit apprehensive I reciprocated the hug, and he escorted me into a massive hall where I found my reserved seat. As the program was about to begin, a kitchen staff member came up to me to inform me that there were kosher meals specifically ordered for me and for anyone else from the Jewish community who would like them. He brought out two gigantic paper bags filled with boxed kosher meals from Café Shawreen. They were taped shut to ensure their kashrut, and he told me that he was instructed by the restaurant only to allow me to open them. So he handed me a pair of scissors as well. I thought immediately about how many Jewish events I have been invited to where I either could eat nothing or I had to tear open a Wilton airplane meal while other Jews ate on *trief* at the same table. But here I was at a Shiite mosque being served a fresh kosher meal that I didn't even ask for, and that was the identical food that they were eating. In fact, I planned to speak and run...I had warned them that I might have to leave early [part of my escape plan should things go awry], but when I saw the trouble they went through, and how much it meant to them that we not only listen to each other's speakers but that we break bread together, I knew I would stay and join them for the meal.

The program began with a young boy chanting a passage from the Quran. He sounded a lot like a bar mitzvah boy chanting from the Torah—which I mentioned as I began my talk. I think all holy texts sound intrinsically beautiful when they are chanted by children. The translation alluded to tolerance and special status afforded to the Abrahamic faiths, or the people of the book. The senior cleric, a tall, bespectacled, dignified man with a Ph.D., Dr. Ahmad Bahraini welcomed the speakers and the audience which was 90% Muslim. He began by immediately addressing the elephant in the room. In a heavy accent he nevertheless said with absolute clarity: *I repudiate all acts of terrorism committed in the name of Islam. Those who murder and take innocent lives in the name of our religion defame Islam and in no way represent me, my faith, or the members of the IEC.* He said that terrorism is a perversion of Islam. As he spoke I thought of the *megadef*, the blasphemer in this week's parasha. I thought of the Torah's intolerance of those who commit acts of desecration in God's name, as the Imam urged us to consider that just as Christians would not want Oklahoma City Federal Building bomber Timothy McVey to be considered representative of Christianity—though he was nurtured by the Christian Identity movement, nor would Jews consider Baruch Goldstein—the militant Israeli settler who massacred 29 Muslim worshippers at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron in 1994 a representative of Judaism, even though he was an identifiably ultra-Orthodox Jew. He said that al Qaida, the Taliban, and other extremist Muslims should not be considered representatives of mainstream Islam. He expressed his hope that our faith communities would continue to become acquainted with each other, and that future joint programming could be established between us. I must say that I was moved by his sincerity. The program was lovely, and each of the presenters gave heartfelt presentations about the centrality of family in their faith traditions. As I suspected, however, it was the meal that provided the richest interactions. People surrounded me immediately after the talk. They asked all kinds of questions. A woman in a hijab asked me whether we sponsor sports activities at the synagogue. She shared with me

that because of modesty requirements some of the Muslim girls don't feel comfortable playing on school or community leagues. She seemed very encouraged when I told her about my daughters' school which also has a modest dress code, and where girls compete athletically wearing knee length shorts. Others asked me about our religious school program and how we teach Hebrew language and culture to our students. Still others came to praise me for my talk and mention how many similarities they thought of while I was describing Jewish culture and values. I dined with a group of men, including another Shiite imam who was visiting from London. I asked them about how Jews were thought of and spoken about in the mosque and Islamic community. The Potomac Muslims said that everyone knows, interacts with, and has Jewish neighbors, co-workers, and friends. He said that he has never encountered negative sentiment about Jews at the mosque. I was anxious to hear what the British imam had to say, but just as the conversation was turning to him the announcement was made for evening prayers. I was disappointed that I didn't get to hear his perspective. Nevertheless, there he was at an American mosque, schmoozing and eating with rabbi. Even without further explanation, there's something to be said for that.

Before I left, I asked Rasoul to give me a tour. He showed me the school wing and a community clinic that they run out of that facility. As we walked the campus, some of the younger members tagged along wanting to listen and make their own comments as we toured. Rasoul showed me the prayer space, as evening prayer was going on, explaining the basics of Muslim prayer in a hushed voice. When the tour was over, Rasoul was not satisfied to just say goodbye. He walked me all the way to my car, and then presented me with this bag. Inside the bag, he said, is a gift of a Muslim prayer carpet. And before giving me another hug he said, please think of me when you pray, and I will think of you when I pray. It was incredibly sincere. And this Iranian sheikh stood there as I got into my car, waving to me as I pulled away.

The following morning I received this email from Rasoul:

My dear friend Rabbi Adam!

Salaam

Words are words and transferring feeling through them has always been impossible! I really cannot thank you.

Since the event I have heard a lot of good words about your speech. Still students are telling me to invite you again. They have a lot of questions about Judaism and they need a reliable source to get their answer.

I hope the gate which you opened will stay open and will be a starting point for better understanding among all of us.

Please ,if possible, send my salaams and thanks to the other Jewish brothers and sisters who came to the event as well.

Peace

Sincerely

Rasoul

I immediately responded in kind. I realize that there are still many, many questions I have for Rasoul, for Dr. Bahraini, and for the members of the IEC community. As lovely as it was to talk about family dynamics, I do want to understand how they view Israel, Zionism, and the Jewish people. And I want them to understand how I feel as well. I want to learn more deeply about Islamic beliefs, and I want to understand why so many Muslims—seemingly a disproportionate number compared to other religious groups—are susceptible to radicalization. I want to explore their belief in secular democracy and how that interfaces with some Muslim's aspirations for a Muslim theocracy. I need to know more about Quranic portrayals of Jews and other non-Muslims. But these are not easy questions, and more importantly they are not questions that can be launched into without first establishing trust and equanimity. And that is why I went in the first place. In order to peel back layers of allegations, rumors, and fear, there first has to be a modicum of relationship. I know that some Har Shalom members were not happy that I agreed to appear at the Mosque, and that no matter how eloquently I defend my decision, still may not be convinced. But I believe that when people break down barriers and come to know each other as human beings rather than stock figures in a story line, then we have a much better chance of achieving understanding, sensitivity and peace. I know that when there are relationships and engagement in the community, that when radicalism is detected, Muslims themselves are more likely to be vigilant about it, like the Imam in Toronto who prevented a catastrophe by turning over to authorities a person in his community displaying telltale signs of radicalization. And as Rasoul wrote, I believe a gate has been opened between us as neighbors in this community. I told them that Shalom is our synagogue's namesake, and that I remain dedicated to pursuing peace as my tradition teaches. The midrash (Tanhuma Shoftim 18) elaborates on the Torah's commandment about laying siege to an enemy city. The Torah instructs that before invading a city, you must first offer terms of peace. The midrash says: *R'eh kamah gadol koah ha'shalom...Consider how great is peace: she'afilu le'sonim, amar Ha'Kadosh Barukh Hu, liftoah lahem l'shalom...* Even when it comes to our enemies, the Holy One of Blessing instructs us first to pursue peace. Friends, if that is the instruction for our enemies, then how much more so should we lead with peace when it comes to our neighbors, just two miles away.