

## Rabbis, Pastors, and Imams in Morocco

(Based on a Sermon delivered by Rabbi Elie Weinstock on 10/27/17)

Rabbis, pastors, and imams walk into a room in Morocco...

It sounds like the beginning of a joke.

It gets funnier, as there was also a Catholic Cardinal (Theodore McCarrick) in the room.

Recently, I spent three days in Rabat, Morocco, participating in the "American Peace Caravan." It was a gathering of rabbis, imams, and Evangelical pastors from 20 US cities coming together to get to know each other and find ways to work together to enhance peace, coexistence, and mutual recognition.

Quite a tall order.

The program was hosted by the Kingdom of Morocco, long active in efforts to promote moderate Islamic voices, as well as the Forum for Promoting Peace, which was founded to apply Islamic principles to contemporary issues and, especially, to counter religious extremism.

It was a fascinating experience for a number of reasons.

### Spending Time in a Muslim Country

It was my first trip to a Muslim country. I visit the Middle East often, but all of my experiences are in Israel. This time, I'm in a Middle Eastern country, and I felt like a stranger in a strange land. It looks like Israel, but, in Morocco, everybody is Muslim, and I - the Jew - am in the minority. Usually, when I am in Israel, I look around and feel a kinship with everyone on the street. I don't know anyone, but the person at the bus stop is someone with whom I share a story. In Morocco, I am on the outside looking in.

The only two sites I had the chance to visit were Muslim sites. Our group visited the local "seminary" where Imams from around the region study. The school also includes a program where male and female religious lay leaders are trained. (I was surprised that female religious leaders exist in the Islamic tradition.) We also

visited the elaborate tomb of Mohammad V, the late King of Morocco revered for his



Rabbi Weinstock  
with participants in the American Peace Caravan

role in the country's independence and known for being friendly towards the Jews of the country. We were welcomed warmly at both stops, yet I couldn't shake the feeling of being out of my element. It was an experience.

There is also the fact that I am a Jew visiting Morocco. Morocco has a long and storied and Jewish past, and it still has an active Jewish community (mainly in Casablanca). There are numerous Kosher tours of the country throughout the year. There just aren't many Jews walking around. Do I wear a kippa? Do I not wear a kippa? Being in Morocco made me much more aware of my Jewishness. In the end, I did wear a kippa around the hotel where the conference took place and also wore one at the airport while waiting the two hours for my flight back to New York. It felt good to be back.

### Tolerant Islamic Voices in Person

In Morocco, I met Muslim leaders who publicly say things I never heard Muslim leaders say before.

Usually, my only interaction with Islam is through the lens of Israel or the news out of the Middle East. This means that I

generally encounter Islam as something hostile or violent. By no means do I think Islam is only this way, but those are the themes in my "echo chamber."

In Morocco, I heard from two very unique voices who spoke loudly and clearly about the need to work together with people of all faiths for a better world.

The first was Shaykh Abdallah Bin Bayyah, one of the leading Muslim scholars of legal jurisprudence. He is a vocal critic of terrorism and author of statements forbidding support for ISIS and other terror organizations. The Shaykh is venerated by his followers. (The way they circled around him brought to mind the way followers gather around a Rebbe or Rosh Yeshiva.) He spoke of the need to save humanity from drowning in an ocean of war and destruction. This requires the collaboration of the Abrahamic family who share some common ideals.

"We believe that if the Abrahamic faiths can come to mutual respect and understanding, this will greatly strengthen the potential for the spirit of peace to pervade our globe..."

The second personality who made an impact was Shaykh Hamza Yusuf. A US born convert to Islam who quotes Bob Dylan, Yusuf founded Zaytuna College, a Muslim liberal arts college in Berkeley, CA and one of the leading voices in Islam today. He emphasized the need to see each other as human beings first and foremost, and we had a nice chat about Jewish law and Modern Orthodoxy.

I have a greater appreciation for the varied religious viewpoints and

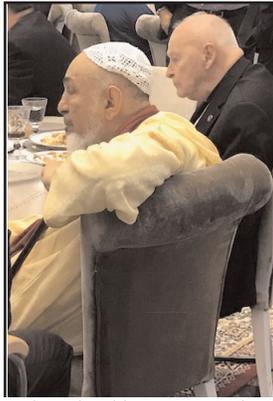


Shaykh Hamza Yusuf

personalities that exist within Islam. That doesn't solve every problem, but it's good to know.

**Interaction With Other Religious Leaders From My Own Community**

It is strange but true. I had to go to Morocco to meet and get to know some local members of the clergy. I met two Evangelical pastors from Manhattan (one from the East Village and one from Harlem) and an Imam long active in New York's Muslim community. They're good guys!



*l-r, Shaykh Bin Bayyah and Cardinal Theodore McCarrick*

An important objective of the American Peace Caravan is for clergy of each faith to get to know each other, to find ways to work together, and to organize local clergy retreats to build bridges of cooperation and understanding between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It's a tall order, and we're just barely getting started, but it was nice to meet other faith leaders and better understand their work.

I had my first serious discussions with pastors, who were very interested in such basic Jewish concepts as Kashrut and prayer. I got to hear some of the truly amazing ways they are active in community service and helping the poor

and needy in the US and around the world. The Imam from New York wanted to make sure I heard the news of the swastika sprayed on doors of Sutton Place Synagogue that occurred that week.

I am not naïve about the range of views held by Muslims and Christians towards Jews and Israel (a topic that was not on our agenda). Like many Jews, I feel like I have some understanding of the various Christian groups. At the same time, I had never had a serious conversation with a Muslim imam about what it means to be Muslim in America or ever asked a pastor what exactly he did in his congregation.

In Rabat, I was very aware of the differences between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. At the same time, I also became more aware of some similarities. Adapting faith to the modern world is not easy. How do we keep our youth inspired? How do we prioritize our activities? How can we make the biggest impact on the world through faith?

Sometimes, being Jewish takes up all of our energy, and we may lose sight of being part of a bigger world of humanity. It was helpful to be in a strange place, confronting the fact that people of all faiths have to live on earth together. In terms used by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "Will human beings act like brothers or others?"

As Jews, our story begins with Avraham, who loved God and loved humanity. He was a seeker who connected with others. I've described him as the first megachurch pastor.

We invoke Avraham every single day in our prayers, so we should remember this love.

As Rabbi Rafi Feuerstein, an Israeli psychologist and educator, wrote:

ומי שאוהב את אלוקים, זוכה ורואה את האור בכל דבר.

One who loves God is able to see the light, the good, in anything.

Avraham loved God so much that he wanted others to experience what he experienced. He shared this love with humanity.

Avraham should be our role model.

ונברכו בך כל משפחת האדמה:

All the families of the earth shall be blessed through you.

What does that mean?

Rashi comments:

יש אנדות רבות, וזהו פשוטו

אדם אומר לבנו תהא כאברהם

The people of the world will see blessing when more people act like Avraham.

Judaism developed into much more than love. Nevertheless, we shouldn't forget how it all started with Avraham and his love for God and for people.

In Morocco, I got a glimpse of people coming together and felt part of a larger community of faith. I participated in a gathering of people of different religions who want to bring out the best in humanity. That's a noble goal. It's a Jewish goal.

I am glad to be back. I return with a renewed appreciation of Avraham and how his love for God transformed humanity.

The blessing that comes through Avraham is that we bless our children (and ourselves): Be like Avraham.

I bless each of us to love God. Love people. Share that love of God with other people. It may not sound like much, but

ונברכו בך כל משפחת האדמה:

It is how each of us can bring blessing to a world in serious need of blessing.

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