# SHARING THE WELL: A Resource Guide for Jewish-Muslim Engagement

*A Project of The Jewish Theological Seminary, Hartford Seminary, and the Islamic Society of North America*

**Kim Zeitman and Dr. Mohamed Elsanousi, Editors**

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***Sharing the Well*** **is also available on the learn.JTSA.edu website.**

# Introductions to *Sharing the Well*

**From the Editors**
**Kim Zeitman and Dr. Mohamed Elsanousi**

*Sharing the Well: A Resource Guide for Jewish-Muslim Engagement* is the culmination of almost five years of creating bridges of understanding and partnership between American Muslim and Jewish leaders. At the three "Judaism and Islam in America" workshops hosted in 2010, 2011, and 2012 by The Jewish Theological Seminary, the Islamic Society of North America, and Hartford Seminary, Jewish and Muslim scholars from universities around the country came together to share their traditions and learn from one another. Their discussions focused on what they had in common and their experiences as minority religions in America today.

The workshops were an enormous success. As they discovered how much they shared, scholars made personal connections that changed the way they viewed the "other." Since the workshops, participants have joined together to create new interreligious collaborations and programs at their universities and in their communities—and formed lasting friendships in the process.

For the third and final workshop, in October 2012, our topic was how we could bring this type of learning and relationship-building to the broader Jewish and Muslim communities in America. We convened twenty-five Muslim and Jewish academic and religious leaders to help us answer this question; from their keen insights and fruitful discussions, *Sharing the Well* was born.

Our resource guide contains three sections intended to help Muslim and Jewish communities engage with each other:
1) Guidelines from experts in the field on how to begin and sustain open and productive interreligious dialogue.
2) Essays by religious, academic, and communal leaders from both religions, centered on values and traditions that Jews and Muslims share, which serve as content for interreligious learning and engagement. These essays cover nine subjects that Muslim and Jewish authors explore independently, and they include discussion questions to help spark conversation.
3) Twenty-four diverse examples of Jewish-Muslim engagement programs from around the country: inspiration for readers to create and expand such programs in their communities.

The goal of *Sharing the Well* is to highlight what we share as Muslims and Jews in America today and to use this as a starting point for deeper learning and dialogue. To this end, we have chosen to omit discussion of the Israel-Palestine issue. We believe that this is an essential issue that necessarily casts its shadow over every Muslim-Jewish dialogue; but with *Sharing the Well*, we aim to build a foundation of mutual understanding and trust that will make productive dialogue around more difficult and contentious issues possible. We hold the philosophy that only after we have built trust and confidence can we engage in a "dialogue of grievance," even as we recognize that others have begun with the hard issues and, having navigated them, found subsequent engagement easier.

It is our fervent hope that *Sharing the Well* will serve as a guide and an inspiration to reach across religious divides. As we drink from the wellsprings of Jewish and Muslim wisdom and tradition, we pray for a bright future of partnership and friendship, *in-sha-Allah*.

***Kim Zeitman*** is the Deputy Director of the Hebrew Free Loan Society. Most recently, Ms. Zeitman served as the Grants Manager at The Jewish Theological Seminary.

***Dr. Mohamed Elsanousi*** is the Director of External Relations for the Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers. Most recently, Dr. Elsanousi served as the director of Community Outreach and Inter-religious Relations for the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) for twelve years.

**From Rabbi Julie Schonfeld**
**Executive Director, The Rabbinical Assembly**

As we actively seek venues and issues around which to draw closer as friends, American Jews and American Muslims can both reflect upon the important experience of living as a minority group within a robust, open society. Both communities must strike a difficult balance to sustain our unique identities and values within the larger ethical and cultural milieu of the American public sphere. While this has certainly been challenging at times, these challenges have, for both groups, created unique communities, identities, and forms of practice.

Demonstrating an important change in public awareness, American discourse about our faith-based moral tradition has expanded in recent years to the nomenclature of "Abrahamic," thus including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The shift subtly demonstrates the impact of minority voices throughout American history. Jews and Muslims are two among many ethnic and religious immigrant groups that have helped Americans become more accepting of minorities, readjusting the vision of the "melting pot" into one that celebrates distinct identities even while promoting a sense of unified goals as American citizens.

Jews and Muslims living in the United States have an opportunity to begin a dialogue in an environment particularly marked by collaboration and by many shared goals and values. This book explores some of the deep parallels between Judaism and Islam, while also detailing the divergent perspectives and ideas we hold that make our dialogue stimulating and informative. The intertwined histories of Jews and Muslims are exemplified by important similarities between our religious practices in matters as fundamental as dietary laws and the observance of a sanctified day each week. Perhaps the richest area of dialogue is the parallel struggle of each community to balance between embracing American life and holding on to our faith traditions.

Life in the United States has provided us with great opportunities and gifts. Not least among those is the opportunity to live in a pluralistic society where we can come together and learn from one another, creating the kind of book that celebrates the similarities as well as the differences between two ancient and profound faiths. The exciting and compelling work that underlies this book is testament to the great potential that yet lies before us.

**From Imam Mohammed HagMagid**
**President Emeritus, Islamic Society of North America**

Far more unites Muslims and Jews in America today than divides them. From commonalities in religious tradition and practice, to a history filled with cooperation and mutual learning, to our status as minorities in American society, we share so much. This common ground formed the foundation for building new connections at the "Judaism and Islam in America" workshops hosted by the Islamic Society of North America, The Jewish Theological Seminary, and Hartford Seminary in 2010, 2011, and 2012. Muslim and Jewish scholars shared insights about their religious texts and traditions and discussed how we can live our traditions authentically while fully embracing American life and liberty. We gained new knowledge, began successful scholarly collaborations, and established lasting friendships.

I am thrilled that ISNA is now taking part in bringing this spirit of camaraderie born of shared learning and dialogue into the broader community through *Sharing the Well*. By focusing on common themes and concerns in our faith traditions and in our lives as Americans today, we will build trust and understanding, cooperation and friendships.

Our goal is not to sidestep or ignore the difficult issues that often cause tension between Muslims and Jews; quite the contrary. By exploring what we share, finding common ground, and building friendly relations, we will be better able to deal with the issues that divide Jews and Muslims today. Respect for each other is key to making difficult conversations educational and productive.

Strengthening connections between our communities will also make us better able to work together on issues that are important to Muslims and Jews. If we join forces to combat Islamophobia and anti-Semitism and act on issues of shared concern, our strength is multiplied. We must put our shared values into action for the benefit of our communities—not just learning together, but *doing* together. And together, we will make our country and our world a more understanding, tolerant, and welcoming place, *in-sha-Allah*.

# GUIDELINES FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

# Guidelines for Interreligious Dialogue

When beginning interreligious dialogue of any kind, it is important that all who participate enter the dialogue with open minds and open hearts, prepared to truly listen to the "other" and begin building bridges of understanding. To help you begin your dialogue on strong footing, we have provided the following two tools, prepared and used by experts in interreligious dialogue.

**1. Before Beginning:** Review and share your answers to the following questions before you begin your interfaith dialogue, and add your own questions as relevant to your community's needs and interests.

- How do we begin a relationship with our Muslim/Jewish sisters and brothers?
- How do we create a safe space for all participants?
- How do we establish parity between participants?
- How do we talk about Islam and Judaism without talking about Israel and Palestine? And when can we have that conversation, if at all?
- How do we create strong interfaith leadership in our community?

(*Guidelines for "Before Beginning," by Joyce Schreibman*)

**2. Dialogue Rather than Debate:** The following guidelines will help set an open, respectful, and productive tone for your interfaith dialogue. After reviewing and discussing these guidelines, adjust or build on them to suit your community's dialogue.

In order to engage in dialogue rather than debate, we will:

Listen with a view of wanting to understand,
*rather than listening with a view of countering what we hear.*

Listen for strengths so as to affirm and learn,
*rather than listening for weaknesses so as to discount and devalue.*

Speak for ourselves from our own understanding and experiences,
*rather than speaking based on our assumptions about others' positions and motives.*

Ask questions to increase understanding,
*rather than asking questions to trip up or to confuse.*

Allow others to complete their communications,
*rather than interrupting or changing the topic.*

Keep our remarks as brief as possible and invite the quieter, less vocal participants into the conversation,
*rather than letting the stronger voices dominate.*

Concentrate on others' words and feelings,
*rather than focusing on the next point we want to make.*

Accept others' experiences as real and valid for them,
*rather than critiquing others' experiences as distorted or invalid.*

Allow the expression of real feelings (in ourselves and in others) for understanding and catharsis,
*rather than expressing our feelings to manipulate others and deny their feelings are legitimate.*

Honor silence,
*rather than using silence to gain advantage.*

(*Guidelines for "Dialogue Rather than Debate" adapted by Yehezkel Landau and Karen Nell Smith for use in the Building Abrahamic Partnerships program at Hartford Seminary*)

# SHARED LEARNING AND DISCUSSION

# Shared Learning and Discussion

In the following essays, Muslim and Jewish religious and communal leaders explore selected themes that are important in Islam and Judaism. Two essays about each subject—one by a Jewish author and one by a Muslim author—describe how each religious tradition interprets and enacts these values and traditions in daily life.

Each author shares his or her own knowledge and interpretation, offering a starting point for you to begin a conversation about the significance of these traditions in your own religious practice. Discussion questions throughout the essays offer ways to spark conversation and shed light on shared themes in the Jewish and Muslim essays.

As Muslims and Jews living in America today, we have much in common and much that we can learn from each other. We hope that these essays serve as a springboard for ongoing engagement between our two communities.

**NOTES:**

- In the Muslim essays, verses from the Qur'an are denoted by numerical chapter and verse references. In the Jewish essays, citations from the Hebrew Bible are referenced by the name of the biblical book along with the chapter and verse.
- Several abbreviations are used throughout the Muslim essays:
    - **PBUH**, the abbreviation for "Peace be upon Him," is frequently used in the essays on Islamic tradition when the name of the Prophet Muhammad is mentioned.
    - **AS**, the abbreviation for *Alayhi salaam*, an Arabic phrase meaning "Peace be upon Him," is frequently used in the essays on Islamic tradition when referring to family members of the Prophet Muhammad.

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*Section 1*

# CARING FOR OTHERS

# Giving: *Sadaqa* in Islam

**Dr. Sarah Sayeed**

Generosity in character and giving to those in need are hallmarks of a Muslim's lived faith. Giving is a commandment that reinforces the interconnectedness and interdependence inherent in the web of God's creation. Giving serves to remind us that we are ultimately dependent upon God; taking care of others is also the fulfillment of an entrustment from God to human beings to take care of creation.

According to the Qur'an, giving is among the many ways that human beings can worship God and attain self-purification. The Qur'anic view is that because human beings are prone to an ego-based attachment to money and status, charity may not come easily. In the Qur'an, God describes two paths that humans can choose from, the paths of good and evil; in this passage, the path of goodness is equated to the path of giving, and it is described as a narrow and steep path, difficult to travel:

> Verily, We[1] have created man into [a life of] pain, toil, and trial. Does he, then, think that no one has power over him? He boasts, "I have spent wealth abundant!" Does he, then, think that no one sees him? Have We not given him two eyes and a tongue, and a pair of lips, and shown him the two highways [of good and evil]? But he would not try to ascend the steep uphill road. And what could make thee conceive what it is, that steep uphill road? [It is] the freeing of one's neck from bondage or the feeding, upon a day of hunger of an orphan near of kin or of a needy [stranger] lying in the dust. (90:4–15)

***Discussion Questions:***

*What makes it easy—or hard—to carry out charity, to give away time, money, or other resources? What causes might be easier to give to, and why?*

To protect the social fabric, redistribute wealth, and ensure that the needy are provided for, all Muslims are obligated to give money or other types of resources such as food, water, or shelter. The requirement to give also helps offset the inclination toward selfishness and hoarding. In one hadith (narration about how the Prophet Muhammad [PBUH] enacted the teachings of the Qur'an), the Prophet (PBUH) said, "There is no person who does not have the obligation of doing charity every day that the sun rises" (al-Nawawi, *Forty Hadith*, no. 25, recorded by Sahih al-Bukhari and Muslim, on the authority of Abu Hurayrah).[2] However, charity has been broadly defined so that even a person who does not have monetary resources still has a range of options to do charitable work.

The term used to talk about giving in the broad sense is *Sadaqa*, which encompasses good deeds as well as monetary almsgiving. The word *Sadaqa* comes from the verb "to be sincere or truthful." Any act that reflects a sincere effort to make things better for others or even for oneself is defined as *Sadaqa*. In another hadith, the Prophet (PBUH) said, "What you feed yourself is charity for you, and what you feed your children is charity for you, and what you feed your wife is charity for you, and what you feed your servant is charity for you" (Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, hadith 16727, on the authority of Al-Miqdam ibn Ma'dikarib). Many other hadith refer to actions such as praising God, removing an obstacle from a roadway, listening to the aggrieved, guiding the blind, and smiling at another person as acts of *Sadaqa*.

1 The Qur'an is clear in establishing that God is One. The usage of "We," when God speaks of Himself, is a style of speech rather than a statement about God's nature; the Qur'an refers to God in different pronouns, including I, He, We, and You.

2 It should be noted that Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims refer to different collections of hadith, and the hadith cited in this article are from Sunni collections because this is what the author is most familiar with. Shia Muslims are likely to agree with the essential meaning of these hadith even if the particular text is not part of the Shia canon.

***Discussion Question:***

*What do you see as the connection between being sincere or truthful, making things better for oneself or others, and charity/giving?*

Islam places a great deal of emphasis on the intention behind actions. Muslims are to perform ritual worship such as prayer and giving as well as non-ritual actions, including daily chores, work, or studies with a sincere desire to earn God's pleasure and to benefit spiritually from the action. Spiritual benefits are said to accrue in this life (by helping Muslims feel spiritual closeness to the divine) and also in the afterlife, when each person's good and bad deeds are judged and weighed to determine whether people go to heaven or hell. Those who do more good deeds with the intention of earning God's favor will have a heavier scale that will raise the likelihood of their entry into heaven.

Individual accountability, earning rewards, and the importance of the afterlife are indicated in the first chapter of the Qur'an and recited in all five daily prayers. This *surah* (chapter of the Qur'an) mentions God as the "Master of the Day of Judgment" and asks God that "He Guide us toward the path that will earn His Favor and keep us away from that which will earn His Anger." An oft-cited hadith is: "Actions will be judged by their intentions" (hadith collection of Bukhari and Muslim, on the authority of Umar bin al-Khattab). Judgment here refers to God's judgment about the worth of one's actions, specifically in terms of the afterlife. It is this sense of God's judgment that underlies the response to boastful spending, as shown earlier in the excerpt from *surah* 90:7, "Does he, then, think that no one sees him?"

To help ensure sincere motivations, the Qur'an cautions Muslims to be vigilant of the ego, even in performance of rituals. For instance, the Qur'an warns: "Woe, then, unto those who pray, who are heedless in prayer, those who want only to be seen and praised, and withhold small kindnesses" (107:4–7). By pointing to the ego-based intentions in prayer, these verses indicate that in its ideal form, prayer is performed with sincerity and attention, not for the sake of earning recognition or religious stature with others; prayer also ideally transforms people's hearts so that they will become giving and extend "small kindnesses."

Giving also may become subject to the ego when the giver *expects* gratitude from the person who is the recipient. The Qur'an states: "The righteous feed the poor, the orphan, and the captive for the love of God, saying: we feed you for the sake of God alone; we seek from you neither reward nor thanks" (76:8–9). To guard the self against a tendency to do good deeds for show, people may choose to give secretly. The Qur'an commends giving secretly as a way also to atone for other previous misdeeds: "If you do deeds of charity openly, it is well; but if you bestow it upon the needy in secret, it will be even better for you, and it will atone for some of your bad deeds. And God is aware of all that you do" (2:271). Thus, giving secretly is not required but helps tip the balance of one's scale toward good deeds.

***Discussion Questions:***

*What is the typical intention or motivation behind your charitable actions? Is it sometimes difficult to know exactly what our motivation or intention is, or do we sometimes have more than one motivation?*

*What do you see as the benefits and disadvantages of giving in secret versus giving openly?*

Within *Sadaqa*, a specific form of mandated giving is *Zakat al-maal* (charity based on assets), which is one of the five pillars of Islam. *Zakat* is a form of *Sadaqa*, but not all *Sadaqa* is *Zakat*. In Muslim-majority countries, *Zakat* is collected by the state; in the United States and other countries with Muslim minorities, *Zakat* is practiced on the individual level through donations to charitable organizations. The word *Zakat* in the Arabic comes from the verb

"to purify and to grow and develop." God invites a believer to:

> Consider the human self, and how it is formed in accordance with what it is meant to be, and how it is imbued with moral failings as well as with consciousness of God! To a happy state shall indeed attain he who causes this [self] to grow in purity, and truly lost is he who buries it [in darkness]. (91:7–10)

The verb used in the sentence for the words "causes this self to grow in purity" is *zakka*. The term *Zakat* often appears in Qur'anic verses in conjunction with *salaat*, the Arabic word for ritual prayer, which underscores the idea that *Zakat* as a ritual is meant to purify one's wealth, to help humans grow and develop in our closeness to God, in the same way that prayer is meant to purify and nurture the soul. The translation "almsgiving" or "charity" thus does not fully capture the deeper intent of *Zakat* to uplift one's soul by giving away one's wealth.

All adult Muslims are expected to pay *Zakat*, providing they meet certain conditions. Anyone who has an annual accrual of wealth in excess of a set amount *after* taking care of their own and family's basic necessities must share a proportion of that remaining wealth with others. This excess amount is defined as the minimum wealth that a person must own in order to be required to pay *Zakat*. It is calculated in terms of a preset amount of gold or silver. This value is often converted to dollars or other currencies, for ease of calculation, and has been translated as roughly 2.5 percent of one's disposable income.[3]

*Zakat* is to be paid annually, and many Muslims choose to pay their *Zakat* during the month of Ramadan, thereby also tying this practice with the third ritual pillar of Islam, which is fasting. The institution of *Zakat* thus binds human wealth and earnings intimately with God, enabling Muslims to draw spiritual nourishment from what could otherwise be a source of human arrogance, boastfulness, and distraction from God. In *surah* 100:6–8, God reveals the connection between wealth and ungratefulness to God: "Verily, toward his Sustainer man is most ungrateful, and to this, behold, he [himself] bears witness indeed! For, verily, to the love of wealth is he most ardently devoted!" The act of sincerely giving away *Zakat* thus interrupts the attachment to wealth and eases the flow of gratitude to God, earns God's love for humanity, and increases compassion and gratitude between human beings.

***Discussion Questions:***

*In American society, giving is a voluntary activity. What are the benefits of keeping giving voluntary? Are there additional benefits of mandated giving not specified above? Are the benefits relevant or important in a contemporary individualistic or secular context?*

The verses cited earlier indicate some priorities about where charity should be directed (for instance, the poor, the orphan, the freeing of a slave). In *surah* 9:60, God specifies eight categories of people who are eligible for charity.

> Charity given for the sake of God is [meant] only for (1) the poor and (2) the needy, and (3) those who are in charge thereof, and (4) those whose hearts are to be won over, and (5) for the freeing of human beings from bondage, and [for] (6) those who are overburdened with debts, and (7) [for every struggle] in God's cause, and (8) [for] the wayfarer: [this is] an ordinance from God—and God is all-knowing, wise.

These categories would include people who are extremely poor and cannot meet their basic needs; anyone who does not meet the minimum of disposable income; those who collect *Zakat*, such as charitable organizations that work on behalf of the poor; for missionary activities or to converts ("whose hearts are to be won over"); people who do not meet the criteria for disposable income but who have a great deal of debt; those who may be engaged in any struggle for a righteous cause for the sake of God and may not be paid for such work, such as teachers of religion, students of religion, or those persecuted on account of religion and engaged in an armed struggle to overcome such persecution, including soldiers; anyone held in bondage or trafficked; and a traveler who may be in need of assistance.

3 For an example of how people calculate their *Zakat*, see http://www.irusa.org/zakahcalculator.

Muslims are encouraged to give to family members and relatives who fall within the categories above, provided that they have no responsibility to take care of the person giving the *Zakat* (e.g., it would not be possible for a child to give *Zakat* to his parent or guardian if that person is responsible to provide for the child). If there is remaining wealth to be distributed, one can extend it outside the extended family to people in the immediate geographic community.

The verses do not specify the religion of recipients; but based on other relevant hadith and scholarly consensus, many Muslims believe that *Zakat* can be collected only from Muslims and can be paid only to other Muslims, while *Sadaqa* can be directed toward anyone, regardless of religion. As a result, Muslims living in the United States often make their *Zakat* contributions to aid organizations working with Muslim communities worldwide. However, it is important to note an evolving conversation among contemporary Muslim scholars as to the direction of *Zakat* funds, particularly for Muslims who live as minorities. In other words, it would be possible—and, according to some Muslims, desirable—to direct one's *Zakat* to individuals who fall within the above eight categories in their immediate geographic vicinity, irrespective of their faith.

***Discussion Questions:***

*How do you prioritize your giving? Do faith, geographic vicinity, or other considerations play a role?*

Additional forms of charitable giving are practiced during religious observances and by individuals who make endowments. *Zakat ul-fitr* is a payment made before the Eid ul-Fitr prayer service, which marks the end of Ramadan. This payment is intended to help those in need to provide for their family Eid celebrations. In the early period of Muslim history, this donation was usually in the form of a certain volume of food per member of the household; in a contemporary context, this volume has been translated into the currency value of one meal (for example, $10). This is required of all people in the household, as long as they can afford to pay for their food, even if they do not meet the criteria for giving *Zakat* as discussed earlier; the head of household typically pays for the whole family. Muslims are also encouraged to give a portion of the meat that is sacrificed during Eid ul-Adha, the festival commemorating the near-sacrifice of Abraham's son.

*Waqf* is a type of endowment and can include land and money to build institutions such as schools, libraries, hospitals, mosques, and other institutions for public benefit. These types of charitable endowments that continue to benefit society are seen as a source of ongoing spiritual benefit or reward for the donor, even after the donor's death. In a hadith, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is recorded as saying, "When a man dies, all his deeds come to an end except for three: a continuous charity, beneficial knowledge, and a righteous child who will pray for him" (*Sahih Muslim*, hadith 4005, on the authority of Abu Hurayrah).

***Discussion Questions:***

*In your view, what is the connection between charity and justice? Does charity reinforce or alleviate inequalities?*

After the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the United States government began scrutinizing—and, in some cases, it blocked—Muslim giving and charity. Stating a concern for national security, the government has monitored donations from foreign sources, particularly Arab and Middle Eastern funders, Muslim charities that work internationally, and individual donations to international causes in Muslim-majority countries. As a result, Muslims have become more wary and confused about where to direct their donations.

Sahar Aziz, a legal fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies, notes: "An overreaching enforcement of broad 'material support to terrorism' laws has chilled religiously mandated charitable giving and hampered humanitarian aid operations, thereby eroding the independence of the American nonprofit sector and unduly politicizing humanitarian assistance" (Aziz, 1). The American Civil Liberties Union documented the extensive impact of governmental scrutiny and enforcement of antiterrorism financing laws on Muslim giving (American Civil Liberties Union). Muslim giv-

ing is thus no longer a private ritual but rather has been reframed in public discourse as a practice that may threaten national security. Organizations such as Muslim Advocates have pioneered programs in charity accreditation and charity transparency in order to increase the confidence of both government and individual Muslims.

***Discussion Questions:***

*When you contribute to charities, do you look into an organization's activities or management? Do you look into its political affiliations?*

***For Muslims:*** *Has your personal charitable giving been affected or influenced by the increased scrutiny and restrictions noted here?*

***For Jews:*** *What do you think would be the reaction if the Jewish community faced similar scrutiny and restrictions on their giving related to Israel?*

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# Giving: *Tzedakah* in Judaism

**Rabbi Daniel S. Nevins**

Charity was an alien concept in ancient Judaism, associated with the Roman practice of honoring the wealthy and powerful when they provided public benefactions, whether bread or circuses. Rather, Judaism taught the value of *tzedakah* (literally, "righteousness"). This concept included poverty relief efforts, both voluntary and mandatory, but it applied more broadly to ethical conduct designed to create a just society. As historian Seth Schwartz has shown, ancient Jews did assimilate some of the Roman practice of honoring patrons (with donor plaques and even portraits); and to this day, the practice of recognizing donors is part of Jewish life. Nevertheless, the Jewish ideal is not one of giving charity but rather of practicing *tzedakah.*

Philanthropy, from the Greek word *philanthropos*, meaning "loving people," comes closer to the meaning of *tzedakah*; yet the Jewish idea also includes the devotional imitation of God, who feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, and consoles the bereaved. In the Talmud, Rabbi Hanina asks how it is possible for a person to walk in the ways of God. He answers that we are to imitate the kindness of God in providing for the material needs of all creatures (b. Sotah 14a). As such, *tzedakah* is not merely a social virtue but also an integral component of religious life.

***Discussion Questions:***

*How is giving charity an example of the practice of righteousness? How do you practice tzedakah—beyond giving charity—in your life?*

**In the Bible**

The book of Proverbs teaches: "Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the best of your income" (Prov. 3:9). Moreover, *tzedakah* is said to "save one from death" (Prov. 10:2, 11:4), whether by rescuing a starving person or by guaranteeing a spiritual afterlife for the righteous giver.

In the first book of the Torah, God confides in Abraham his plans to destroy the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, saying, "For I know [Abraham], that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do what is righteous and just" (Gen. 18:19). To keep the way of the Lord apparently means to live according to righteousness (*tzedek*) and justice (*mishpat*). In the book of Deuteronomy, God commands Israel: "Justice, justice shall you pursue—that you may live and inherit the land that the Lord your God gives to you" (Deut. 16:20). The Bible frequently reminds Israel not to abandon the stranger, widow, orphan, or Levite (who was landless) but rather to provide them with food and other physical necessities in order to live a dignified life. Deuteronomy adds a psychological component to the command—to act with compassion: "Do not harden your heart or close your fist before your poor brother" (Deut. 15:7).

***Discussion Questions:***

*What does this psychological component—to act with compassion—mean to you? Why is the intention or thinking behind our act so important?*

Biblical and early rabbinic writings on *tzedakah* reflect the agrarian context of our ancestors. Most Israelites were farmers, and thus most laws of giving were associated with harvesting practices. Farmers were instructed to leave the corners of their fields unharvested so that the poor could come and glean their food, as illustrated in the biblical book of Ruth. In addition, dropped and forgotten fruits were to be surrendered to the poor, who nevertheless were required to harvest for themselves. This system preserved the dignity of the poor and maintained their connection to the agricultural cycle even if their circumstances prevented them from subsisting from their own property.

Ancient Israel developed an elaborate system of tithes as well as the remarkable institution of the sabbatical, which was designed to level social wealth to a large extent, since the entire land was to be considered ownerless for the year. The Jubilee was set to restore properties to families that had been forced to sell them over the previous five decades so that every farming family would possess an inheritance in the land. Jews were forbidden to charge interest on loans to one another, and initially, all loans were canceled in the sabbatical year. Because this practice had the negative effect of denying lines of credit to the poor, the ancient sage Hillel proposed a mechanism to allow long-term loans to be repaid.

**In Early Rabbinic Literature and Practice**

It is unclear to what extent any of these laws were followed, even in ancient times. The sages of the first centuries of the Common Era described poverty relief as a commandment lacking specific measurement, and it is difficult to gauge the extent of ancient philanthropy. With the destruction of the ancient Temple (70 CE) and the dispersion of Jews throughout a global diaspora, Jewish communities began to develop alternative mechanisms for providing basic assistance for the poor. Every Jewish family was expected to contribute to the local food bank, which provided subsistence support for indigent families as well as travelers. Social values such as hospitality and loving-kindness demanded that even poor Jews provide material assistance to others in need.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Do you think it fair or reasonable to require the poor, who are receiving or in need of charity themselves, to provide charity to others? Why might this be important?*

During the festival seasons, Jews were required to provide gifts for the poor, especially at Purim and Passover, and to welcome guests to their table, especially at Passover and Sukkot. Indeed, the Bible hints at this by interrupting its description of the festivals in the book of Leviticus with the commandment to provide food for the poor (Lev. 23:22). These special festival donations are practiced to this day. Two sages of the Talmud taught that providing hospitality at one's table atones for sin today in the same way that sacrifice at the altar atoned for sin when the Temple stood in Jerusalem (b. Berakhot 55a; b. Hagiga 27a).

***Discussion Questions:***

*What do you make of the connection between providing hospitality at one's table and making a sacrifice to God at the Temple altar? Why might the sages have declared that both atone for sins in the same way?*

Jewish texts generally assume a homogeneous society in which Jews take care of their own most vulnerable Jewish neighbors and have minimal contact with Gentile neighbors. Yet in the Talmud, important statements mandate the support of the non-Jewish poor as well, "for these are the ways of peace" (Mishnah Gittin, chap. 5). This differentiation may be understood in that Jews viewed one another as extended family, with primary responsibility for one another ("all Israel is responsible for one another"—see Seder Eliahu Rabbah, chap. 12), while nevertheless recognizing an obligation to treat all people with honesty, kindness, and generosity.

***Discussion Questions:***

*In your giving and hospitality, do you give preference to those of your own religious group? What factors contribute to where you give?*

**In the Middle Ages**

By the medieval period, the rabbis began to regulate the practice of *tzedakah*, arguing that Jews should tithe their income, not only fruits from the field. Following the examples of Abraham (Gen. 14:20) and Jacob (Gen. 28:22),

donating 10 percent of one's possessions, or tithing, became a Jewish ideal. Tithing applied to capital and to income, as well as to dowries or inheritances upon which an earlier generation had already tithed (*Shulhan Arukh*, Yoreh De'ah 331:16). The laws of *tzedakah* became a well-developed topic of Jewish inquiry.

In the Talmud, the rabbis expressed concern that a person not give more than 20 percent of his possessions, lest he become impoverished and dependent on others (b. Ketubot 50a). While this teaching was repeated and codified in the medieval period, it is fair to say that these rabbis were not considering the phenomenon of the superwealthy of our day, who could give away 90 percent of their wealth and still have enough left to pay for many lifetimes of material comfort.

Perhaps the most famous medieval statement on *tzedakah* is the "Ladder of *Tzedakah*," by renowned rabbi and scholar Maimonides, according to whom the lowest form of *tzedakah* is a begrudging donation where the donor and the recipient both know the other's identity. The highest form of *tzedakah* is "double-blind" anonymous, designed to relieve recipients from further dependence—for example, by providing them with a job.

One problem in all philanthropic systems is the determination of legitimate need. Some classical texts argue that tzedakah requires the restoration of a previously wealthy person to the level of grandeur from which he had fallen—for example, to feed him on plates of silver and gold. While such statements are best understood as exaggerations, they indicate the importance of restoring dignity as well as physical necessities for the poor.

***Discussion Questions:***

*In modern times, it is common for donors to be recognized for their giving, through awards, plaques, and other attributions. Maimonides believed that it is more righteous to give anonymously. Why might he have believed this?*

*What would you classify as the "highest" form of giving?*

*How do you define "legitimate need?"*

*How does our giving in America today aim to provide the poor with a sense of dignity as well as material assistance?*

**In Modern Times**

Many communities have designed kosher food pantries in a way that allows the poor to receive their food in a discreet fashion, so that others do not see them in line. In recent years, many people have become "house poor," stuck with expensive mortgages on properties that have lost value and unable to afford necessary food and medicine despite their apparent wealth. Helping them maintain the appearance of self-sufficiency may be essential for their dignity, their mental health, and their ability to return to financial well-being.

The practice of *tzedakah* demands sensitivity to the awkwardness and anguish of receiving gifts from others. The Jewish grace after meals includes the prayer:

> May we never find ourselves in need of gifts or loans from flesh and blood, but may we rely only on Your helping hand, which is open, ample, and generous; thus we shall never suffer shame or humiliation.

Because many people do indeed depend upon the generosity of others, it is imperative that support be provided in the most dignified and generous way possible. Many Jewish communities maintain "free loan" societies that allow people to borrow money without paying interest in order to start a business, pay for an education, or survive a medical emergency. This practice goes back to the Bible, which prohibits the collection of usury. However, it is understood that borrowing money on interest (in a commercial loan) is often a necessary and healthy course of

action, which can be justified through legal mechanisms despite the biblical ideal banning the collection of interest.

***Discussion Question:***

*Why do you think that the Bible—and the Qur'an—bans the collection of interest on loans?*

What is "Jewish" giving? The provision of basic material needs such as food, clothing, shelter, and medications is a universal need. Jews should, and often do, provide generous support for food pantries, homeless shelters, vocational services, and other agencies that support the most vulnerable members of our society. Helping the non-Jewish poor of one's community is an essential part of Jewish practice and responsible citizenship. Increasingly, Jews are focusing on the needs of the global poor, providing for relief and development aid, as well as advocating for government policies that support greater access to food and health care across the globe. In addition to giving money, it is important to volunteer time so that *tzedakah* becomes integrated into one's daily routine and one's social identity. Beyond physical need, *tzedakah* attends to the spiritual needs of people. For example, supporting organizations that arrange for visits to the elderly and the ill may be seen as *tzedakah*.

***Discussion Questions:***

*When it comes to giving money or time, do you believe that one should be preferred over the other? Do you have a personal preference for one or the other?*

A distinctive feature of *tzedakah* is that it includes support for Jewish religious institutions such as the synagogue, the school, the burial society, and the ritual bath. Each Sabbath, a public prayer asks that God bless "all who engage in providing for the needs of the community," whether by donating bread for the poor or candles for the congregation. Still, one must consider whether the commandment of giving *tzedakah* can be fulfilled solely by supporting the ritual and educational needs of the Jewish community. It seems that the practice of *tzedakah* demands a diverse portfolio of activities and donations so that the physical and spiritual needs of the Jewish and non-Jewish members of a community will all be addressed.

Jewish law prohibits the handling of money on the Sabbath and most festivals. Because these days are also the times when the Jewish community gathers *en masse*, there is no practice of passing a collection plate during these major services. However, during daily worship, it is customary to pass a small locked box into which worshipers can place coins and bills for charity. These gifts are generally small and symbolic and do not constitute a major source of funds for *tzedakah* in most communities. Some congregations auction off synagogue honors, with proceeds given to *tzedakah*, but this practice is confined mostly to the Orthodox. Almost all congregations include an appeal during holidays and other key moments for the congregation itself and for programs that it supports. Many Jewish organizations use special events such as concerts, art shows, dinner dances, and, increasingly, athletic events, to raise money for *tzedakah.* Some even sponsor forms of gambling such as Bingo for this purpose, though this is considered controversial and is forbidden by many congregations.

**Ethical Issues in Charity**

One source of tension in the practice of *tzedakah* is the conflicting ideals of anonymity versus recognition for good deeds. Anonymity is often viewed as an ideal; yet it presents complications. In the Talmud, great concern is expressed about a man who gives *tzedakah* anonymously to a woman, lest the secret become known and people wonder whether their relationship is illicit. Some donors prefer to remain anonymous, fearing they will be endlessly petitioned for assistance from other organizations or individuals. Yet there are moral perils to donor recognition. Sometimes the motivation for donations shifts from the worthiness of a cause to the honor of the donor. Opulent charitable events can distract attention from the cause that is the putative reason for the gathering. With good judgment, donors and the lay and professional leaders of charitable organizations can avoid such excesses and ensure that the bulk of the

dollars donated is dedicated to those in greatest need.

Unfortunately, there are many examples of generous donors whose source of wealth has turned out to be illegal or immoral. Such donations can be questioned as a form of money laundering. Moreover, some organizations have engaged in illegal payback schemes with anonymous donors. Such behavior is illegal and also morally reprehensible in that it undermines the practice of *tzedakah* and often harms the most vulnerable members of society.

Donors, managers, and recipients of *tzedakah* must all ensure that this essential activity is transacted with honesty, responsibility, modesty, kindness, and integrity. At the end of the book of Exodus, Moses provides the children of Israel with a report on how their donations for the construction of the tabernacle have been spent. His example has been viewed as instructive for all people who handle *tzedakah.* Even though they may be as trustworthy as Moses, it is appropriate that managers of nonprofit organizations give an accounting of their disbursements so that the poor be guaranteed support and the public will continue to donate with generosity and compassion.

***Discussion Questions:***

*In recent years, pressure for nonprofit organizations to account for the use and impact of donor funds has increased. How important is this to you? How do you prefer to learn about the use and impact of your charitable support?*

The American Jewish community has a long and proud history of public philanthropy for immigrants, the poor, the unemployed, and the ill, as well as support for valued religious and educational activities. In the nineteenth century, many Jewish communities organized federations that would centralize the process of collecting and disbursing charity. This system brought many benefits: it created a public forum for debating priorities and diminished the chaotic and sometimes conflicting demands of various individuals and organizations. The professionalization of Jewish philanthropy enabled many causes to benefit and drew some of the most talented members of the community into public service.

The centralized system of *tzedakah* collection also has limitations. It can sever the bond between the donor and the recipient organization and perhaps lead to lower overall giving. Subsequent generations of philanthropic families may lose interest in the communal causes of their parents and grandparents.

In recent decades, the trend in Jewish (as in general) philanthropy has been toward the establishment of family foundations that make restricted grants to particular organizations or programs, rather than annual donations to central communal funds. Foundation grants tend to favor exciting initiatives that promise quick "returns" rather than urgent but frankly boring projects such as repairing the roof of a nursing home.

American tax law plays a substantial role in the shaping of Jewish philanthropic practice, especially for the wealthiest of donors. It is important, as a counterweight, to retain and even develop the practice of *tzedakah* as a personal practice through the regular donation of small sums of cash and through volunteering one's time to serve the community, actions that are not tax-deductible. Only through such personal interactions can *tzedakah* play its role in shaping a religious character, as well as providing needed support for the most vulnerable of society.

***Discussion Questions:***

*What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of giving to specific organizations or programs rather than to central communal funds?*

*Do you think that personal interaction and involvement in giving are important?*

# Social Action: Helping Others in Judaism

**Rabbi Gordon Tucker**

**The General Principle of *Hesed***

Jewish tradition sees a proper, stable society as resting on three prongs, which it names in its own cultural and religious terms: "The world stands on three things: on Torah, on worship, and on acts of kindness" (Mishnah Avot 1:2). "Torah" represents our acknowledgment and acceptance of God's reaching out to us; "worship" is the acceptance of our obligation to reach out to God; and "acts of kindness" (Hebrew: *gemilut hasadim*, also referred to here as *hesed*) refer to the mutual relationships of caring among God's creatures. We will focus here on the third of these: acts of *hesed*. A foundational Jewish text about *hesed* is:

> Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai [first century CE] was once leaving Jerusalem, followed by his disciple Rabbi Joshua. They saw the Temple in ruins, and Rabbi Joshua said: "Woe to us for the ruined Temple; it was the place at which the sins of Israel were atoned for." Then Rabban Yohanan said: "Don't be grieved, my son; we have a way to atonement that is just as good. And what is that? It is acts of kindness to others, as it is said: 'For I desire goodness [*hesed*], not sacrifice'" (Hosea 6:6). (*The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan*, chap. 4)

The Hebrew word *hesed* has no simple translation into English, expressing a range of intentions and actions focusing on interpersonal relations. But two related terms that do a good job of capturing the common denominator over that range of meanings are "keeping faith" and "solidarity." Solidarity with other human beings provides the indispensable foundation for a just society, worthy of God's children.

> You are children to the Lord your God. (Deut. 14:1)
>
> Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we break faith with one another? (Mal. 2:10)

It is precisely the conviction that we are God's children that gives rise to this imperative of *hesed*—of caring for, and keeping faith with, others. Once that metaphor is taken seriously, an immediate inference arises from the human realm of parents and children. Imagine that a person has several children. Some are better off—healthier, wealthier, and generally possessed of better fortune in life—than their siblings. What could the parent want more than for the children who *have*, to give whatever support they can to the children who *have not*? Moreover, how would the parent feel if that support were withheld, either out of apathy or out of mean-spiritedness? Would the parent not feel betrayed and deeply saddened?

It was no doubt something very much like this inference that led Rabban Gamliel, son of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch (third century CE), to say:

> Whoever shows compassion for human beings will receive compassion from Heaven; and whoever does not show compassion for human beings will not receive compassion from heaven. (Talmud, Shabbat 151b)

Another passage in the Talmud takes this a step further, stating that this reflex of solidarity with the human family is virtually a definition of what it means to be a descendant of Abraham:

> Whoever shows compassion for human beings is certainly of the offspring of Abraham our father. And whoever does not show compassion for human beings is certainly not of the offspring of Abraham our father. (Talmud, Beitzah 32b)

Whether or not this statement was originally meant to be a test for whether one is literally a descendant of Abraham, we ought to take it to mean that in order to claim spiritual descent from—and thus connection to—Abraham, one must demonstrate a commitment to *hesed*. Otherwise, the invocation of the Patriarch becomes hollow and self-serving.

***Discussion Questions:***

*How is compassion or kindness to others related to keeping faith or solidarity with others? Is it always the case that we show kindness or compassion to others because of these feelings, or are other feelings sometimes the cause of our compassion toward others?*

*Why might hesed, kindness to and compassion for others, be cited above all as the single factor determining whether someone is a descendant of Abraham and whether someone receives compassion from heaven?*

**Ways of Caring for Others**

Acts of *hesed* can take many forms. Charity, of course, is one. This includes, among other things, sheltering the homeless, feeding the hungry, and clothing the naked. But there are many other ways in which we are urged and expected to keep faith with God's children. Here are four:

(1) Making the stranger feel at home. This was considered, on the basis of the story of the three wayfarers/angels in Genesis 18, to be a signature trait of Abraham. (See "Hospitality: Welcoming the Stranger in Judaism" in this volume for more information.)

(2) Visiting the sick. God is said to have performed this very act of kindness, in the form of the three angels mentioned above. Abraham has just undergone his adult circumcision when Genesis 17 ends, and the midrashic reading of Genesis 18 was that the angels were, in addition to their other missions, there to visit the not-yet-well Abraham. A striking story about the value of visiting the sick is told in the Talmud, tractate Ketubot 77b, concerning what were widespread fears about getting too near to people suffering from a disease called *ra'atan*. (One need only think of the oft-exaggerated fears people today have about proximity to those suffering from AIDS to imagine the state of mind being described.) The story is that sage after sage declined to visit and sit with those who were ill with that dread disease. But one sage, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi (third century CE), would routinely visit them, sit with them, and teach them words of Torah (the ultimate affirmation of their human dignity and the value of their lives).When this brave and generous sage died, the narrator continues, the prophet Elijah heralded his arrival in heaven and instructed everyone to make way for the extraordinary new arrival.

(3) Burying the dead. God is said (rather explicitly in Deut. 34:6) to have done this kindness as well, for the deceased Moses. Burying the dead was considered an imperative of *hesed* sufficient to override—in cases of absolute necessity—the normally strong prohibition of Temple priests coming into contact with the dead. In the case of an unburied human corpse, even of unknown identity, if no one else was there to do this basic act of human to human solidarity, the high priest himself was expected to do it.

(4) Being scrupulous about human dignity. Charity should be given in such a way as not to humiliate the recipients or treat them as if they do not exist (for example, dropping a coin into a recipient's hand while walking by, without making eye contact). But should it happen that one simply has nothing to give, *hesed* still must be done. That is the gift of words of comfort and hope to such persons in distress, offering to pray for them and promising not to forget them:

> Rabbi Isaac said: Whoever gives a coin to a poor person earns six blessings, but one who offers the poor words of comfort earns eleven blessings. (Talmud, Bava Batra 9b)
>
> If a poor person asks you for charity and you have nothing to give, you must offer that person words of comfort and consolation. (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Agriculture, "Laws Concerning Gifts to the Poor," 10:5)

In this same vein, the poor are themselves expected to give charity, even the smallest amount, because an essential element of human dignity is precisely the taking of responsibility for other children of God.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Why are words of kindness and comfort even more important than offering material charity? Are there times when you think that this might not be the case? Have you experienced a time when words of comfort were the most valuable act of kindness that someone could have bestowed?*

*Three of the examples of hesed above are acts done for the living (welcoming the stranger, visiting the sick, and treating with dignity those to whom we give charity); the fourth is done for those who are dead. Why would an act of kindness to the deceased rank as highly as acts of kindness done for the living?*

**The Specially Protected Classes**

If the above is true of all human beings, a higher level of concern is evinced in the tradition for several special classes of people. These are referred to by the classical biblical triad of "the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow." People in these classes have an extraordinary claim on our *hesed* because they are bereft of the people who naturally would first come to their aid and defense. The resident alien is apart from his or her native land and kin. If such a person is taken advantage of or harassed by the unscrupulous, there is no one immediately to take up his or her cause. The same was true, in the patriarchal societies of antiquity, of one whose father had died, and certainly of a woman whose husband had died. Since they were deprived of their closest human protectors, God, in effect, became their protector, and delegated that role to us all. Scripture puts us on notice, in very strong rhetorical terms, that a failure to care for such people will quickly seize God's—their ultimate protector's—attention:

> You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me, and my anger shall blaze forth and I will put you to the sword, and your own wives shall become widows and your children orphans. (Exod. 22:21–23)

The spirit of this law extends to all who, in the absence of other protectors, may need the protection that we are able to provide.

***Discussion Questions:***

*In our society today, what might you consider "specially protected classes" of people, most in need of our collective protection? What can we do to help protect them?*

**A Duty to Rescue**

Another aspect of caring for others is the prohibition on turning an oblivious eye to someone else's dangerous situation and the affirmative duty to act when intervention can help remove that danger without mortally threatening the rescuer. The foundational text in the Talmud is:

> From where do we learn that one who sees a fellow human being drowning in a river, or being dragged by

> a wild animal, or being attacked by brigands, is obligated to attempt to rescue that person? From the verse [Lev. 19:16]: "Do not stand idly by the blood of your fellow."(Talmud, Sanhedrin 73a)

Here is how Moses Maimonides expanded and codified this ancient religious expectation in his twelfth-century law code:

> If one hears informers plotting evil against, or laying a trap for, another and does not call it to the other's attention; or if one knows that a violent person is going to attack another, and although able to appease the attacker and make him relent, he does not do so; or if one acts in any similar way—such a person transgresses in each case the injunction, "Do not stand idly by the blood of your fellow."… Although … these prohibitions … involve no action, the offense is most serious, for if one destroys the life of a single person, it is regarded as though one destroyed the whole world, and if one preserves the life of a single person, it is regarded as though one preserved the whole world. (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Torts, "Laws Concerning Homicide and the Preservation of Life," 1:14, 16)

A (necessarily somewhat imprecise) principle of proportionality applies to this obligation. For example, one is never legally obligated to assume an imminent risk to one's own life in order to save another (though it would be considered an act of special saintliness to do so). Thus, one certainly has no obligation, in a rescue attempt, to assume risks to oneself greater than the risks to which the one being rescued is exposed.

In the United States today, only four states have laws imposing on the general population an obligation to come to the aid of a crime victim (although a few more states require it for sexual assaults). It may well be that the stricter stance of Jewish law on this matter reflects the difference between a legal order based on fundamental individual rights, on the one hand, and a vision of society standing solidly on three prongs—one of which is the obligation to care, and even sacrifice, for others—on the other hand.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Do you think that there should be more laws requiring people to come to the aid of crime victims? How can we draw the line between an innocent bystander and a not-so-innocent bystander—or can we do so at all?*

**Widening the Circle of Caring**

The obligations of *hesed* begin, naturally, with those who are closest to you: family and others who have a special relationship of dependence on you. It then radiates out, according to one's ability. The needy of your own location take precedence over those who are needy in another location (because the obligation to care for the more distant needy falls primarily on those in that other place). But the fact that there is this necessary and morally correct hierarchy of priorities does not mean that there is no obligation with respect to even the most distant needs and oppressions. Nor are we permitted simply to be oblivious to them and fail to use whatever power we have to influence others who may be in a position to offer assistance. In principle, there is no limit to the circumference defined by the obligations of *hesed*:

> If you are able to protest effectively wrongdoing in your family and you do not, you become liable for your family's wrongdoings; if you are able to protest your city's wrongs and you do not, you become liable for the wrongs of your city; and if you are able to protest the whole world's wrongs and you do not, you become liable for the wrongs of the whole world. (Talmud, Shabbat 54b)

Among the ways in which we can carry out these responsibilities even to the whole world is to be aware, especially in today's globalized world, of the many connections that exist between the comforts we enjoy and the hardships of others whom we have never met, and to try our best not to be contributing to those hardships. A passage in a

medieval rabbinic text, which ostensibly paints an elaborate picture of Creation, makes this point in a striking way:

> There are deep waters beneath the surface of the earth, on which the earth rides. Rabbi Joshua said that the depth of the earth is a distance of sixty years' walk. And there is one fountain that sits immediately over *gehinnom* [a fiery hell], which flows from there, producing [warm] waters that provide pleasure for human beings. (*Pirkei Rabbi Eliezer*, chap. 5)

This was no idle speculation, nor were the authors trying to tell us at least one good thing about *gehinnom*. In fact, they were doing the exact opposite: they were reminding us to be aware that the pleasures of many of our paradises are often situated right above somebody else's hell, and are made possible by those hells.

Rabbi Joshua noted drily that it's a sixty-year walk down into the depths. What he no doubt meant was that we'd like to think so; but it's not true. The hell of others cannot possibly be unconnected in this global world and economy from our pleasures and privileges. It is not sixty years' walk any more, and it never really was. Thus, the imperative to work for social justice everywhere we can emerges as a straightforward corollary to the basic obligation of *hesed* with which we began, and on which the world itself stands and depends.

***Discussion Question:***

*In our interconnected world, with Internet, phones, and a twenty-four-hour news cycle, we know far more about the world around us than it was possible to know in the past. How do we follow the imperative to take global responsibility for others in our society today?*

# Social Action: Helping Others in Islam

**Dr. Sarah Sayeed**

"By time! Truly humanity is in a state of loss, except for those who have faith, do good deeds, and call one another to truth and to patience" (103:1–3). This verse from the Holy Qur'an illustrates that Muslims are responsible for demonstrating a combination of belief, action that helps others, and calling others to a better course. The pursuit of social welfare and social justice, as well as being responsible stewards of our earth and of God's Creation are among the ways that Muslims can grow spiritually and prepare for their meeting with God after death. In the beginning of this *surah* (chapter), God swears by time, which also reinforces the idea of the ephemeral and the importance of working to fill time with righteous actions.

Clearly, the world around us needs fixing. Economic recession, environmental degradation, and a social fabric frayed by income inequality, violence, and social disconnectedness are just a few of the challenges facing humanity. Muslims believe that many of these problems are partly the result of humanity being in a "state of loss" (ibid.). The story of the creation of Adam (AS) reflects the tension inherent in being human: that we are created as caretakers of the world but we are also responsible for its problems.

> Behold, Your Lord said to the angels: "I will create a vicegerent on earth." They said: "Will You place there one who will make mischief there and shed blood? While we do celebrate Your praises and glorify Your holy [name]?" [God] said: "I know what you know not." (2:30)

God replies to the angels that despite our human tendencies toward iniquity, He is confident and has divine knowledge about our ability to be His trusted representatives on earth. For Muslims to appropriately bear this divine trust, we must be aware of ourselves, of our context, and seek change in areas that are contrary to God's Commandments. The first step toward correcting others and social reform is self-correction. In his introduction to the translation of Imam al-Mawlud's *Purification of the Heart*, Shaykh Hamza Yusuf notes:

> If we examine the trials and tribulations, wars and other conflicts, every act of injustice on earth, we will find that they are rooted in the human heart…. If we want to change our world, we do not begin by rectifying the outward. Instead, we must begin by changing the condition of the inward. (Yusuf, 8)

The term *islah* is used to talk about social reform, and contemporary usage often relates it to sociopolitical transformation. In the Arabic, the root of the term *islah* is *s-l-h*, which connotes soundness, reconciliation, improvement, and setting affairs right. The Qur'an states:

> Call on your Lord with humility and in private. For God loves not those who transgress beyond bounds. Do no mischief on the earth after it has been set in order [*isla'iha*], but call on Him with fear and longing in your hearts. For the Mercy of God is always near to those who do good. (7:55–56)

This passage describes the earth as being orderly, in contrast to iniquity, messing up, or going contrary to the order that God has commanded us to uphold. In another verse of the Qur'an, the same terminology is used in narrating the story of an earlier Prophet who warned his people: "And follow not the bidding for those who are extravagant, who make mischief in the land and mend not their ways" (26:151–52). The Qur'an also commands humanity to just actions, generosity, and reasonableness:

> Behold! God enjoins justice, and the doing of good, and generosity toward [one's] fellowmen; and He forbids all that is shameful and all that runs counter to reason, as well as envy; [and] He exhorts you [repeatedly] so that you might bear [all this] in mind. (16:90)

Yet even as we work to first change ourselves, human beings are frail, prone to heedlessness and to acting in ways that are unreasonable, selfish, and unjust. What should be our approach when we fall off the prescribed path? The prescription, *aslaha*, to seek reform, appears in various *surahs* in conjunction with the verb *taba*,"to seek forgiveness," as in the following example from the Qur'an:

> Your Lord has inscribed for Himself [the rule of] Mercy. Truly, if any of you did any bad action in ignorance, and thereafter repented [*taba*] after that, and then reformed [*aslaha*] his conduct, lo! He is oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (6:54)

***Discussion Questions:***

*How does working on self-transformation help achieve the goals of social change?*

*What are some contemporary examples of individuals who are social-change agents who have veered off the path of inner vigilance that leads to righteousness?*

*Does our society encourage the expression of remorse? How forgiving are we as a society when these individuals have made mistakes and expressed remorse?*

Building on inner reform and transformation, Muslims are also asked by the Qur'an to look around and be unswerving in their commitment to justice:

> Oh, you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to God, even though it be against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, be he rich or poor, God is a better protector to both [than you]. So follow not your lusts, lest you may avoid justice, and if you distort your witnesses or refuse to give it, verily, Allah is ever well acquainted with what you do. (4:135)

In a relevant hadith (narrations about how the Prophet Muhammad [PBUH] enacted the teachings of the Qur'an), the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) stated:

> Whoever of you sees something wrong must try to change it by the hand [i.e., concrete action]; if he is not able to do so, then he should use his tongue [speaking out, giving advice]; and if he is not able to do so, then at least he should change it in his heart [disagreeing or despise it]. And that is the weakest of faith." (al-Nawawi, *Forty Hadith*, no. 34, recorded by Muslim on the authority of Abu Saeed al-Khudri)

The Qur'anic references above suggest that attachments to extravagance, to ourselves, or to people who are important to us could ultimately become obstacles to our own commitment to justice. The hadith points out the various avenues to standing up against wrong, including action, speaking out, or simply being opposed to it in one's heart when it might not be possible to act in certain circumstances.

***Discussion Questions:***

*What factors prevent us from taking action, speaking out, and becoming advocates for justice in our time? Are there circumstances in which it is easier to speak out and not act, or when it is not easy to speak out at all? Is the difficulty of acting or speaking out about our convictions connected to our ego-based attachments?*

As discussed in the unit "Giving: *Sadaqa* in Islam," Muslims are expected to pay *Zakat* and contribute financially to those in need. In addition, Islam encourages *Sadaqa*—charity beyond monetary giving. The hadith to "visit the sick, feed the hungry, and free the one who is imprisoned unjustly" (Sahih al-Bukhari 7:168) lends religious backing to organizations devoted to social services focused on health care, hunger, and prison reform. Other texts in the Qur'an and hadith encourage care for the widow and orphan and teaching people.

The reformation of social ills often requires more than charitable work, including legal advocacy and policy reform. Because of his implementation of Qur'anic guidelines against exploiting the poor and against female infanticide, his work to free slaves and provide for orphans and widows, and his advocacy for human dignity regardless of a person's color, gender, or wealth, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is often seen as a social reformer. Muslims seeking to reform their societies find a great deal of inspiration in his character and leadership.

*Islah* can also be a useful construct for framing interfaith relations and peace building. A noun derived from the same Arabic root is used by Muslims to speak about reconciliation of parties in a conflict, including family, local, and international conflicts. This is a process of mediation that has a long history among Arabs, even before the development of formal legal mechanisms to solve disputes. The Qur'an instructs Muslims to avoid using God as an excuse not to do good: "And make not Allah, by your oaths, a hindrance to your being righteous and observing your duty unto Him and making peace among mankind. Allah is Hearer, Knower" (2:224). The priority is to demonstrate faith through righteous actions and building good relations between people; a show of faith through swearing on God's name may give the impression of religiosity that is ostentation and actually a barrier to good actions.

The Qur'an instructs that when people are tyrannized, they have the right to defend themselves, but *islah*, reconciliation, is duly noted and rewarded:

> And those who, when tyranny strikes them, they defend themselves, and the retribution for an evil act is an evil one like it, but whoever pardons and makes reconciliation—his reward is [due] from Allah. Indeed, He does not like wrongdoers. And whoever avenges himself after having been wronged—those have not upon them any cause [for blame].The cause is only against the ones who wrong the people and tyrannize upon the earth without right. Those will have a painful punishment. And whoever is patient and forgives—indeed, that is of the matters [requiring] determination. (42:39–43)

In addition to the responsibilities we have to improve human relations, Muslims are asked to be caretakers of nature, the environment, and animals. This responsibility is captured in the Qur'an: "It is He [God] who has placed you as viceroys of the earth and has exalted some of you in rank above others, that He may try you by [the test of] what He hath given you"(6:165). In a related hadith, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) states: "The world is green and beautiful, and Allah has appointed you His guardian over it" (Sahih Muslim, 36:6606, on the authority of Abu Sa'id Khudri).

Taking care of the earth is another means of giving charity and earning rewards for the hereafter. A related hadith states: "There is none among the Muslims who plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, but is regarded as a charitable gift [*Sadaqa*] for him" (Sahih al-Bukhari 39:513). Similarly, caring for animals, including animals that need rescue, is encouraged, as in this story from hadith:

> While a man was walking on his way, he became extremely thirsty. He found a well. He went down into it to drink water. Upon leaving it, he saw a dog, which was panting out of thirst. Its tongue was lolling out, and it was eating moist earth from extreme thirst. The man said to himself: "This dog is extremely thirsty as I was." So he descended into the well, filled up his leather sock with water, and, holding it in his teeth, climbed up and quenched the thirst of the dog. Allah appreciated his action and forgave his sins. The Companions asked: "Shall we be rewarded for showing kindness to the animals also?" In response, the Prophet (PBUH) said, "A reward is given in connection with every living creature." (Sahih al-Bukhari 45:656)

***Discussion Questions:***

*How does the religious view of responsibility for the world around us and the living things in it compare with contemporary ideologies such as capitalism, socialism, and secularism? What are the overlaps and differences?*

**Reference**

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# Hospitality: Welcoming the Stranger in Islam

**Soumaya Khalifa**

The word "hospitality" immediately takes me back to my early childhood. I fondly remember times when my parents invited guests for dinner or when we expected family to visit us from out of town. During those special times, my mother would prepare everyone's favorite food and buy the best fruits, cakes, cookies, juices, and more. And she would not stop there; she would get out our nicest dishes, bed linens, and more. My father was involved in the planning as well: he selected the fruits and the cake for our visitors.

Even before knowing what hospitality meant, it was instilled in me at a very young age that this is how guests are received. It was also instilled in me that treating guests any less than how my parents did was unacceptable and even dishonorable. My parents often said that this is the spirit of Islam and of humanity: being generous and hospitable to people. How we make others feel matters.

**Stories of Hospitality in Islamic Tradition**

My father used to tell me three bedtime stories that focused on the virtues that he and my mother wanted to instill in me. He intentionally pulled stories from the traditions of Prophets Abraham (AS) and Muhammad (PBUH), perhaps because he realized that when I was a child, this hospitality thing was not sitting well with me: once I told him that our family should focus on ourselves, offering visitors much less and saving the best for our family. Why did we have to go out of our way to share this way?

The stories that my father told me included a story about Prophet Abraham (AS), who was most hospitable to his guests. He disliked eating unless he had a guest to eat with him and would often look for guests to invite to a meal. When he received three of God's angels as guests, he immediately served them a roasted calf, as he mistook them for travelers and did not yet know their divine mission. My father emphasized that Prophet Abraham (AS) is central to the three monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and that a core value of these three faith traditions is hospitality.

The second story was about the family of Prophet Abraham (AS). According to Islamic tradition, God ordered Prophet Abraham (AS) to leave his baby son Ishmael and the baby's mother, Hagar, in the area now known as Mecca, Saudi Arabia—in the middle of a desert. Soon Lady Hagar ran out of water, and her baby was hungry; she could not feed him because she was thirsty. As the baby cried, he tapped the ground with his heel and out came a gushing of water: it was a well called Zamzam. Lady Hagar, who was hospitable and generous, shared the water with people in the area. People came from other parts of the desert to settle in the area because of the well and her generosity. This well is still producing water that Muslims from all over the world drink when they visit the holy city of Mecca.

The last story was the migration of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his followers from Mecca to Medina. After thirteen years of sharing the message of Islam with people in Mecca, it was difficult for the Prophet (PBUH) and his followers to remain, as they faced persecution and economic sanctions. According to Islamic tradition, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was commanded by God to take his people and migrate to Medina. This significant event marked the beginning of the Islamic calendar.

The people who followed God's commandment to leave Mecca left behind their homes, belongings, and part of their families. The people of Medina received the Muslims from Mecca with open arms and a great deal of hospitality. Each Meccan was partnered with a person from Medina, and they immediately became family. The people of Medina divided their wealth, belongings, and homes with the people of Mecca. The people of Mecca, along with their newfound families in Medina, lined the road to welcome the Prophet (PBUH) as he arrived in Medina with

a song, which continues to be passed down from generation to generation. Had it not been for the hospitality and generosity of the people of Medina, the Meccans would have not been able to rebuild and begin their lives anew.

My father told me the stories of Prophet Abraham (AS) and his family, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and the early Muslims to teach me the importance of hospitality as an Islamic faith value. These stories taught me that being hospitable is inseparable from being Muslim—this is the most important value in Islamic tradition.

***Discussion Questions:***

*What lessons can we learn about hospitality in the Muslim tradition from these stories?*

*How did you learn about the importance of hospitality in your religious tradition? What stories of hospitality from your religious tradition resonate most with you?*

**Hospitality as Generosity**

The definition of "hospitality" is "the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers" (Oxford Dictionary online). Being generous in giving is often inferred when one thinks of hospitality.

Muslims attribute generosity to God. This stems from the Muslim belief that on the Day of Judgment, all humanity will stand before God, who will decide whether a person will go to heaven or hell. Muslims believe that their station in heaven is best attained by purifying their intentions and doing good deeds. They believe that God, through His grace, rewards good deeds by multiplying them manifold, while counting a bad deed as only one. This is seen as a clear manifestation of the generosity of God. So Muslims who have heaven as their goal must work on accumulating good deeds, purifying their intentions, and minimizing their bad deeds.

Numerous examples of hospitality and generosity are found in the beliefs and teachings of Islam's primary sources, such as the Qur'an (the Muslim holy book) and the hadith (the tradition of Prophet Muhammad [PBUH]), as demonstrated from the stories shared above. Muslims also try to learn from the ninety-nine attributes of God that are found in the Qur'an and make them part of their own character. Hospitality conjures one attribute of God in particular: the Generous (Al-Karim). Al-Karim has other meanings as well, including the Noble, Honorable, and Beautiful. God's generosity is evident in all creation and all the favors that creation was endowed with. From providing sustenance to blessing everyone with His bounties, one often observes that it is all granted without regard to the recipients' belief or lack thereof, or to the recipients' thankfulness or lack thereof. God's generosity covers everyone and everything in the universe, not just humans.

> And He giveth you of all ye ask of Him, and if you would count the bounty of God you cannot reckon it. Lo! Man is verily a wrongdoer, an ingrate. (14:34)

***Discussion Questions:***

*How is being generous, noble, honorable, and beautiful tied together, as in Al-Kareem?*

*We often think of hospitality and generosity in terms of our human relationships. How can we translate this into our treatment of other creatures and of the world around us more generally?*

The question now becomes: How can Muslims make this attribute of generosity part of their character? One way to do this—to emulate God—is to show generosity and hospitality toward others. This follows the example of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), whom Muslims regard as having personified the Qur'an's—and therefore God's—teachings.

> O you who believe! Give of the good things that you have [honorably] earned and of the fruits of the earth

that we have produced for you…. And whatever you spend in charity or devotion, be sure God knows it all. (2:267–70)

By no means shall you attain righteousness unless you give freely of that which you love; and whatever you give, of a truth God knows it well. (3:92)

The likeness of those who spend their wealth in the Way of God, is as the likeness of a grain [of corn]; it grows seven ears, and each ear has a hundred grains. God gives manifold increase to whom He pleases. And God is All-Sufficient for His creatures' needs, All-Knower. (2:261)

During the month of Ramadan, Muslims tend to be most hospitable and generous. Ramadan is believed to be when the Qur'an was first revealed to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and Muslims believe that any good deed in Ramadan is magnified and multiplied by God. The estimated 1.5 billion Muslims worldwide and the more than 5 million Muslim Americans strive to maximize their good deeds during this month. They fast from dawn to sunset and share their predawn and post-sunset meals with family and friends in their homes or in their mosques. It is a tradition to invite people for breaking the fast because Ramadan is also a communal observance.

It is believed that if a Muslim feeds a fasting person or anyone during the month of Ramadan, he or she will receive many rewards from God. Many mosques in the U.S. and across the world provide free meals that people donate to feed the less fortunate. Those who have resources donate to the mosque or sponsor the *Iftars* (break-the-fast dinners). Feeding those in need is done with dignity and respect; no questions are asked, and they eat with the rest of the community.

We will now examine two ways that Muslims practice hospitality: hospitality toward their guests and hospitality toward their neighbors.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Are there any particular times of year when you feel most compelled to practice hospitality and generosity to others? Why?*

*How might showing hospitality toward guests and toward neighbors differ? Do you think that one or the other is more important?*

**Hospitality toward Guests**

As evidenced in the example of my parents above, guests who visit our homes must be treated with kindness, generosity, and respect. This applies to all guests, be they family members or not, friends or strangers, people from all faith traditions or none at all. Giving to others selflessly and without regard to whether one knows them is an important dimension of hospitality.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Is it more difficult to be generous and hospitable to people you do not know versus those you know well? Are there differences in how each of these experiences makes you feel?*

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was always generous to his guests and instructed his companions to do the same. The Prophet (PBUH) said: "He who believes in God and the Last Day should show hospitality to his guest" (Sahih al-Bukhari 1:78).

Food is important, and part of this requirement is to provide an abundance of food and drink for guests, to the best of one's abilities. A Qur'anic verse highlights this very type of hospitality shown to a guest by Abu Talha, a companion of the Prophet (PBUH), and his wife Umm Sulaim. Abu Talha welcomed a hungry traveler into his home even though there was very little to eat. He asked Umm Sulaim to bring whatever food they had and give it to the guest. As the guest ate his fill, the hosts pretended to eat in the dim candlelight. The following day, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) gave them the news about the verse that God revealed:

> But give them preference over themselves, even though poverty was their [own lot]. And those saved from the covetousness of their own souls—they are the ones that achieve prosperity. (59:9)

The host generally eats or drinks last, after all the guests are served. "He who serves drinks should himself be the last person to drink" (Al-Tirmizi 3:46). This is a sign of respect for the guests and ensures that guests' needs are met first and foremost.

Despite this focus on food, even more important than food is how a guest is received. Muslims should greet their guests with a pleasant and welcoming attitude and take interest in them.

***Discussion Question:***

*Why is the attitude of a host more important than the food and material provisions that are offered?*

If a person wants to show hospitality to new acquaintances or to people whom he or she does not know very well, these acquaintances can first be invited to places outside the home. Hospitality can and should also be offered outside one's home—at a restaurant, a coffee shop, a mosque, or anywhere else. Guests should be invited into one's home once one is comfortable in doing so, but this should not stop Muslims from providing hospitality whenever the occasion arises.

Just as Muslims must follow required etiquette in the treatment of their guests, guests must also follow etiquette. This includes visiting when invited—not showing up unannounced. Once in the host's home, guests should go only where the host allows them to be in their home. Guests should not overstay their welcome. A guest should not admire belongings of the host because in some Muslim-majority country cultures, the host must give the guest whatever he or she admires.

As mentioned above, hospitality is a value highly regarded in the Islamic tradition. But a person's safety and security are a higher priority in the sight of God, so one should therefore only invite guests to one's home if comfortable doing so.

***Discussion Questions:***

*In American society, what rules of hospitality etiquette do we follow in hosting guests, or as guests ourselves? How are the rules similar to or different from the type of hospitality etiquette described above?*

*When might tension arise between being hospitable and your own or your family's safety or well-being? Have you ever experienced this tension?*

**Hospitality toward Neighbors**

Islam places great importance on the treatment and hospitality of neighbors. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said:

> The Angel Gabriel kept recommending treating neighbors with kindness until I thought that a neighbor would be assigned a share of inheritance. (Sahih al-Bukhari 73:43)

A Muslim should bear the trouble caused by his neighbor and extend kindness to him:

> One man came to Abdullah ibn Abbas and said to him: "A neighbor of mine causes me a lot of trouble, insults me, and causes me inconvenience." Ibn Abbas replied: "If he disobeys God [by hurting you], obey God [by being kind to him]." (Imam Ghazali, Ihyaa Ulum-ud-Din, 2:212)

Being hospitable to a neighbor can mean offering food or gifts. A Muslim should give to his neighbor with an open hand and not expect or request anything in return. To hold the neighbor accountable for a good deed or remind him of it at a later date is not in line with the teachings of Islam.

Another means of hospitality toward a neighbor is living in peace and tranquility. The Prophet (PBUH) was once asked to define a Muslim. The Prophet (PBUH) said that "a Muslim is a person of whom it may be said that people around him are safe from his tongue and hands" (Sahih al-Bukhari 76:491).

Muslims must try their utmost to get along with their neighbors even if some of their own needs are compromised. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: "None of you should prevent his neighbor from placing his rafter in his wall" (Sahih al-Bukhari, Kitab al-Mazalim wa al-Ghasb, 2283).

One's proximity to neighbors determines which neighbor takes precedence when it comes to hospitality:

> Narrated by Aisha: I said, "O Allah's Apostle! I have two neighbors! To whom shall I send my gifts?" He said, "To the one whose gate is nearer to you."(Sahih al-Bukhari 73, Good Manners and Form)

***Discussion Questions:***

*Islamic tradition says that one must do one's best to get along with neighbors, even to the extent of compromising one's own needs. How does this mesh with the individualistic tendencies of American society? Do you think that this injunction can or should always be followed?*

**Conclusion**

According to the tradition of the Prophet, "Smile is a *Sadaqa*." A Muslim smiling at another person is considered a form of charity or a good deed for which he or she will be rewarded. This simple saying emphasizes the importance of being nice to people and of being hospitable in all circumstances.

Hospitality is about human relationships. These relationships build families, communities, and countries. My mother-in-law always said that "a human being is just a remembrance. When one is long gone, people will remember only how he or she made them feel." What better way to be remembered than being generous and hospitable toward others?

***Discussion Question:***

*How can we promote the importance and practice of hospitality among our religious communities?*

# Hospitality: Welcoming the Stranger in Judaism

**Rabbi Jill Jacobs**

Hospitality to travelers (*hakhnasat orhim*), say the rabbis of the Talmud, takes precedence over greeting the divine presence (Shabbat127a). This surprising statement has its roots in the biblical story of Abraham welcoming three strangers into his tent:

> The Lord appeared to [Abraham] by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them, and, bowing to the ground, he said, "My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves; then go on—seeing that you have come your servant's way." They replied, "Do as you have said."
>
> Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Quick, three *se'ahs* (a dry measure) of choice flour! Knead and make cakes!" Then Abraham ran to the herd, took a calf, tender and choice, and gave it to a servant boy, who hastened to prepare it. He took curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them; and he waited on them under the tree as they ate. (Gen. 18:1–8)

According to the traditional reading, this story takes place while Abraham recuperates from circumcision, which was performed at the age of ninety-nine. One reading of this story sees Abraham interrupting a conversation with God to care for three strangers who suddenly appear at his door. The strangers turn out to be divine messengers who deliver the news that Abraham and Sarah will soon have a son. Alternatively, the statement "The Lord appeared to Abraham" may refer to the three messengers, who represent the divine presence.

Either way, Abraham welcomes the strangers without knowing that they bring divine tidings. According to Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, eleventh-century France), one of the most important medieval commentators, Abraham deliberately sits at the entrance of his tent "to see whether there were passersby in order to bring them into his home." Rather than wait for strangers to knock, Abraham goes out looking for them.

***Discussion Questions:***

*How would you characterize Abraham's approach to strangers? In what ways does he try to make the three visitors feel comfortable? Why do you think that he chooses these ways to welcome them?*

*What role does Sarah play in this story? To what extent does she take initiative, and to what extent does she follow Abraham's lead?*

*In what ways should Abraham's and Sarah's actions be models for how we welcome strangers? In what ways should we not follow their examples?*

Contrast Abraham's behavior with that of the residents of Sodom, the evil city that God destroys in the next chapter of the book of Genesis. When two angels (understood as two of the messengers who appeared to Abraham) arrive there, Abraham's nephew Lot invites them to his home to eat and sleep. Presumably, Lot—whom God later saves, along with his family, from the fate of the rest of the city—is as hospitable as his uncle. But Lot's hospitality to strangers does not sit well with the rest of the town. Just as the two visitors are preparing to turn in for the night, the townspeople arrive at the door, demanding that Lot surrender his guests, apparently to be raped. (While the text has been understood as a condemnation of male homosexuality, it is clear from biblical context that the sin

of the Sodomites was violent sexual assault, not consensual male sex.) When Lot refuses to give up his guests, the townspeople pursue him instead:

> [9] But they said, "Stand back! The fellow," they said, "came here as an alien, and already he acts the ruler! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." And they pressed hard against the person of Lot, and moved forward to break the door.[10]But the men stretched out their hands and pulled Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. [11]And the people who were at the entrance of the house, young and old, they struck with blinding light, so that they were helpless to find the entrance. (Gen. 19:9–11)

The rabbis of the Talmud declare that the primary sin of Sodom—and the reason God destroyed the city—was inhospitality to travelers:

> [The people of Sodom] said: Since bread comes forth out of [our] earth, and it has the dust of gold, why should we suffer wayfarers, who come to us only to deplete our wealth. Come, let us abolish the practice of traveling in our land….
>
> Now, they had beds upon which travelers slept. If [the guest] was too long, they shortened him [by lopping off his feet]; if too short, they stretched him out.
>
> If a poor man happened to come there, every resident gave him a denar [unit of currency], upon which he wrote his name, but no bread was given him. When he died, each came and took back his.
>
> They made this agreement among themselves: whoever invites a man [a stranger] to a feast shall be stripped of his garment.
>
> A certain maiden gave some bread to a poor man, [hiding it] in a pitcher. When the matter became known, they covered her with honey and placed her on the parapet of the wall, and the bees came and consumed her. (Talmud, Sanhedrin109a–b)

***Discussion Questions:***

*Why do you think that the rabbis defined the sin of Sodom as rejection of strangers? Why might this sin's significance have led to the destruction of the entire city?*

*When in your life have you been an outsider? How were you treated? How did you feel? How did you respond?*

*Where in your life have you seen the rejection of outsiders? How have you responded? How should we respond as individuals or as communities?*

**The Face of the Stranger/The Face of God**

Why should welcoming the stranger take precedence over welcoming God? One suggestion comes from Rabbi Judah Loew, a sixteenth-century scholar known as the Maharal of Prague. Welcoming guests, he says, is tantamount to honoring God, since all human beings are creations in the divine image. But he goes a step further:

> Rav Yehuda [in the Talmud] said that welcoming guests is *greater* than welcoming the divine presence … for one cannot encounter the face of God directly, as it is written, "No one may see me and live." This is not similar to welcoming guests. For a person welcomes and honors a "new face," and the guest becomes beloved to the host, and the host attaches himself completely to this image of God. This is greater than welcoming the divine presence, as one cannot have this kind of direct attachment to the divine presence. (*Netivot Olam* 4)

Since a person cannot have direct experience of God, he says, encountering and cleaving to another human being allows for the closest possible relationship with God, as mediated through the divine image in each person. Surprisingly, the Maharal locates this ideal human-divine relationship in the encounter between a host and a stranger—and not between a person and his or her spouse, parent, child, teacher, or close friend. Perhaps it is more difficult, and ultimately more powerful, to see the image of God in a total stranger than in one's loved one.

Another sixteenth-century scholar, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, looks to God as the model for welcoming strangers:

> The mitzvah of welcoming guests is included in the positive commandment "You shall walk in God's ways" … for the Holy Blessed One welcomes guests in every time and era, in every hour, in every season, and at every moment. For if God did not welcome guests for even a single moment, the entire world would cease to exist. That is to say that all of creation are guests of God. Just as a guest comes to lodge [temporarily], we are sojourners whom God welcomes. (*Sh'nei luhot habrit*, *parshat Vayera to Gen.18:1-3* )

This assertion falls within the tradition of *imitatio dei*—the obligation to imitate God's own performance of mitzvot, generally those that involve caring for others. Horowitz breaks down the power dynamic between host and guest. As the story of Sodom demonstrates, strangers may be vulnerable to the whims of the residents, who see themselves as superior to outsiders. But if we are all sojourners in God's world, no one can claim superiority over anyone else.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Do you consider welcoming guests to be a religious practice? How might such an outlook affect the practice of welcoming guests?*

*Have you ever experienced divinity in welcoming guests? In being welcomed? What was that experience like?*

**How to Welcome Guests**

In Judaism, general values almost always become concretized into specific laws and obligations. It is no surprise, then, that legal thinkers over the years have developed guidelines for *hakhnasat orhim*, rather than depended on the goodwill of the host.

Rabbi Moshe Isserles, a sixteenth-century authority, begins by defining guests only as visitors from out of town who are staying with the host or with a neighbor. However, "if someone invites a friend for a meal, this person is not considered a guest, and the meal is not considered to be the fulfillment of a mitzvah—it is just a meal" (*Orah Hayim* 333:1).

The mitzvah of *hakhnasat orhim* requires going outside one's comfort zone and inviting in a stranger—and not simply having a friend for dinner.

***Discussion Question:***

*Why do you think that it is necessary to go outside one's comfort zone to complete the mitzvah of hakhnasat orhim?*

As we saw in the story of Sodom, there is an assumption that the stranger will be vulnerable, especially while traveling from one town to the next. For this reason, the Talmud and later legal commentaries require residents of each town to accompany strangers on their way, lest bandits on the road take advantage of them.

This law of accompaniment draws inspiration from the biblical law regarding a dead body found between two towns. If no murderer can be identified, the elders of the nearer town carry out an atonement ritual in which they break the neck of a heifer, declare their own innocence, and ask for atonement (Deut. 21:1–9).

The rabbis of the Talmud wonder why the elders of the town must go through this elaborate ritual to proclaim their innocence. After all, it seems unlikely that anyone would suspect these revered elders of murder. Rather, the Talmud answers, the declaration of innocence means: "It did not happen that he came to us for help and we sent him away, or that we saw him and let him go" (Sotah 38b). If the elders had refused to help the visitor, or had sent him away without escort, they would stand guilty of his murder, even if they did not directly participate.

Thus, says another legal authority, "It is a positive mitzvah according to the talmudic rabbis to accompany guests as they leave. The rabbis said, 'Anyone who does not accompany guests is like one who sheds blood.' " We compel people to accompany guests, just as we compel people to give *tzedakah* (which is treated as a tax) (*Arukh hashulhan* 426:2).

***Discussion Questions:***

*Why do you think that these texts emphasize that guests are likely to be poor or vulnerable? What obligations arise from defining guests in this way?*

The *Hofetz Haim* (Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan), a nineteenth-century rabbi known for his ethical teachings, devotes an extensive section of one of his books to the rules of welcoming guests:

> When guests come to one's home, one should receive them with a cheerful face and immediately set food before them, for perhaps this poor person is hungry but would be too embarrassed to ask for food. One should provide for them cheerfully, and not with a sour face. Even if the host is worried about something, he should hide this from the guests.
>
> One should speak with them pleasantly so that they will be comfortable. The host should not discuss his troubles with them, for fear of upsetting them lest they think that they are the cause of these troubles, as the host loses money by hosting them.
>
> At mealtime, the host should express regret that he is not able to provide more, as it is said, "Offer your soul to the hungry" (Isa. 58:7)—that is, show goodwill.
>
> The Zohar explains the verse "Surely, you should break your bread for the hungry" (Isa. 58:7) as meaning that the host should cut pieces of bread in front of the guests, so that the guests will not feel embarrassed to do so. Even more so, one should not look at the guest while he is eating so as not to embarrass the guest. (*Ahavat hesed* 3:2)

***Discussion Questions:***

*Why do you think that the Hofetz Haim emphasizes acting and speaking cheerfully to guests? What other guidelines would you propose for how one should treat guests?*

**Conclusion**

The Jewish conversation around *hakhnasat orhim* assumes that strangers are vulnerable and needy, by virtue of their outsider status. The host community bears responsibility for feeding and housing these strangers, and even for accompanying them as they leave town, lest others take advantage of the travelers on the way. The mitzvah of welcoming strangers is so important that the Torah and later commentaries establish this virtue as the defining characteristic of Abraham and as the downfall of Sodom.

***Discussion Questions:***

*In what ways is welcoming guests similar to or different from giving tzedakah (monetary gifts for the poor)? How might the welcoming of guests fit into a larger system of financial and social services for those in need?*

*Section 2*

# FAMILY AND HERITAGE

# Family Relationships in Judaism

**Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky**

**Parents and Children**

The relationship between children and their parents is at the core of the Jewish communal experience, shapes Jewish identity, and promotes Jewish continuity. Twice the Torah commands: "Honor your father and your mother" (Exod. 20:12; Deut.5:16), each time as part of the Ten Commandments. The Torah also commands: "Each man shall revere his mother and father" (Lev. 19:3). These commandments for honor and reverence are powerful indicators of the centrality of family life.

The Babylonian Talmud, that great monument of rabbinic thought and law, compiled in sixth-century Iraq, reports:

> Our rabbis taught: What is "reverence" and what is "honor"? "Reverence" means that the son must neither stand in his father's place nor sit in his place, nor contradict his words, nor tip the scales against him in an argument with others. "Honor" means that he must give him food and drink, clothe and cover him, lead him in and out. (Kiddushin 31b)

These practical and concrete acts define a scope of behaviors that lead to familial order. And while the rabbis typically formulate the commandment about the men of the family, already in the early third century CE they note:

> The Torah says, "Honor your father and mother"; yet it says, "Revere your mother and father." Why has the order of parents been reversed? To teach that mother and father are equal. (Mishnah Keritot 6:9)

Indeed, mothers and fathers are so central to family and Jewish identity that when either parent dies, rabbinic law requires the rending of a garment, remaining unbarbered, going without music, and reciting memorial prayers as a sign of grief lasting eleven months (Talmud, Mo'ed Qatan, chap. 3). Children look to their parents for direction and succor. Without parents, we are bereft and lost; the family is riven.

How do the rabbis imagine the role of the parents in giving direction and identity to their children? The Talmud prescribes the following:

> Our rabbis taught: The father is bound in respect of his son, to circumcise, redeem him, teach him Torah, take a wife for him, and teach him a craft. Some say, to teach him to swim, too. (Kiddushin 29a)

Here the rabbis are practical. In Jewish Babylonia, which is the Fertile Crescent where canals and rivers were ubiquitous, they see it as a requirement of Torah law to teach a child to swim—his life depends on it. Equally, they wish to ensure that a parent equips a child to earn a living. Aside from these practicalities, keen attention is paid to developing a Jewish identity. A boy must be ritually circumcised (Gen. 17:23–27). If he is a firstborn, he must be redeemed from the requirement of "service to God" (Exod. 13:2, 13). A parent must either personally instruct his child in Torah (here meant in the broadest sense of Jewish law and lore), or ensure that someone else is commissioned to do so. Finally, the extent of parental responsibility toward their children extends to ensuring that they are married to an appropriate Jewish spouse (see the "Intermarriage" unit in this volume).

The commandment to teach one's children echoes throughout the Hebrew Bible. When the virtual credo is sounded, "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord alone" (Deut. 6:4), it is soon followed by the injunction, "Teach your children. Speak of the commandments when you dwell in your home, when you travel on the way, when you lie down and rise up" (Deut. 6: 7). And four times, the Torah enjoins that children be taught about the miraculous

redemption of the exodus from Egypt, the signal event in the historical formation of the Jewish people (Exod. 12:26, 13:8, 13:14; Deut. 6:20). A Jewish family is one in which the words of Torah are the discourse of daily life.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Discuss your approach to the religious education of your children. Do you send your children to a once- or twice-weekly religious school at a synagogue or mosque, or to a religious day school? Do you teach your children about their religion in a different way? How did you make this decision, and how do you encourage your children to value their religious education?*

*Minorities in society can find it difficult to encourage children to prioritize their faith over the pursuits of the majority. If you have you faced this situation, how have you dealt with it? How do you reconcile your children's desire to fit in and participate in the majority culture while encouraging them to value their faith tradition?*

*In America today, many people—particularly children of this generation—are part of many communities and have multiple ethnic/religious heritages. What does this mean for identity-building and connecting a child to tradition?*

There is a tendency to idealize the relationship of parents and their offspring. Yet the Torah (Deut. 21:18) recognizes that one could have a "stubborn and rebellious son, who does not listen to his father or mother and does not obey them even after they punish him." Although the Torah commands death by stoning of such a child, third-century rabbinic jurisprudence defines the category almost out of existence (Mishnah Sanhedrin 8:1–4). Whether this is due to the rabbis' distaste for capital punishment or whether the rabbis prefer to romanticize family relationships is hard to say. Whatever the cause, the rabbis interpret away the Torah's law in favor of a notion that every Jewish parent's child is, of course, a good boy or girl.

Yet the rabbis also recognize that children might have difficulties performing the commandment of honoring one's parents. It is a commandment that knows no time boundaries. One must honor one's parents always, even after their death. Further, parents can be difficult, or not observe Torah law, or grow senile and exhibit signs of dementia. The Talmud reports, "Come and hear: R. Eliezer was asked: How far does the honor of parents extend? —Said he: that a parent might take a purse full of money and throw it into the sea, and the child should not shame him" (Kiddushin 32a). This idealization of the parental bond, even in the face of difficulties, is well illustrated by the following talmudic anecdote:

> R. Tarfon had a mother for whom, whenever she wished to mount into her bed, he would bend down to let her ascend, using himself as her footstool. And when she wished to descend, she stepped down upon him. He went and boasted thereof in the rabbinic academy. They said to him, "You have not yet reached half the honor due her!" (Kiddushin 31b)

While the rabbis refuse to be impressed with Tarfon's boast, their point is fairly clear. One can never do enough for the parents who brought you into the world.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Can we realistically implement the talmudic ideal of honoring our parents in modern society? Are there circumstances under which this directive should be reconsidered?*

**Siblings**

Relations with siblings, however, seem to be much more fraught with difficulties. The book of Genesis is replete with tales of sibling rivalries, particularly those in which the younger sibling supplants the elder, starting with Cain and Abel; and in the Abrahamic family, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers. This may

reflect that in the book of Genesis, family sagas are also tribal narratives in which the head of the clan represents the people Israel. But there is certainly a fair dose of mundane reality in the recognition that brothers and sisters do not always have ideal relations. Even Moses had to contend with the jealous gossip of his older siblings (Num. 12:1–2).

***Discussion Questions:***

*How are the tensions and divisions among siblings handled in scripture? What can we learn from their relationships that we can apply to our own relationships?*

These narratives of the supplanting of the elder speak to the fact that biblical Israel was "the younger child," a small and powerless clan. It also is a way of militating against the biblical rule of primogeniture, in which the eldest male offspring inherits a double share of the patrimony. When the eldest is supplanted, there is a redistribution of wealth and property. This redistribution of the ancient Israelite regime was further modified by the case of the daughters of Zelophehad (Numbers 27), who died without sons; his daughters petitioned Moses for their father's inheritance in the absence of brothers. Moses brought their case before the Lord. And the Lord said to Moses, "The plea of Zelophehad's daughters is just" (Num. 27:5–6). Thus daughters have an opportunity to inherit, even if not on par with male offspring.

The Hebrew Bible issues commands against incestuous relationships (Leviticus 18). Given that the Israelites claim to have spent centuries enslaved in Egypt, where the perceived norm was that Pharaoh would marry his sister, and given that the biblical etiology of the nations of Ammon and Moab stem from the incest of Lot and his daughters (Genesis 19), it is not surprising to find such legislation. Yet, curiously, the Torah commands that when a brother dies without a son, the wife of the deceased is obligated to marry his brother, in order to carry on the family name (Deut. 25:5–10). It is possible for the brother to refuse this task; an entire tractate of Mishnah and Talmud (Yebamot) is dedicated to discussion of this custom, called levirate marriage. Although the practice is very rare in modern times, it is still practiced in certain ultra-Orthodox Jewish circles.

***Discussion Questions:***

*The tradition of obligating the marriage of former in-laws contradicts the prohibition against incest. How can we reconcile this apparent contradiction? How does this reflect the importance that Jewish tradition places on family? How important is perpetuating the family name in modern Judaism and Islam?*

**Husband and Wife**

We have shifted from a discussion of sibling relations to that of marriage. Husbands and wives are engaged and married as part of a sacred bond: the wedding ceremony is a religious one, replete with the appropriate blessings, surrounded by family and friends, accompanied by a joyous banquet meal. Husbands and wives are expected to be intimate with each other, while following biblical and rabbinic rules of family purity (see, e.g., Lev. 15:19–30), which prohibit intercourse during the woman's menstrual cycle. This period is expanded by rabbinic additions to the family purity laws (see Mishnah and Talmud tractate Niddah), which seek to optimize the possibility of childbearing.

Husbands have a responsibility to provide for their wives, and wives to care for their husbands. These responsibilities are enumerated in the Talmud but are also explicitly mentioned in the Jewish marriage contract, called the *ketubah* (literally, "written document"), which serves as a prenuptial agreement that provides for a wife in the event of death of her husband or divorce. Although women are protected by the *ketubah*, the marriage laws tilt in favor of patriarchal primacy. To wit, biblical law allows for a male to marry multiple wives (cf. Abraham and Jacob in Genesis). In European Jewish communities for the past millennium, polygyny has generally been prohibited—effectively limiting Jewish men to only one wife, following local custom.

Even so, certain men were jealous and insecure about the sanctity of their marriage. Biblical law (Numbers 5) allows for a Jewish man who suspects his wife of adultery to force her to submit to a trial by ordeal. The rabbis were appalled by this undermining of their legal system and treated the suspected wife as a parable for God's reward and punishment by the principle of "measure for measure." So the Mishnah and Talmud that deal with this question are heavily dedicated to homily and lore, rather than to legal details. It does not mean that the rabbis were naïve about adultery but rather that they preferred to presume that Jewish wives remained faithful to their husbands. For the rabbis, Jewish marriage was, and remains, an ideal state. Husband, wife, and offspring were the biblical and rabbinic norm.

Even while the rabbis pretended that there were no unreasonably jealous husbands or wayward wives, they were aware that not all marriages were made to last "until death do us part." While marriage was idealized as husband and wife being "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (as Adam says of Eve in Gen. 2:23), when marriages did not work out, Jews were commanded to divorce (Deut. 24:1–4). The earliest rabbinic precursors disagree on the grounds for divorce: the first-century BCE school of Shammai presumes that only in the case of sexual immorality was divorce called for (cf. Matt. 5:32, where Jesus says the same); but the school of Hillel, which became normative law, says that even a burnt meal was sufficient cause.

Although these laws seem to be decidedly in the husband's favor, they also protected a wife from arbitrary dismissal. In a Jewish divorce proceeding, a wife is granted alimony. Modern Jewish authorities struggle to afford wives even more rights, including the right to initiate divorce. All in all, the institution of divorce is meant to be a cure for unhappy families, allowing husbands and wives a chance to remarry and establish a family of mutual love and respect. Rabbi Judith Hauptman has argued that, over time, rabbinic law afforded Jewish women more rights and voice than did biblical law. It is the tendency in the modern era to further empower women in the Jewish community with equal status on family issues.

***Discussion Questions:***

*How has the development of gender roles in American society—women working outside the home, men spending more time caring for children—changed gender roles within a religious and marital context? How do our religious traditions speak to this or reflect this change (or not)?*

Further, with the ability of women to earn an independent income in the modern era and the expanding acceptance of nontraditional families, the snapshot of the Jewish family has changed. Now it is possible to find well-integrated Jewish families with but one parent, or same-sex parents. Some members of synagogue communities are unmarried yet have children; some married and unmarried synagogue members choose to remain childless. The truth of the bumper sticker "Love Makes a Family" is amply displayed in the broad range of family relations in modern Jewish communities.

We close this unit, which has focused on the legal norms that dictate observant Jewish family life, by noting two phenomena that must be addressed in any survey of family relationships. In the first, the role of Jewish observance is such that Jewish celebration is often at the core of family identity. Whether sitting at the Shabbat table chanting Sabbath songs, or engaged in discussion and festivity at a Passover seder, or joyously dancing and entertaining a new bride and groom, family relations are played out against the background of Jewish celebration and sanctification. (For more on this, see the units "Hospitality: Welcoming the Stranger in Judaism," "Holidays in Judaism," and "Life-Cycle Events in Judaism" in this volume).

The second phenomenon is that of the secularized Jewish family. Particularly in North America and Israel, families often have a strong sense of Jewish identity without a particular adherence to Jewish law or observance. These families sometimes play out their identities around food (think of lox and bagels as a marker of Jewish identity)

or commitment to community action. Ironically, even these self-labeled secularists find their Jewish identity built around traditional elements (e.g., food customs, social justice) that also are commanded by the Torah and the rabbis. While they may not feel constrained by the Commander, they nevertheless, through their actions, build their family relationships around Jewish identity and Torah in its broadest sense.

***Discussion Question:***

*In what ways does your family express your unique religious and cultural connection to Judaism or Islam?*

# Family Relationships in Islam

**Maggie M. Siddiqi**

The Qur'an provides Muslims with a toolkit of resources for every type of family relationship, both in terms of their beautiful ideal and how to address conflicts when they arise. Muslims often also look to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his familial relationships for guidance.

**Parents and Children**

A core, if not the most essential, component of family relations in Islam is one's relationship with one's parents. Muslims are commanded throughout the Qur'an to treat their parents well and to be dutiful children. For example:

> Your Lord has commanded that you should worship none but Him and that you be kind to your parents. If either or both of them reach old age with you, say no word that shows impatience with them, and do not be harsh with them, but speak to them respectfully and lower your wing in humility toward them in kindness and say, "Lord, have mercy on them, just as they cared for me when I was little." (17:24)

This commitment to one's parents is also financial: Muslims are required to give generously to their parents before all others, throughout their lifetimes and even in death, through inheritance.

> They ask you [Prophet] what they should give. Say, "Whatever you give should be for parents, close relatives, orphans, the needy, and travelers. God is well aware of whatever good you do." (2:215)

> When death approaches one of you who leaves wealth, it is prescribed that he should make a proper bequest to parents and close relatives—a duty incumbent on those who are mindful of God. (2:179–80)

God often describes family and communal relationships by declaring that people "have a right over" one another, and members of one's own family maintain this right first and foremost. This duty is particularly necessary toward one's mother, as emphasized in a famous hadith (tradition of the Prophet) reported by his companion Abu Huraira: A person came to Messenger of God (PBUH) and asked, "Who among people is most deserving of my fine treatment?"

> He (PBUH) said, "Your mother."
> He again asked, "Who next?"
> "Your mother," the Prophet (PBUH) replied again.
> He asked, "Who next?"
> He (PBUH) said again, "Your mother."
> He again asked, "Then who?"
> Thereupon he (PBUH) said, "Then your father."
> (Sahih Muslim 32: 6180)

Throughout the Qur'an, God elaborates on this close relationship between parent and child—most notably, between Ishmael (Ismail) and his father, Abraham (Ibrahim), and his mother, Hagar (Hajar); and Moses (Musa), with his biological and adoptive mothers. The prophet Luqman provides the clearest Qur'anic example to all parents on how to instruct their children, first and foremost in God-consciousness. The Qur'an quotes from Luqman directly, and then shifts to instruct children on their obligations to their parents, particularly their mothers:

> We endowed Luqman with wisdom: "Be thankful to God: whoever gives thanks benefits his own soul, and as for those who are thankless—God is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise." Luqman counseled his son,

"My son, do not attribute any partners to God: attributing partners to Him is a terrible wrong." We have commanded people to be good to their parents: their mothers carried them, with strain upon strain, and it takes two years to wean them. Give thanks to Me and to your parents—all will return to Me. (31:12–14)

***Discussion Questions:***

*Why does the Qur'an place so much emphasis on honoring one's mother, even above one's father? What do you think of this?*

*Honoring one's parents is of enormous importance in Islam and Judaism, but in America today, it is not uncommon for children to place their parents in nursing homes or assisted-living facilities rather than follow the traditional practice of caring for their aging parents at home. How do we reconcile this situation with the commandment to "honor our mothers and fathers"?*

**Conflict and Reconciliation**

God provides the above examples for raising children and commands children to obey their parents in every way possible, while also forbidding them from obedience when it would lead them to sin. At the time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), many Muslims, including the Prophet (PBUH) himself, were chastised, disowned, and persecuted by members of their family for their beliefs. Because they would not renounce their beliefs and their families would not accept them, they were forced to sever family ties.

In many parts of the Qur'an, God provides us with examples among earlier prophets. The father of Abraham (Ibrahim), for example, was an idol worshiper. When Abraham repeatedly spoke out against this practice, his father threatened to stone him (19:46), and Abraham was sentenced to death by his community. After God saved him, Abraham still prayed for his father's forgiveness. The Qur'an commends his loving character but condemns such attempts at intercession:

It is not fitting for the Prophet and the believers to ask forgiveness for the idolaters—even if they are related to them—after having been shown that they are the inhabitants of the Blaze (or Hellfire): Abraham asked forgiveness for his father because he had made a promise to him, but once he realized that his father was an enemy of God, he washed his hands of him. Abraham was tenderhearted and forbearing. (9:114)

***Discussion Question:***

*How do you reconcile the commandments to honor and respect our parents with the commandments to reject our parents if they lead us away from God's commandments?*

A beautiful example of how best to repair family ties is the story of Joseph (Yusuf), which constitutes the longest continuous narrative in the Qur'an. Joseph's jealous brothers committed a treacherous act by throwing him into a well, leaving him to die or to be taken as a slave. He was discovered and sold into slavery. After many years and more trials, Joseph was blessed with an appointment to a high leadership position under the king of Egypt. After a drought and famine struck the land, his brothers desperately sought help from the king and encountered Joseph:

They said, "By God! God really did favor you over all of us, and we were in the wrong!" But he said, "You will hear no reproaches today. May God forgive you: He is the Most Merciful of the merciful." (12:91–92)

Joseph offers an excellent example for resolution to arguably the worst possible event one could experience at the hands of family members. After years of hardship resulting from his brothers' treachery, Joseph would be fully justified in seeking revenge or, at a minimum, some form of reparation. Instead, he forgives his brothers and helps them in a time of need, granting them and the rest of the family safety and ample provisions. Muslim families likewise

attempt to preserve family relations at all costs, even when presented with a difficult challenge.

***Discussion Questions:***

*What lessons can we draw from the story of Joseph? Have you experienced a situation in which you or others prioritized family relations and stability over family conflicts?*

*Traditionally, people lived near immediate and extended family; now, families are often spread out, in different states or countries. How do we deal with long distances or separations between family members?*

**Marriage**

The prophets Noah (Nuh) and Lot (Lut) experienced hardships that paralleled Abraham's struggle with his father: despite their prophethood, both of their wives were disbelievers and were ultimately destroyed by God. These relationships contrast starkly with the beautiful marriages of Adam and Eve (Hawa), Muhammad and Khadijah, and others. Interestingly, God uses a different Arabic word to describe each wife: *imra'a*, or woman, to describe the wives of Noah and Lot; and *zawja* ("other part of a couple or pair"), to describe Eve and the wives of Muhammad. This subtle distinction emphasizes how a marriage should be when it fulfills its true potential. In describing the ideal relationship between husband and wife, God tells us:

> Another of His signs is that He created spouses from among yourselves for you to live with in tranquility: He ordained love and kindness between you. There truly are signs in this for those who reflect. (30:21)

God describes the original couple, Adam and Eve (Hawa), thus:

> People, be mindful of your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them spread countless men and women far and wide. (4:1)

The original marriage thus consists literally of "soulmates," and the ideal marriage fulfills this example. Muslims consider the relationship of Muhammad and Khadijah to be one of the most beautiful love stories of all time. They were married for about twenty-five years, until she died. Muhammad later took multiple wives, as was then common, but he never married another woman while he was with Khadijah, and each wife knew that the late Khadijah occupied a special place in his heart. Because of the diverse nature of the Prophet's (PBUH) early community, interfaith and intercultural marriages were common; he himself married a Christian woman, Maryam. Interfaith marriages had limitations, however. The Qur'an instructs Muslims:

> Today, all good things have been made lawful for you. The food of the People of the Book is lawful for you, as your food is lawful for them. So are chaste, believing women, as well as chaste women of the people who were given the scripture before you, as long as you have given them their bride-gifts and married them, not taking them as lovers or secret mistresses. The deeds of anyone who rejects faith will come to nothing, and in the hereafter he will be one of the losers.(5:5)

Some speculate that this verse does not include permission for Muslim women to marry men from the People of the Book or provide for their own protection; in a patriarchal society, a husband would be more likely to prevent his wife from practicing her religion than vice versa (see the "Intermarriage in Islam" unit in this volume for additional detail regarding this passage). Some debate whether this ruling should still apply, but most scholars uphold that only Muslim men may marry monotheists who are not Muslim.

*Discussion Questions:*

*What do we know about the ideal nature of marriage in Islamic tradition? How can this serve as a model for strong marriages today?*

*How do you feel about the idea that, traditionally, Muslim men may intermarry, but Muslim women may not?*

**Children, Orphans, and Single Parenthood**

A couple enjoys unity in their relationship with each other and particularly in the creation of a child. Abraham and Sarah (11:71–72), as well as Zechariah (Zakariyyah) and his wife (19:2–15), both experience the pain of infertility and childlessness, followed by the blessings and joy of parenthood in old age. After earnestly praying for a child, God responds to Zechariah:

> "Zechariah, We bring you good news of a son whose name will be John—We have chosen this name for no one before him." He said, "Lord, how can I have a son when my wife is barren, and I am old and frail?" He said, "This is what your Lord has said: 'It is easy for Me: I created you, though you were nothing before.'" He said, "Give me a sign, Lord." He said, "Your sign is that you will not [be able to] speak to anyone for three full [days and] nights." He went out of the sanctuary to his people and signaled to them to praise God morning and evening. (19:7–11)

Zechariah's joy contrasts with the experience of the Virgin Mary (Maryam), his niece, who instead, according to the Qur'an, experiences the hardship of single parenthood and slander from her community as a result:

> And when the pains of childbirth drove her to [cling to] the trunk of a palm tree, she exclaimed, "I wish I had been dead and forgotten long before all this!" but a voice cried to her from below, "Do not worry: your Lord has provided a stream at your feet, and if you shake the trunk of the palm tree toward you, it will deliver fresh ripe dates for you, so eat, drink, be glad, and say to anyone you may see: 'I have vowed to the Lord of Mercy to abstain from conversation, and I will not talk to anyone today.' " She went back to her people carrying the child, and they said, "Mary! You have done something terrible! Sister of Aaron! Your father was not an evil man; your mother was not unchaste!" (19:23–28)

God not only provides comfort and sustenance during the birthing process but also miraculously enables the infant Jesus (Issa) to speak out in defense of Maryam's upright character and chastity (19:29–33). Her experience provides solace to women in childbirth and to single mothers who know too well the feeling of judgment and slander from their communities. The community is tasked with the obligation to care for the children of a single parent or a child with no parents. Muslims are frequently instructed throughout the Qur'an to care for orphans. According to the Prophet's companion Sahl bin Sa'd:

> The Prophet (PBUH) said: "I and the person who looks after an orphan and provides for him will be in Paradise like this," putting his index and middle fingers together. (Sahih al-Bukhari 73:34)

An interesting restriction exists on the manner in which individuals are permitted to care for orphans: guardianship is greatly celebrated, but Muslims are commanded not to adopt children in a manner that erases the child's family lineage. Before Muhammad (PBUH) became a prophet, for example, he adopted a boy named Zayd and called him his son. Zayd was thus referred to as "Zayd ibn [son of] Muhammad." About thirty-five years later, these verses were revealed:

> God does not put two hearts within a man's breast. He does not turn the wives you reject and liken to your

> mothers' backs into your real mothers; nor does He make your adopted sons into real sons. These are only words from your mouths, while God speaks the truth and guides people to the right path. Name your adopted sons after their real fathers: this is more equitable in God's eyes—if you do not know who their fathers are [they are your] "brothers-in-religion" and protégés. You will not be blamed if you make a mistake, only for what your hearts deliberately intend; God is most forgiving and merciful. (33:4–5)

Zayd was thus renamed "Zayd ibn Harithah," after his biological father. This did not diminish the intimacy of the relationship between the two; rather, it was now simply understood that there was no blood relationship between the two, and Zayd's biological lineage was preserved.

***Discussion Questions:***

*What experiences of childbirth and child-rearing do we find in the Qur'an and Sunnah (examples of the Prophet [PBUH])? How do they compare with our own experiences?*

*How can or do we follow the communal imperative to care for orphans and the children of single parents today?*

*How can American Muslim parents adopt children in accordance with Islam, given societal expectations today?*

**Divorce**

The above verses also condemned a practice at the time in which men would semi-divorce their wives by ceasing marital relations with them. Women were thus deprived of this marital right and simultaneously deprived of the right to seek fulfillment through a new marriage, as they were technically not divorced. The verse condemned this practice, and a subsequent verse provided these men with a means of repenting and making amends for their sin. Divorce is permitted in Islam, and provisions are offered for a wife's protection. However, the Prophet's companion 'Abdullah bin 'Umar noted: "The Messenger of God said: 'The most hated of permissible things to God is divorce'" (Sahih Sunan ibn Majah 3, 10:2018).

***Discussion Questions:***

*A recent survey by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding found that divorce rates are climbing among American Muslims, following the pattern of American Jewish life. How might we—as Muslims and as Jews—draw on our religious beliefs and traditions to deal with this reality? How might we, as a religious community, help couples who must divorce avoid bitterness and difficulty for their families and communities?*

**Gender Roles**

Because our approach to gender roles is in the context of pluralistic, equality-oriented America, it is critical to understand that, even at the time of the Prophet (PBUH), the role of women in society was understood in different ways. The early community of the Prophet in Medina consisted of native Medinans as well as Meccan immigrants. Women from the bustling Meccan metropolis, while active in the public sphere, traditionally spent more time in the home. Khadijah, for example, was a successful businesswoman with a prominent status in Mecca who hired men to travel and trade goods for her. In the agrarian society of Medina, on the other hand, women typically spent more time outdoors, farming and selling goods in the marketplace; many of them even fought alongside men in battle. As such, there was already a diverse understanding of the role of women in the Prophet's society. One could say that American Muslim women likewise embody this great diversity.

A husband and wife must fulfill numerous marital responsibilities. By nature of their biology, women are expected to play a greater role in child-rearing. Men are thus required to fully provide for the family financially. A woman may also earn money, but all that she earns is hers; she is not required to use it for household expenses. The Prophet's own

example was that of a loving and actively engaged father, who encouraged other fathers to demonstrate tenderness. On one occasion, the Prophet's companion Abu Huraira tells us:

> The Messenger of God (PBUH) kissed [his grandson] Hasan ibn' Ali while al-Aqra' ibn Habis at-Tamimi was sitting with him. Al-Aqra' observed, "I have ten children and I have never kissed any of them." The Messenger of God (PBUH), looked at him and said, "Whoever does not show mercy will not be shown mercy." (Sahih al-Bukhari, Al-Adab al-Mufrad)

***Discussion Questions:***

*Why might all a wife earns be her own, and not required to be used for her household or family? How does this relate to the traditional roles of Muslim women in family and communal life?*

*The differences between Medinan women and Meccan immigrant women appear to be cultural, i.e., stemming from a traditional societal practice that does not necessarily further or impede their religious practice. Based on the example of this early community, how can we better understand contemporary differences of opinion on gender roles? How might the diversity of the prophetic community in Medina help us appreciate the diversity of the Muslim community in America?*

Family relationships are an essential part of how Muslims are expected to conduct ourselves in this world. We are both blessed and tested through our relationships with family. We are therefore instructed to strictly fulfill our familial obligations and are given much flexibility in how to do so, given cultural and other circumstances. The Qur'an and *Sunnah* provide Muslims with a roadmap for navigating these relationships, as with every aspect of our lives.

# Passing on Tradition in Islam

**Dr. Hussein Rashid**

**Introduction**

"There is no deity except God, Muhammad is the messenger of God; Ali, Commander of the Faithful, is the friend of God." This simple phrase, the declaration of faith, speaks to the three basic components of faith for Shia Muslims.[4] It addresses *tawhid*, the unicity[5] of God; *nabuwwah*, prophethood—specifically, that of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH); and *imamah*, the continuing guidance of the Prophet's family through the descendants of his daughter Fatimah (AS) and his son-in-law Ali (AS). These beliefs are transmitted through worship.

Although liturgical prayer is an important part of worship, worship is more than that one manifestation. Ali Shariati, in discussing the unicity of God, says that simple divisions violate our essential understanding of what *tawhid* means (Shariati, 82–83). Instead, when thinking of worship, we must think more broadly than liturgy. We must think of many different acts as worship. I propose looking at prayer, soundscapes, holy days, and service as everyday acts of faith that create a culture of *taqwa*, or God-consciousness. This culture of *taqwa* inculcates faithfulness in succeeding generations.

**Prayer**

Islam, a religion that is found in every country on earth and is practiced by 20 percent of the world's population, does not lend itself to a simple description of tradition. Every nation, city, town, village, clan, tribe, and family has its own traditions. At the same time, there are universal rituals that bring some cohesion to the worldwide Muslim community. While the so-called Five Pillars of Islam may offer convenient shorthand for universal rituals, the categorization is not universally applicable[6] and offers a reductionist view of what it means to be a believing Muslim.

Prayer, though it is one of the pillars, is much more than the formal *salaat* (also *namaz*, formal prayer). It happens in liturgical contexts but also outside those contexts. It is both structured and spontaneous. The spontaneity is part of an ingrained tradition. The tradition is so strong that one reflexively offers a prayer before a journey or an exam, or as a simple expression of thanks. It is the repeated performance of prayer that tells a story of belief. Prayer is witnessed by children and is an invitation to them to submit themselves to something greater. All structured prayer begins with the opening chapter of the Qur'an. It is the longest sustained prayer in the Qur'an:

> In the name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful (1)
> All praise is due the Lord of Creation (2)
> The Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful (3)
> The Lord of the Day of Judgment (4)
> You alone we worship and You alone we seek for help (5)
> Guide us to the Right Path (6)
> The Path of the blessed ones, not of the cursed ones, nor of the lost ones. (7) (adapted from Sells, 42)

This passage encapsulates the three basic parts of belief with which we began our discussion. In verse 5, the absolute authority of God as the purpose of worship is established. There is no one else to be worshiped and no need to turn to anyone besides God to seek assistance. It is for this reason that verse 2 tells us that all praise is due to God.

4 The author is a Nizari Ismaili Muslim; the views in this unit are those of his Shiite denomination.

5 "Unicity" is more appropriate than "unity" to describe *tawhid*, the oneness of God. Unicity implies something beyond human comprehension, without anthropomorphizing or humanizing God.

6 The rituals are part of Muslim traditions, but not all groups recognize only five pillars. According to some groups, ritual observance must be tied to specific beliefs; simply focusing on the rituals does not get into questions of belief.

Verse 6 is a supplication for guidance, which exists not only in the book of the Qur'an but in figures to whom God grants authority to guide. These figures are the prophets and the Imams. Although God has sole power, He grants the ability for these blessed individuals to act as intercessors. Several times throughout the Qur'an, Muhammad (PBUH) is given an explicit intercessory role (4:64, 48:10). The logic is that God has power over all things, including intercession (e.g., 39:44); He can grant that power to whomever He wishes (e.g., 34:44, 10:4, 2:255, 34:23, 19:87, 20:109); He has explicitly given that power (e.g., 42:5); and saying that God will take the power of intercession away implies that individuals have the ability to intercede (e.g., 2:48, 2:254). In acknowledging that verse 6 is about continual guidance, that part of the function of prophets and the Imams is clarified for the believer.

This opening chapter is a reaffirmation and re-inscription of belief; it is the most recited section of the Qur'an and opens all formal prayers. However, other beautiful prayers are also preserved in Muslim traditions; these prayers may not have the broad appeal of Qur'anic prayer but have profound meaning and resonance in certain Muslim communities. A powerful reflection on the meaning of prayer is offered by Imam Zayn al-Abidin (AS), great-grandson of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). In a selection from the reflection, he says:

> My God, were it not incumbent to accept Your command, I would declare You far too exalted for me to remember You, for I remember You in my measure, not in Your measure, and my scope can hardly reach the point where I may be a locus for calling You holy! Among Your greatest favors to us is the running of Your remembrance across our tongues and Your permission to us to supplicate You, declare You exalted, and call You holy! (Adapted from al-Abidin, 255)

In this passage, the Imam humbles himself before God's majesty and reminds us that we have to worship because God commands us to do so. However, we should feel trepidation in doing so because we cannot comprehend and appreciate God's majesty in any meaningful capacity. It is a warning not to reduce God to the level of the human. At the same time, we are blessed for that command because it is a blessing to remember God, and it is for our benefit, not God's.

***Discussion Questions:***

*How does the act of prayer reinforce key religious beliefs? How does it serve as a connector for community and family and from generation to generation?*

**Soundscapes**

As we look at these texts, we see them as words on a page. Most Muslims do not access them in this way; instead, they hear them. These texts are transmitted through sound. The Qur'an means "recitation." Worship permeates the lives of Muslims through the soundscapes, the aural creativity of humans that reflects what is important to them, which changes with time and place.

The Qur'an remains central in any discussion of soundscapes. When a child is born, a selection from the Qur'an may be recited in the baby's ear. However, Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, is the native language of only about 20 percent of the worldwide Muslim population. And Qur'anic Arabic is not the same as modern Arabic, so even that 20 percent of the population may not easily understand the Qur'an. Arabic is a familiar sound to Muslims, but it is the local sounds structured around the Arabic ones that offer affinity and transmission of religious sentiment.

***Discussion Question:***

*How do soundscapes factor into your personal religious beliefs or connections?*

To cover the breadth of Muslim soundscapes would be impossible, but to focus on something universal like the call to prayer limits the richness of what a Muslim soundscape can be. So I offer a focus on what is familiar to me. Born

and raised in New York, I am of South Asian descent, and my family was, for many generations, in East Africa, so many cultural languages and soundscapes are available to me. The art form of *qawwali* is a good example of what a soundscape means because it easily illustrates how time and place change manifestations but not meanings.

*Qawwali* is a form of devotional music that originated in South Asia in the fourteenth century. In the signature piece of the repertoire, an Arabic phrase—Prophet Muhammad's declaration of Imam Ali as his successor—is combined with local languages. The mention of the phrase elicits reflections on the Qur'an, which implicitly recognizes the declaration (5:3, 5:67). The combination of languages is characteristic of these Muslim soundscapes. In the case of *qawwali*, usually Arabic or Persian is mixed with Urdu, Panjabi, Sindhi, or other South Asian languages.

As *qawwali* moves around the world, it absorbs local characteristics, so that the *qawwali* of Fiji is audibly different from the *qawwali* of India. In the United States, British musician Peter Gabriel performed his hit song "In Your Eyes," with Nusrat Fateh Khan, considered one of the best living performers of *qawwali*, at the 1996 VH1 Music Awards. This performance reflected the continued vitality and transformation of the tradition. Khan also worked with American performer Eddie Vedder on the *Dead Man Walking* soundtrack. Whereas the Gabriel-Khan combination was in service to Gabriel's work, the Vedder-Khan work was more collaborative. One song they performed was "The Face of Love," which contains a reference to a saying of Prophet Muhammad that to look at the face of Imam Ali is an act of devotion (Shah-Kazemi, *Justice and Remembrance*, 19). *Qawwali* illustrates how a living art form reinforces belief. Incorporating core teachings, it makes them understandable to audiences in their time and place, and it is adaptable and can be reproduced. Muslims also adapt the tradition to suit their needs.

New forms of music combine with older traditions to create new sounds for new environments. Rap, rock, and electronica are only some of the genres now employed to reflect Muslim devotional aims. The soundscape of Muslim America inherently reflects the diversity of America and Muslims, creating a new vehicle for transmitting religious belief and piety.

***Discussion Question:***

*In Islam and Judaism, believers have blended modern music, local traditions, and traditional soundscapes. Discuss popular or common examples. Do you find that this blending adds new layers of meaning and means of transmitting religious belief, or does it detract from the traditional purpose or meaning of the prayer or religious message?*

**Holy Days**

Holy days, as opposed to holidays, are a break in the normal routine, when one can think about piety. Each of the numerous days of commemoration throughout the Muslim calendar is an opportunity to reflect on ethical teachings and the religion's moral history.

Ramadan is a month of holy days. Each day of fasting is supposed to bring a Muslim into a greater realization of the emphasis he places on the world and to create a closer relationship to God instead. During the month, Laylat ul-Qadr is a special night on which it is believed the revelation of the Qur'an began. Muslims will stay up all night on that evening, praying as Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) did. This action emphasizes the power of worship and the Qur'an as divine writ. The month ends with Eid ul-Fitr, the celebration of breaking the fast. The word *fitr* is also related to one's true nature. This evokes the idea that at the end of the month, Muslims have come closer to their true nature of remembering God more, and the world less.

Another well-known celebration is Eid ul-Adha, or the feast of the sacrifice. This event commemorates the commitment by Abraham to sacrifice Isma'il (AS).[7] It occurs at the end of the three-day Hajj ritual, in which pilgrims

7 In Muslim thought, Abraham takes his elder son, Isma'il (AS), for the sacrifice, not Isaac. See Qur'an 37:99–111 and commentaries.

adopt the personas of Abraham, Isma'il, and Hagar (AS). Each persona represents faith, conviction, and obedience to God, and the combination of figures shows that these traits cross gender, generational, and ethnic lines.

Two holy days revolve specifically around Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who is considered by Muslims to be a beautiful role model (33:21). The first is the celebration of his birthday, known as *mawlid* or *milad*, which is an opportunity for Muslims to honor their beloved prophet and reflect on his teachings. Another day is Shab-e Mir'aj, the night on which it is believed that Muhammad (PBUH) ascended to heaven to talk to God. In that meeting, it is believed that he met with the Abrahamic prophets who came before him. Not only does this event inscribe Muslims into a larger religious narrative; it is also a chance to think about how to achieve a comparable level of intimacy with God. It is a night of powerful spiritual engagement.

Yom-e Ali, a celebration of the birth of Imam Ali (AS), functions in similar ways to the *mawlid* or *milad*. In addition to the direct devotion of the Imams, for whom Ali (AS) serves as a metonym, it is an opportunity for Muslims to think about their relationship with Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Numerous traditions of the Prophet speak of the special relationship between the two men, including the famous "I [Muhammad] am the city of knowledge, and Ali is the gate; so whoever desires knowledge, let him enter the gate" (Shah-Kazemi, *Justice and Remembrance*, 11–35). The proximity to the Prophet (PBUH) is a way to achieve nearness to God, which happens through proximity to Ali (AS) and the Imams.

It is this break with normal routine in order to focus on particular aspects of the faith that allows us to pass on tradition. A ritualized concentration on the divine emphasizes the practice of faith. Holy days are that break in routine that allows us to engage with the sacred.

***Discussion Questions:***

*In what ways is the observance of holy days a method for transmitting or passing on tradition? How do you and your families use holy days to reconnect with and pass on tradition?*

**Service**

Each of these holy days, as an interruption of the expected, offers a chance for Muslims to think about the ethical and moral desires that they have and how to enact them in the world. It is a moment to step back from the world and reset one's attitude. It can potentially lead to action to change the world as well.

A story about Rabia al-Basri, an early Muslim mystic, illustrates the power of actions to change the world. One day, Rabia was walking through town with a bucket of water in one hand and a torch of fire in the other. People asked her what she was doing, and she replied that she wished to burn down the gates of heaven and put out the fires of hell. She did not want to worship God for the promise of heaven or the fear of hell but for the love of God alone (Smith, 123). This act is credited with starting a focus on love mysticism in Muslim traditions. Rabia's actions seem to be the implementation of a saying attributed to Imam Ali (AS):

> There is a group who worship God out of desire [for something not yet attained], and this is the worship of the merchants. And there is a group who worship God out of fear, and this is the worship of the slaves. And there is a group who worship God out of gratitude, and this is the worship of the free. (Shah-Kazemi, *Spiritual Quest*, 32)

Knowledge found in the Qur'an and the examples of the prophets and the Imams help a Muslim determine what actions to take. While Rabia offers an important example for the way words are turned into action, she is not necessarily representative of the actions that most Muslims take to transmit the moral and ethical teachings of Islam into the broader world.

Service is an easily accessible interaction with the world in which many Muslims take part. It is a manifestation of the ethos of Muslim traditions, starting with Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). In a folk tale, every day the Prophet (PBUH) would pass by a particular window, where a woman would throw garbage on him. This occurred regularly for a period of time, but one day it stopped. Curious, the Prophet (PBUH) found out that the woman was ill, so he nursed her back to health. Beautiful moral messages can be found in that story (Brown, 19).

We see institutions like the Aga Khan Development Network and Islamic Relief at the international level offering services to those in need. At the local level, we see groups like Inner-City Muslim Action Network and UMMA Community Clinic living this message. More important, all this happens because Muslims serve at the individual level. And service happens at the family level, the level of the prayer community, and the larger communities to which Muslims belong. As the ethics of the faith are lived, they are passed on to others.

***Discussion Questions:***

*What moral messages do you take from the story of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) nursing back to health the ill woman who threw garbage on him? How can you connect these messages to social action that you take or wish to take in the world?*

**Conclusion**

As a Muslim, I hold three beliefs strongly: the unicity of God; the fact that God sent us prophets, including Muhammad (PBUH), for guidance; and that guidance continues through the progeny of Muhammad (PBUH), the Imams. These beliefs are passed down in a variety of formal and informal ways. Worship, broadly defined, is the most obvious way. As part of liturgy, it ingrains these beliefs in a regular and structured way. Spontaneous worship is a sign of a deeply held faith that elicits devotion. In addition, reflection on prayer gives ethical meaning and guidance to one's life.

These prayers inform a soundscape for Muslims. Other elements include music, a popular way of expressing belief and teaching lessons, which is highly adaptive and makes the universality of Islam particular to each Muslim, so that he or she feels part of a grand tradition. Many elements make up a soundscape, including stories that are found in this unit. In telling them, they enter the soundscape of America. Like worship and active listening, holy days offer a break in the rhythm of the regular: a moment to experience something new, even in an old story. A reinforcement of ethical and moral living manifests in actions. By performing faith, others see what a Muslim believes, and it is transmitted to the next generation, as well to others who witness it.

Transmission of faith is never easy. Prayer alone is not sufficient. Rather, we need to look at the entire environment and realize that beliefs manifest themselves in many ways. We need to capture all the manifestations to make religion totally engaging for the next generations.

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# Passing on Tradition in Judaism

**Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin**

When Moses stood on the east side of the Jordan, looking over the Promised Land after forty years of leading the Hebrew people through their desert wanderings, he knew that he had an impossible task: to prepare his people for a certain future that he would not share, that he himself could not know, and that his people had never encountered before.

Yet it was up to him to ready them for the task and enable them to succeed and thrive. How does one lead in a terra incognita? How do you prepare for something that you have never seen before? Moses chose to do the only thing he could: remind the people of their past and urge them to keep the greater cause and the ultimate purpose constantly before them. Most of the Hebrew Bible's book of Deuteronomy is filled with just that. It is brimming with the stories and teachings, traditions, and language of the world of their ancestors. For Moses knew that the only way to steadily and safely navigate the challenges of the new is to remember, learn from, and adapt the lessons of the old.

Being a minority and maintaining one's traditions in the vast cultural sea of another is hard. It was hard 2,500 years ago, and it is hard today. Whether through war, opportunity, famine, or financial pressures, people have been leaving home and striving to preserve their cultural heritage in foreign environments for generations.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Share your or your family's story of how you came to be in America. How did life in your homeland compare with living in America? What difficulties did you or your family face in adjusting to life in America and maintaining your heritage in a new land?*

There are four fundamentals in seeking to preserve one's own and one's children's identity in a majority culture not of one's own: names, language, calendar, and food. All these, of course, are in the greater frame and rituals of constantly retelling one's sacred story and studying and teaching one's sacred texts. All these elements of culture are strengthened and more easily practiced by living near one's cultural fellows. But all also stand as strong expressions—and transmitters—of identity on their own.

**Names**

As geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (himself a minority within a culture of others) writes, "Naming is power—[it possesses] the creative power to call something into being, to render the invisible visible, to impart a certain character to things…. [Naming has the power] to create a seemingly coherent reality out of a congeries of disparate parts" (Tuan, 688). Although Tuan is speaking of naming places, the message is the same for naming people.

While Tuan focuses on the impact of naming on the one conferring the name, we can extend his insights to the one who is named. Life happens within the bounds of names. The mass of the universe is tamed—and, in a way, created—through the conferring of names. Names help us sort, categorize, assess, and manage the world around us:

> Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. (Gen. 2:19–20)

The first task that man was given was naming the world around him. So, too, our personal names—all of them—frame our lives. They constantly remind us who we are and where we came from. We say them throughout our lives, sign them, type them. They are us, even when we are not there. Choose a good name for a child, therefore, and tell him again and again the story of his name. It will be something that nestles so deeply inside him that he could no more escape it than he can change his image in the mirror.

Mordecai, of the Hebrew Bible's book of Esther, has a telling name. He is introduced to the world this way:

> There was a Jewish man who lived in the fortress city of Shushan whose name was Mordecai son of Yair son of Shimi son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin. Kish had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile … by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. (Esther 2:5–6)

Mordecai's name catalogs four Diaspora generations of his family heritage, including the origin of their exile. It is a case study in a strategy of balancing, and thriving in, dual cultures. The name begins with a label: this man is a Jew. Though he lives abroad—he is a foreigner in a country far from his native land and a member of a minority group lodged in the very center of another's homeland—his identity remains firm. He knows who he is, and whose he is. He is a Jew, the text proclaims, a member of the Jewish people. All else is commentary.

So the story of a strong, self-identifying Jew, defiant in the face of exile, has a protagonist with the name "Mordecai." Really? A name more redolent of a Persian god Marduk would be hard to find. What were his parents, or the storyteller, thinking? No doubt they were thinking what many immigrants today think: to get along, they must in some way go along. Tagging their Jewish son with a strong Persian name to enable him to thrive in the majority's world was acceptable as long as it was just part of his name and tied to a long trail of Hebrew names that trace the family's lineage back four generations to its proud patrimony in the Land of Israel. Mordecai's name, told in full, anchors him to his people, his tribe, and his homeland. His name carries the blessing and the burden of that chain. He knows that the chain did not come this far and endure this long in order to end with him.

Being a good Jew in exile also meant being a good neighbor, a good Persian, to the extent that his faith allows. In the story, his loyalty to the state, to the king, and to the reigning culture is demonstrated by his patriotism. He saved the monarch by revealing the plot that he heard royal officers hatching to overthrow the king. Persian was his language; the Persian king was his king; and he evidenced loyalty to his host nation. It was his nation, too. All the while, though, he was mindful of his identity. He acted as a Jew as well as a Persian. He knew that was how to secure his and his people's continued safety: by supporting a stable, liberal, and gracious government.

Esther, too, is a name that instructs and is borrowed from the world of the majority culture. But Esther has another name, a Hebrew name: Hadassah, meaning "myrtle," a plant that conjures up the fertility, climate, and sweet smells of the Land of Israel. But her Hebrew name is her private name, her home name, her hidden name, not the name she uses in public. Her name in public is Esther, clever because it is authentically Persian, evoking and celebrating the Persian goddess Ishtar as much as Mordecai celebrates the Persian god Marduk. On the other hand, it means "hiddenness" and thus hints at its own duplicity, how it hides Esther's essential identity, her Jewishness, the part that the majority culture can never fully know or understand. But that is fine for this stage of the story, when the job of the majority culture is simply to make room for the private presence of other cultures.

Today we need not be so circumspect in our names. The best part of America revels in bold proclamations of our culture through our names. Barack Hussein Obama is testimony to that. Indeed, hiding one's identity seems a bit un-American. We are proud of our immigration heritage, even if parts of our society struggle to embrace immigrants today.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Discuss your first and last names and their origins and, if you have children, the names that you chose for them. How do our names reflect, celebrate, or hide our religious or cultural heritage? What value does your name hold for you?*

**Language**

As names do for people, language does for culture. The more fluent one is in a language, the more deeply embedded one is in that culture. And while fluency is the best, it is not the only way to possess the power of a language. Even the knowledge of a few key words—father, mother, the days of the week, counting, values, feelings, and concepts not captured in the majority world's vocabulary—is enough to set apart the knower from the rest. Jews may not know the meaning of the Hebrew words they recite during religious services, but the words hold inherent value because of what the Hebrew language represents. It binds the speaker to a people, to age-old tradition, to a distinct belief and value system—to a heritage.

Language is more than a different way of labeling the world. It is a different way of knowing it, of signaling it, of responding to it. Language is a shibboleth (Judg. 12:5–6), a password signaling that one belongs to a certain group, a key that opens to concepts and values and ways of being just a bit different from others. It is a password that says of the user, "I am one of you."

The midrash (rabbinic explanation of or story about a biblical text) Leviticus Rabbah 32:5 reflects the importance of names and language:

> Rav Huna said in the name of Bar Kappara: The Israelites merited their redemption from Egypt for four reasons: they did not change their names, they did not forget their language, they did not speak ill of one another, and they did not engage in depravity.

Thus their redemption as a people was dependent in large part on their maintaining their shared heritage—their names and their language—as minorities in a foreign land.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Do you read, speak, or understand Hebrew or Arabic? What meaning does your "religious language" hold for you? How does language connect you to your heritage?*

**Calendar**

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, "This month is to be for you the beginning of months, the first month of your year" (Exod. 12:1–2). Even before the children of Israel left Egypt, God told them to create a new calendar. Naming, ordering, and controlling one's time is a symbol of a people's unity, autonomy, and self-determination. All those who count time the same way, who name days the same way, and who speak of and celebrate holidays the same way: they build for themselves a community across space and time.

When Jews wish one another a sweet new year during Rosh Hashanah in the fall, speak of liberation and the meaning of freedom at the Passover holiday in the spring, and ask one another for forgiveness during the month of Elul in late August for any wrongs they may have done throughout the year, they are acting and living in a different way of counting time, a Jewish time zone, as it were, simultaneous with the American standard time zone that they also occupy.

We are a highly mobile society, lured away from our families and religious networks by schools, jobs, and general exploration. Some of this thinning out can be transcended and offset by sharing the measurement and observance of time (especially when augmented by smartphones, Facetime, Skype, and the like).

Cultures create their own shared, unifying medium of time. This is of enormous value to those of us who have been scattered all over the place. For a Jewish woman to light Shabbat candles in her home, knowing that a progression of Jewish women all over the world are lighting Shabbat candles in theirs, all triggered by their sunset on that same day for the same reason, is to create a bond of action and identity. The women join this transcendent, unified community with a simple strike of a match.

The Jewish calendar is the primary connection to Judaism for some modern, secular Jews. They may attend synagogue services and partake in religious ritual only on the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur or at a Passover seder, but this insertion of collective "Jewish time" into their secular calendar connects them to their heritage and their people.

People breathe in sync with the calendars of their lives. Their energies and expectations, planning and behavior, moods and celebrations rise and fall as one on the matrix of their common calendar. When people of the same culture live in close proximity, their common calendar augments space. When people of the same culture live far apart, their common calendar transcends space.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Have you encountered difficulties reconciling religious time and American time, maintaining a religious calendar that does not conform to the dominant cultural calendar (e.g., when religious holidays fall on schooldays, or when one must pray during the workday)? How have you handled these challenges?*

**Food**

And then there is food. Food is perhaps the premier portable signifier and unifier of culture. It is a carrier of stories and memories, both familial and tribal. It collapses time, experience, and identity with one whiff, one bite, and sometimes even one glance. One man recounts when he was a patient in a hospital and was visited by a Jewish stranger who gave him a challah (the rich, doughy, braided bread eaten by Ashkenazi Jews on Shabbat). The hospital patient had not been actively engaged in his Jewish identity for decades, but the challah conjured up memories of his youth, his people, and his identity. It connected him, inside the thick and confining walls of the hospital, to the vibrant world of Jewish life outside. He vowed that when he recovered, he would adopt as his personal mitzvah the task of buying challot and distributing them every Friday to Jewish patients in the hospital he was then in. And so he did.

Food, both the permitted and the forbidden, incorporates elements of time, names, community, and language at special times—holidays, life-cycle events, celebrations—as well as everyday times. It reifies beliefs, stories, teachings, and memories, amid normal routines and functions, even on our most mundane days. We shop, cook, and eat, anyway. To do so in the gastronomic jargon of our culture offers an often delicious and comforting celebration of identity.

Foods allow us to mix and match our minority and majority cultures in a healthy, casual way that celebrates and manages our double identity. We can eat bagels and tofu for Sunday brunch, have challah and eggplant Parmesan for Shabbat dinner, and matza pizza on Passover. The ways we blend and unify the elements of our foods become surrogates, and models, for the ways we blend and unify the elements of our multicultural selves.

***Discussion Question:***

*How is the role of food different for us as minorities versus as the majority, or even as a small versus a large majority (i.e., for Jews and Muslims, the difference between abiding by the rules of kashrut or halal in New York versus in a small town in Iowa)?*

Other carriers of identity, of course, work their way deep into the soul: music, dance, clothing, rituals, prayers, chants, texts, art, books, and more. All play a role in preserving the unique cultural identity of minorities. We live in a world with a marketplace of ideas, cultures, ideologies, and commodities at our fingertips. We paradoxically cherish this vast richness of variety and culture at the same time that such variety is threatened with cultural flattening. Yet it is good not only for our tradition but also for the world for us to pursue, and embody, such a rich interplay of cultures. Just as the natural world demands, depends on, and creates diversity, so the human part of the natural world thrives in a celebration and interplay of diversity. Being true to our traditions and our people is one of the best ways that we can create a world that is truly "very good" (Gen. 1:31).

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# Intermarriage in Judaism

**Rabbi David M. Freidenreich**

## Intermarriage in the Bible and Jewish History

> Abraham was now old, advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things. And Abraham said to the senior servant of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, "Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, but will go to the land of my birth and get a wife for my son Isaac." (Gen. 24:1–5)
>
> When Esau was forty years old, he took to wife Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah…. Rebekah said to Isaac, "I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries a Hittite woman like these, from among the native women, what good will life be to me?" So Isaac sent for Jacob and blessed him. He instructed him, saying, "You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women. Up, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father, and take a wife there from among the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother." (Gen. 26:34–35, 27:46–28:2)

***Discussion Question:***

*Why is it so important to Abraham and Rebekah—and also to Hagar (Gen. 21:21)—that their sons marry someone from their own native region?*

Abraham, Hagar, and Rebekah lived *in* the Land of Canaan, but they did not regard themselves or their children as being *of* that land. It was vitally important to these parents that their sons marry people like themselves: members of Abraham's clan or, for Hagar, a fellow Egyptian. This desire to remain separate from the local population posed real challenges and hardships. Abraham's servant feared that no woman would agree to leave her home to marry Isaac. Abraham's grandson Jacob went abroad himself to find his wife; he never saw his mother again. After Jacob and his uncle/father-in-law, Laban, had a falling-out and severed ties, Jacob's children had no choice but to associate with locals, with traumatic consequences in the case of his daughter Dinah, who suffered rape (Genesis 34).

The desire to be in the land but not of it characterizes much of Jewish history. God enjoined the Israelites about to enter the Promised Land not to marry members of the Canaanite nations (Deut. 7:3). Jews who returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile went further, promising not to marry any locals (Ezra 10; Neh. 10:31). Biblical and postbiblical writers express concern that intermarriage threatens the purity of the Jewish people and that Gentiles will lead their Jewish partners into idolatry or immoral behavior.

As Jews settled throughout the Middle East, Europe, and North Africa, they rapidly adopted local cultures, languages, and habits. Even so, they retained a distinct identity in part through the practice of marrying fellow Jews. It helped that Christians and Muslims, to varying degrees, also saw the Jews as a separate community—in the land but not of it—and opposed intermarriage. Nevertheless, mixed marriages occurred in small numbers throughout the Middle Ages, more frequently in the Islamic world than in Christendom. Most of these marriages resulted in the Jewish partner converting to Christianity or Islam, or at least consenting to raise the children in the dominant religious tradition. Only rarely did the Gentile spouse become Jewish, despite Christian and Islamic laws forbidding such conversions. I am unaware of cases in the Middle Ages in which a Gentile spouse remained non-Jewish but consented to raising Jewish children.

**Intermarriage in America, Past and Present**

> In the past twenty years, there have been exactly two cases in which a local Jewish boy married a local Jewish girl. What has kept the Jewish population constant as families have moved away and older people have died is the fact that most young adults leave town for a more or less prolonged absence at some time or another during marriageable age, and a fairly large number return with their mates from afar…. Nearly every "old" Jewish family with children of marriageable age has been affected in one way or another by intermarriage. Although there is always much sadness on the part of the immediate family and much sympathetic clucking of tongues from friends, the announcement that a young man is about to marry or has already secretly married a *shiksa* hardly creates a sensation by now…. There is a certain restraint in the comment of Jewish families on the subject of intermarriage. "You can never tell when it will happen to you," they explain sadly, placing it in much the same category as cholera. (Shafter, 62–63, describing Jews in mid-twentieth-century Maine)

***Discussion Questions:***

*In what ways, and for what reasons, were the Jews of mid-twentieth-century Maine similar to the biblical figures Abraham, Rebekah, and Hagar? In what ways, and for what reasons, were their intermarriage-related experiences different? In what ways, and for what reasons, are the reactions to intermarriage described here similar to or different from your own?*

Jews came to the United States seeking opportunities that they lacked in the Old Country, especially the prospect of ensuring that their children would have a better life. For the most part, these Jews were proud of their identity and sought to transmit Jewishness to their children. Finding a Jewish spouse, however, was sometimes challenging. Many men who immigrated in the mid-nineteenth century went back to Europe to find a Jewish wife, often returning to the U.S. with several of her female friends and relatives as potential partners for Jewish friends who could not themselves afford to travel. The practice of importing brides declined as the American Jewish population grew, but most Jews from small communities, like the one in Maine that Toby Shafter describes, followed in the figurative footsteps of Abraham's servant and grandson: they left home to find a spouse. Unsurprisingly, some Jews (mostly men) chose instead to marry one of their Gentile neighbors.

The percentage of American Jews married to non-Jews increased rapidly in the last third of the twentieth century, creating consternation in the Jewish community. Indications of this impending shift, however, had been apparent earlier, as is evident in Shafter's 1949 comparison of intermarriage and cholera. Jews, after all, had long sought genuine acceptance in American society. Over the course of the twentieth century, Jews began to interact more frequently with non-Jews in social and residential as well as business settings. This tendency intensified as anti-Semitic discrimination subsided during and after World War II. Jews in an affluent 1950s suburb of Chicago, including many who were deeply committed to their Jewishness, told researchers that having a mostly Jewish circle of friends makes no difference in determining whether someone is a "good Jew." The most important criteria for being a good Jew, they said, were living an ethical life—in other words, being a good American—and being proud of one's Jewishness (Sklare, 321-332).

Old Country stereotypes about immoral Gentiles and concerns for the purity of the Jewish tribe— both encapsulated in the derogatory term "shiksa"—faded as American Jews increasingly spent time with American Gentiles, often regarded simply as fellow Americans. Christian stereotypes about Jews also faded as a result of these interactions, and the intermarriage taboo receded on both sides. The rise in Jewish-Gentile marriages, moreover, paralleled a rise in Catholic-Protestant unions and marriages of partners with different white ethnic backgrounds: Jews, attempting to express their self-identity as "good Americans," behaved in the same way as their Christian neighbors. Today, in the community that Shafter describes and in many others like it, nearly every Hebrew school child has a non-Jew-

ish parent. The fact that many non-Jews choose not only to marry Jews but to raise their children as Jews without themselves converting, a phenomenon without historical precedent, is eloquent testimony to the acceptance of Jews and Judaism in contemporary American culture.

What changed over the course of the twentieth century was not only the intermarriage rate but also, and more fundamentally, the conception of what it means to be Jewish in a majority-Gentile society. As American Jews, we generally regard ourselves as being not only *in* this land but *of* it as well. For over two thousand years, Jews perceived themselves to be set apart from their neighbors. The commitment to marrying a fellow Jew served as an especially powerful means of preserving this collective identity. But, as Jews have long said, "America is different." We feel thoroughly at home in the U.S., in part because integration into American society does not require the renunciation of our Jewishness. This integration expresses itself in many ways, mixed marriage being one of them.

American Jews can still choose to be in the land but not of it: the ultra-Orthodox are the most obvious—but not the only—example. The vast majority of American Jews, however, feel neither the need nor the desire to make the sacrifices associated with self-segregation, even if they may find the prospect of their children or grandchildren marrying non-Jews to be distasteful. Anecdotal evidence, moreover, suggests that communal attitudes toward intermarriage are becoming increasingly tolerant. What remains unchanged is the challenge posed by the very success of the Jewish community in achieving its American dream. How can Jews who are fully integrated into a non-Jewish society, among them those with Gentile family members, cultivate a strong sense of Jewishness for themselves and for future generations?

***Discussion Questions:***

*How would you answer the question above, either as a Jew regarding the Jewish community or as a Muslim regarding the Muslim community? What role should non-Jewish (or non-Muslim) partners play in the Jewish (or Muslim) community? How should the community engage these individuals?*

*For Jews: How, if at all, should Judaism or Jewish institutions change in response to the rise in intermarriage? Should the definition of who is a Jew, or a synagogue member, be revised? Major rabbinical schools in the U.S. refuse to admit intermarried students; should that change?*

*For Muslims: Which elements of this description of intermarriage in the American Jewish community resonate with your experiences in the American Muslim community? Which elements do not resonate? Why and why not?*

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# Intermarriage in Islam

**Professors Sami Shamma and Yahya Michot**

"A Jewish woman makes the best spouse." This saying is attributed to King Fuad II of Egypt, who, in 1976, married Dominique-France Picard—a Jew. Islam permits the intermarriage of Muslim men with the People of the Book (Jews and Christians). By examining the history and traditions associated with this practice, we will seek its wisdom. But first, we recall the three Islamic juridical rules relating to marriage in general and to intermarriage in particular.

First, Muslims (men and women) are not permitted to marry nonbelievers. The main source of this prohibition comes from this Qur'anic verse:

> Do not marry women who associate partners with God, until they believe. A believing bondwoman is better than a woman who associates partners with God, however pleasing she may appear to you. Nor give believing women in marriage to men who associate partners with God, till they have believed; a believing bondman is certainly better than a man who associates partners with God, even though he may please you.[8] (2:221)

A theological difference exists between the definition of a nonbeliever (*kafir*) and an associator (*mushrik*); but for our purposes, they are interchangeable.

Second, an exception is given to Muslim men to permit them to marry Christian and Jewish women:

> The chaste believing women and the chaste women of the people who were given the Book before you are lawful to you, provided that you give them their dowers and marry them, neither committing fornication nor taking them as mistresses. (5:5)

Finally, Muslim women are permitted to marry only Muslim men. This rule is also based on the Qur'anic verse 5:5 above. The exception given in this verse clearly permits Muslim men to marry females of the People of the Book. No such permission exists for Muslim women. All nouns in Arabic are either feminine or masculine; therefore it is very difficult to explain this verse as giving permission to Muslim women to marry men who are People of the Book.

The reason behind this last rule can be explained: believing in all the Prophets and revealed scriptures is essential to Islam. There is no question in a Muslim's mind about the divine origin of these other two religions. The reverse cannot be assumed, as Jews and Christians neither generally accept the prophethood of Muhammad (PBUH) nor believe that the Qur'an is a revealed scripture. Putting these facts into a marriage context, one can see how a Muslim husband is obliged to respect the faith of his Jewish or Christian wife and to maintain his wife's access to her places of worship and her scriptures. Conversely, a Jewish or a Christian man's religion does not oblige him to accept the validity of a Muslim wife's faith. This could be a source of great strife in the family. God enshrined in the Qur'an the importance of harmony in family life, and such strife would disturb this harmony.

***Discussion Questions:***

*What message does the reasoning above send about a man's role versus a woman's role in traditional Muslim marriages?*

*For Muslim readers: Does this reasoning still apply in the context of modern-day America, where gender roles are often different from what they were in the past?*

8 All translations in this unit are by Wahiduddin Khan, with some minor adjustments.

Examining verse 5:5 in isolation does an injustice to the understanding of these practices. To properly contextualize verse 5:5 and its importance, we need to begin at verses 5:3 and 5:4. We will consider two aspects of this analysis: first, the fact that these verses were among the last to be revealed and therefore they, like most final revelations, were intended to polish and refine Islamic law and ethics. Second, we will analyze the chronology of these three verses, 5:3–5:5.

Verse 5:3 reads in part: "Today I have completed your religion for you and completed My blessing upon you and chosen for you Islam as a religion." It is evident from the text above that the Lord brought the period of revelation to an end, and by doing so, He said what needed to be said on theological issues. In light of this verse, we see how God moved the discussion in the next two verses toward social harmony and coexistence between Muslims and the People of the Book. In answer to a question posed to the Prophet (PBUH), God declares: "If they ask you what has been made lawful for them, say, 'All good things have been made lawful for you'" (5:4). In this declaration, God frames the permissions that follow as good and lawful.

We read in the beginning of the next verse:

> Today, all good things have been made lawful to you. The food of the People of the Book is lawful to you, and your food is lawful to them. The chaste believing women and the chaste women of the people who were given the Book before you are lawful to you. (5:5)

It is noteworthy that in these verses, there is no different ruling for Christians and Jews; they are treated equally. The marriages between Muslim men and women of the People of the Book appeared from the earliest days of Islam.

The most famous case is the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself, who married Safiyya bint Huyaiy, a Jewish woman. It is also reported that the second rightly guided caliph, 'Umar b. al-Khattab—the caliph who took Jerusalem and put an end to the Christian ban on Jewish presence therein—had a Jewish wife. The sage Maimonides, in his edict, declared that if a Jew is forced to convert, he should convert to Islam. All this points to the closeness of Judaism and Islam. The Prophet (PBUH) also took a Christian wife named Mariya al-Qubtiyyah. Mixed marriages between the offspring of Isaac and Ishmael began with the dawn of Islam and have continued until our time. Such mixed unions nevertheless faced challenges that still exist today and are of two main types: scriptural and geopolitical.

***Discussion Question:***

*What issues do you think would be most significant in a Muslim-Jewish marriage?*

Scripturally, difficulties arise from a misinterpretation of the harsh language found in some places in the Qur'an, particularly regarding the children of Israel's early history and the relations of Arabia's Jews with the Prophet (PBUH). This harsh language should be understood as an admonition primarily directed at Muslims. Its purpose is to give a lesson, a warning of sorts, to the Muslims, by making them aware of the pitfalls that recipients of earlier scriptures had failed to avoid. Moreover, the Qur'anic authorization of mixed marriage between a Muslim and a Jew is not affected, and in the Qur'an, as in the Bible, the Jews remain God's chosen people: "Children of Israel, remember My blessing, which I have bestowed on you, and how I favored you above all other people" (2:47).

***Discussion Questions:***

*Is the interpretation above—that the Qur'an's harsh language with regard to the Jews is more of an admonition to Muslims than a directive regarding how Jews should be viewed or treated—surprising to you? How might this interpretation move Jewish-Muslim relations forward?*

In the case of the Christians, theological differences are mainly concentrated on the Trinity and the divine nature of Jesus. The Qur'an is critical of Christian claims that God fathered Christ and their declaration of the triune nature of God. The language is still harsh but not to the extent used with the Jews. Again, these verses are addressed to the Muslims, not the Christians.

In the early Islamic period, mutual agreements influenced the relationship between the Muslim and Jewish communities. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) signed with the Jews of Medina a city-state constitution, calling its Muslim and Jewish inhabitants "one nation apart from all others." This constitution guaranteed the mutual defense of the city by all its inhabitants and established that aggression against any side would prompt the support of the other. This period of cooperation deteriorated over time, ending with the expulsion of the Jews from Medina by the Prophet (PBUH) for violating the covenant between the two parties. Nevertheless, large Jewish communities lived for centuries in Muslim countries as protected minorities. Many of their daughters contracted happy marriages with Muslims.

In the later prophetic period, the Prophet (PBUH) signed a major and important covenant with the Christians of Najran.[9] This covenant enshrined guarantees and freedoms for Christian communities, granted by the Muslims. The covenant protected the religious freedom of Christians and banned Muslims from interfering in their religious affairs, as well as banned Muslim armies from entering their lands. It expanded these protections to Christians everywhere.

Today, Jewish-Muslim relations are often stretched thin because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a result, many Jews see enemies in Muslims, and vice versa; hence an animosity that may weigh heavily on Muslim-Jewish marriages. A stigma might even be attached to such unions; consequently, the marriage is kept secret from neighbors and friends. The children of such mixed couples seem to suffer the most from this geopolitical conflict. While they bear no responsibility for the conflict, their identity can be affected by it. This is especially true in a school setting: while most students identify with one religion, these children are unable, or unwilling, to disclose their mixed heritage. Furthermore, once they reveal their mixed heritage, they are often bombarded with questions regarding their position, or that of their parents, on the Palestinian-Israeli problem. Some may therefore decide to identify themselves with one religion and to hide the other—or, in some cases, completely deny their other heritage.

Christian-Muslim relations cover the spectrum from animosity and war to understanding and harmony. These relations have fluctuated throughout history. The highest tensions took place during the Crusades (which ended in 1199) and, most recently, in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. However, relations were good during the centuries when the Arabs ruled Spain, as well as in the early twentieth century, when Arab Muslims and Christians stood shoulder to shoulder resisting foreign occupation following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I.

Between husband and wife, some similarity of worldviews is essential. Between Muslims and Jews, such similarity exists in at least three aspects. First, Islamic and Jewish ideas of God are very close. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is One" (Deut. 6:4) is a pillar of the Jewish creed. For Muslims, the Qur'anic verse 112:1,"Say, 'He is God, the One'" also affirms the Oneness of God. Convergent understandings of the absolute being can contribute to the success of a Muslim-Jewish marriage.

Second, the dietary laws of the two religions have much in common. Although the laws of kashrut are stricter than the halal rules, they derive from similar basic principles. The prohibitions on eating the flesh of the swine and the methods of slaughter have a great deal in common. This situation surely makes the daily life of Muslim-Jewish couples easier.

9 Najran was a Christian town in northern Yemen at that time. The Martyrs of Najran are acknowledged in both Christianity and Islam.

A third aspect relates to family structure. Both religions traditionally have encouraged a predominantly patriarchal model and favor unions between people raised within similar social and cultural backgrounds.

Muslim-Christian marriages present their own unique challenges. They are by far the most common mixed marriages in Islam. Again, we recall that the Prophet (PBUH) took a Christian wife. This practice continued throughout the early centuries of Islam, especially in the Levant. Islam remained a minority religion in Muslim lands well into the third century of Hijrah (Muhammad's move from Mecca to Medina and the date that marks the start of the Muslim calendar). This and other factors contributed to the phenomenon of traveling Muslim men marrying indigenous Christian women.

Christian-Muslim marriages also differ in terms of social acceptability. In the early days of Islam, they were more common, simply based on population distribution and numbers. In modern history, the Arab Christians were not seen as the enemy despite the Christian European colonization of most Arab and Muslim lands. The Arab Christians and their Muslim counterparts fought side by side against these colonizers. Interestingly, the majority of Arab leaders during that period, especially in the Levant, were Christians.

Islam usually takes a strict and exclusive stance on theological issues; yet when it comes to marriage with non-Muslim female believers (Jews or Christians) it promotes an open and inclusive approach. This enables Muslims to hold firm to their theology and to simultaneously be good husbands to their Jewish and Christian wives. As for politics, the most difficult geopolitical problem in the world today is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; yet Muslim-Jewish marriages take place even in Israel, providing a glimmer of hope for a just and lasting peace.

For a happy marriage, what a Muslim husband and a Jewish or Christian spouse can share is indeed far more important than what might divide them.

***Discussion Question:***

*Why do you think that Islam, with its strict approach to theological issues, takes a more open stance when it comes to marriages between Muslims and Jews or Christians?*

*Section 3*

# RELIGIOUS LIFE

# Prayer in Islam

**Sohaib Sultan**

The Qur'an urges its followers toward the life of prayer. "Establish prayer" is a constant command throughout the Qur'an, and nearly every passage that describes righteous believers includes those who engage in prayer (e.g., 2:3). The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) spoke often of the importance of prayer and in his own life displayed the primacy of prayer. The Prophet (PBUH) referred to prayer as the "coolness of his eyes," the "key to paradise," and that act of devotion that distinguished believers from nonbelievers (Bukhari, *The Book of Prayer*). There are many descriptions of the Prophet (PBUH) praying while others slept, praying so long that his ankles would swell, and praying with such intensity that his beard would become wet with tears. As the Prophet (PBUH) was dying, it is said that one of his final pieces of advice to the community was, "Prayer, prayer, prayer" (Bukhari, *The Book of Prayer*).

For believing and practicing Muslims, prayer forms an essential part of daily life and provides a sense of being in the world. Muslims offer prayer in three primary and intertwined ways: *salaat* (ritual prayer); *dhikr* (making remembrance of God); and *du'a* (supplication). Each of these is explored below, along with other key elements of Muslim prayer.

**Introduction to *Salaat***

*Salaat* is a ritual with fixed, prescribed meditative postures, movements, and recitations from the Qur'an. This type of prayer is offered as a service of gratitude to God at five specific times throughout the day. Each prayer is performed with the presence of heart, mind, and body in the predawn morning, early afternoon, late afternoon, sunset evening, and nighttime. Muslims perform *salaat* according to the community's collective memory of how the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) offered his prayers. The description of the Prophet's *salaat* is known through hadith (written records) collected during the first centuries of Islam and transmitted by pious companions and family members of the Prophet (PBUH) through oral tradition.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Traditionally, Muslims pray five times a day, and Jews pray three times a day at specific times, with specific prayers and rituals. Why might this fixed practice be significant in prayer for Muslims and Jews? What purpose does this type of ritual prayer serve for you?*

In its essence, *salaat* is remarkably similar across the different schools of Islamic practice so that it is common for Muslims to pray with fellow Muslims without confusion or need for explanation. *Salaat* is considered a religious prescription for every post-pubescent Muslim, and its neglect is understood to incur sin.

The precise starting and ending of the time span for each of the five daily prayers is usually astronomically calculated and handed out every year in the form of an Islamic calendar. The times are also easily looked up on websites such as Islamicity.com or via mobile apps. Some Muslims are more nature-oriented and find it more precise, if not more spiritually fulfilling, to determine prayer times based on the position of the sun. In the Muslim world, knowing the time of prayer is easy—you just have to listen for the melodious call to prayer (*adhan*) that emanates from the loudspeaker of the mosques. Muslims in America rarely experience this sentimental call to prayer except when they are already in the mosque. As such, most Muslims have to be cognizant on their own of the times for prayer.

***Wudu***

When the time for *salaat* arrives, a Muslim will begin with an act of ritual purification known as *wudu*. There is an obvious outward aspect to the cleansing, but there is also a more subtle and equally, if not more, important inward

cleansing sought from this act. *Wudu* is a preparation for the prayer that is a type of meeting with God. Just as one would spiritually, mentally, and physically prepare to meet someone of stature, so the *wudu* serves that purpose for a Muslim's meeting with the Master of masters and King of kings.

The *wudu* begins with an intention in the heart to devote oneself to God, usually by simply saying "with the Name of God" or renewing the Islamic testimony of faith (*shahada*) that recognizes God's Oneness and the finality of the chain of God's Prophets in the Messenger Muhammad (PBUH). Using a small amount of flowing water, the *wudu* requires a very specific process for cleansing: washing the hands three times, beginning with the right hand; thoroughly rinsing the mouth three times; snuffing water up the nose three times; washing the face from forehead to chin three times; washing the arms from wrist to elbow three times; taking the wet hands over the head and around the back of the neck and into the ears; and, finally, washing the feet from toes to ankles three times, beginning with the right foot. Muslims learn *wudu* at a young age, and a convert practices it so often that it becomes second nature.

This ritual purification is part of the larger Islamic ethos of purifying the spiritual heart where human emotions reside from malevolent qualities such as excessive anger, greed, hatred, and envy. The washing ritual ends with a supplication (*du'a*): "O my Lord, make me from among those who are oft-returning to You, and make me among those who purify themselves" (al-Nawawi, *Book on Supplications*). In America, making *wudu* in a public washroom can feel awkward for many Muslims. Comedian Azhar Usman jokes, "What do you say when your boss at work finds you with your foot in the bathroom sink?"(Usman). As awkward or challenging as it might be, it is part of being a practicing Muslim in a non-Muslim society. Certain actions nullify a person's state of cleanliness after making *wudu*, such as relieving oneself or passing wind or the like. Flowing blood also nullifies the state of ritual purity; therefore, women are exempt from *salaat* altogether during menstruation.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Why might it be important to have a strict process for wudu? In what ways is wudu helpful, advantageous, or problematic for practicing Muslims?*

**Place and Direction of Prayer**

If a Muslim is not near a fixed place of Islamic prayer such as a mosque (known as *masjid*; literally, "place of prostration" in Arabic), determining a suitable space for prayer will probably be the next step. *Salaat* can be offered just about anywhere so long as the place of prostration is free of filth. Typically, Muslims will pray in their homes or in a quiet space at work or off to the side in a public park. Muslims have to be more creative if such spaces are not available, such as praying in a dressing room at the mall or behind a stairwell in a building.

When Muslims are together, if space and situation allows, they will usually pray together in congregation, even outside a mosque. Great emphasis is placed on praying with fellow Muslims in congregation, but the lone prayer of a Muslim is also acceptable and valid. Some Muslims try their best to find a place of residence or even work near a mosque so that their prayers are almost always performed in congregation and their communal life can center on the mosque. According to a 2011 Pew Research study, there were about 2,100 mosques in the United States. Many mosques in America serve not only as spaces for prayer but also as spaces for sacred learning, conferences, and festivities. As such, mosques are often referred to as Islamic centers.

***Discussion Questions:***

*In what ways does the location of prayer affect the experience of prayer?*

*Given what we have read about Muslim prayer above, why might praying in a congregation be preferable to praying alone?*

The next step for the Muslim engaging in *salaat* is to find, if it is not readily apparent in a fixed place of Islamic prayer, the direction of the holy city of Mecca, the location of the symbolic House of God (*ka'ba*). Muslim tradition holds that the Prophet Abraham and his son Prophet Ishmael were commanded to build this sanctuary for God's devotees and to enact certain sacred rites there, which are followed to this day during Muslim pilgrimages. The point of directing one's heart, mind, and body toward the *ka'ba* is to give all Muslims everywhere, irrespective of differences, a common focal point and to connect the believing community in every age to the monotheistic devotion and piety of Abraham and his family.

On a practical level, finding the direction of Mecca usually involves the use of a compass (there is even an app for it!) or a keen sense of direction. In America, most Muslims have determined that the shortest route to Mecca is northeast. Some Muslims, especially on the West Coast, insist that southeast is the direction of prayer for Muslims in America, based on a different method of determination.

**Formal *Salaat***

Once a Muslim has found his space and direction of prayer, the formal *salaat* begins with a believer standing in the upright position, making the intention to pray to, and for the pleasure of, God, and then lifting both outward-facing palms toward the ears with the invocation of *Allahu akhbar* ("God is greater"). Muslim sages who have reflected on the inward meaning of the prayer's motions have said that this act is like taking all the ungodly concerns, thoughts, and distractions that are constantly in front of you and placing them between your two palms and throwing them behind you with the spiritual reality that "God is greater" than any of those things. It is an act of inaugurating or announcing one's presence in the courtyard of the divine and entering into a meditative state where, ideally, all that matters is this encounter with God.

After this motion to begin the *salaat*, Muslim devotees remain standing while folding their hands together across the midsection of their body or leaving their hands at their sides. In this first meditative posture of standing, the opening chapter of the Qur'an is recited, aloud or quietly to oneself, or is carefully listened to as it is recited by the imam (prayer leader) if one is praying in congregation. The opening chapter is seven verses and reads like a special request to God.

> In the Name of God, the Gracious, the Giver of Grace!
> Praise belongs to God, Lord of the Worlds,
> The Gracious, the Giver of Grace,
> Master of the Day of Judgment.
> It is You we worship; it is You we ask for help.
> Guide us to the straight path:
> The path of those You have blessed, those who incur no anger and who have not
> gone astray. (1:1–7)

Another way that Muslims understand the recitation of this opening chapter is to see it as the beginning of a conversation with God. A hadith from the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) expresses this sentiment. The Prophet (PBUH) said that for each line that is recited, God has a reply to each individual engaging in the recitation. So, for example, when it is recited, "It is You we worship; it is You we ask for help," God replies, "This is between Me and My servant, and My servant shall have what he has asked for" (al-Nawawi, *Forty Hadith*). After a recitation of the opening chapter, devotees are free to read any passage from the Qur'an that they have memorized, whether it be long or short.

***Discussion Questions:***

*With so much of salaat requiring specific words and actions, what significance do you find in the fact that Muslims may recite any part of the Qur'an they choose at this point in salaat?*

*What are your thoughts regarding the hadith that God responds to each individual Muslim who begins the act of prayer?*

The meditative posture of standing upright is symbolic of other teachings as well. Standing is a preparation for what Muslims believe to be that coming day when every soul will be brought before God and made to reflect on the good and evil they committed in this world. Also, when standing, the mind is over the heart, which symbolizes how sometimes in the spiritual journey, reason and learning take precedence over inner feelings and emotions of the heart.

After completion of recitation from the Qur'an, the prayer moves into its next posture of a full bowing with hands placed on the knees. In this position, the devotee quietly chants, "Glory be to God, the glorious, the supreme," in Arabic three times or more. Bowing is a symbolic gesture for the awe and reverence that is due God and is a reminder that God's omnipresence requires living a life with that sense of reverence. In this meditative posture, the heart and mind are aligned, which symbolizes those times when reason and inner enlightenment are both needed. From the position of bowing, the devotee will return to the upright position.

The pinnacle of the prayer takes place in the third posture—the prostration, which involves every limb of the body as the devotee places forehead, nose, flat palms, knees, and feet on the ground and chants, once again, the phrase "Glory be to God, the glorious, the supreme" three times or more before sitting and then going back into a state of prostration. Prostrating symbolizes willfully surrendering to God's teachings in a spirit of humbleness. It resembles the state of the fetus in the mother's womb and, in many ways, is like returning to that original and pure state. The Prophet (PBUH) taught his followers that it is in this posture that God is closest to the servant. In this position, the heart now is above the mind and symbolizes how, at times in the spiritual journey, faith overwhelms the heart and takes precedence over what the mind cannot fully comprehend.

***Discussion Questions:***

*What additional meaning do you find in the positions of Muslim prayer (standing, bowing, prostrating)? What positions during prayer hold special meaning for you, and why?*

The second prostration concludes one cycle in the prayer. Each daily *salaat* has its own fixed number of cycles. In the middle and conclusion of the cycles, there is a sitting in which Muslims recall an intimate conversation between the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and God and the angels that were present during the Prophet's spiritual ascension into the heavens. It is also a time when the devotee renews the *shahada*, sends peace and blessings upon the family and followers of Abraham and Muhammad (PBUH), and a short prayer of forgiveness and well-being. The prayer concludes after the final sitting with a greeting of peace and God's grace to the right and to the left. This final act brings the devotee back into the "real world" and highlights the need to spread the peace attained through prayer to fellow devotees and neighbors, to the East and to the West.

This is a general description of the *salaat*. If it is prayed in congregation, a designated prayer leader will lead every motion, and the community will follow. The prayer leader stands in front while rows are formed behind. The rows must be straight, and the devotees must stand as close shoulder-to-shoulder as possible and should be in sync through every step of the prayer.

***Discussion Question:***

*What meaning do you find in standing shoulder-to-shoulder, as closely as possible, during prayer?*

**Gender Roles in Prayer**

When men and women pray together, traditionally a male will lead the prayer. This male may be a full-time prayer leader appointed by an institution such as a mosque, or he may be informally elected to lead based on his knowledge of the Qur'an, piety, or seniority. Women line up in rows, like men, but in their own distinct space, usually toward the rear of the space or in a balcony and sometimes, though rarely, on the same but distant side of men. The Prophet's original community prayed with no barrier separating the men's and women's spaces; soon after the Prophet's death, physical barriers were erected between male and female spaces in the mosque. In America, the space designated for women tends to be a subject of debate. Many Muslims have argued that the community should return to the Prophet's model of an open space in which all Muslims pray in the same area, with no physical barrier. Only time will tell which direction most mosques end up taking.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Why might the tradition of separating men's and women's spaces have come to be? What are your thoughts on this practice?*

When women are by themselves, they can pray in congregation with a designated or an elected prayer leader from among them, but leading the prayer from the middle of the first row rather than out front. A few Muslim progressive activists pushed the boundaries by insisting that Muslim women be equally capable of leading a mixed congregation of men and women in *salaat*. This has—so far, at least—not gained much popular traction. There are, however, calls for women scholars, teachers, and voices of religious authority to guide the affairs of the community. In reality, the prayer leader usually does not enjoy much religious authority unless he is also known to be a scholar or preacher.

***Jummah***

One *salaat* every week stands out from the rest: a prayer popularly referred to as *jummah* ("Friday" in Arabic), which refers to the communal prayer held in the early afternoon every Friday. This prayer takes place in community, with the number of people it takes to form a congregation for Friday prayer varying, according to different schools of Islamic practice: there should be a minimum of three, including the prayer leader.

A designated male gives a sermon (*khutbah*) followed by two cycles of prayer in congregation. The sermon is usually in a mixture of Arabic and the native language of the people. Some insist that the official sermon should be only in Arabic, so a sermon in the native language is given immediately preceding the official sermon. The content of the sermon, at least in America, is up to the preacher, as long as it urges Muslims toward God and godliness. Many types of sermons and topics are preached in different communities every week. Most communities have a group of preachers who rotate the responsibility of preaching, rather than having the same preacher every week. All adult men are obligated to attend the Friday prayers. Women are not obligated to attend, but most mosques in America have a fair number of women for the Friday prayer.

***DiscussionQuestions:***

*What advantages or disadvantages might there be in having a different preacher from week to week?*

*Why might attendance at Friday prayers be required of men but not of women?*

***Dhikr***

After Muslims have concluded the formal *salaat*, they will often engage in another form of prayer, *dhikr* (literally, "making remembrance" of God and invoking God for forgiveness and assistance). The most popular *dhikr*, taught by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to his daughter Fatima and the community at large, is to chant eleven, thirty-three, or ninety-nine times "Glory belongs to God, Praise belongs to God, Greatness belongs to God, Divinity belongs to God alone" (Bukhari, *The Book of Prayer*), usually in Arabic. Muslims are encouraged to engage in many such remembrances throughout the day. There is no fixed time or place for making *dhikr*. Most chants are found from phrases in the Qur'an, hadith, or litanies that pious men and women developed over the centuries and that were transmitted by their students to future generations. Reciting the Qur'an itself is considered one of the greatest forms of *dhikr*.

***Du'a***

After a *dhikr*, many Muslims will engage in another form of prayer, *du'a* (literally, "calling"; often translated as "supplication"), on God for the fulfillment of needs and hopes for this life and the afterlife. Some well-known *du'a* are found in the Qur'an, often in the voice of one of God's Prophets. For example, the *du'a* for safe traveling is found in the Qur'an through the voice of the Prophet Noah, who sets out on the ark, while the *du'a* for clarity in speech or articulation is found through the voice of the Prophet Moses when he is tasked with confronting the tyrannical Pharaoh and hesitates because of a knot in his tongue.

*Du'a*, which is supposed to be very personal, can be made in whatever language the devotee is most comfortable and can take any reverential form and content. *Du'a*, like *dhikr*, can be made at any time, in any place, and in any state of being. Usually, you will find Muslims lifting their palms together upward like beggars when making *du'a* and wiping their faces upon completion of their supplication.

*Salaat*, *dhikr*, and *du'a* are the three main ways in which Muslims engage in prayer. Through these forms, Muslims remind themselves of God's centrality in their lives. For the practicing Muslim, prayer is a core component of daily life. There are many shades of gray when it comes to Muslim attitudes toward prayer, but the philosophy and consciousness of prayer inherently guide the spiritual and ethical sensibilities of the Muslim community at large in America and beyond.

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# Prayer in Judaism

**Rabbi Amy Eilberg**

Lord, where shall I find You?
High and hidden is Your place.
And where shall I not find You?
The world is filled with Your Glory.

I have sought Your nearness,
With all my heart I have called You;
And going out to meet You,
I found You coming toward me. (Carmi, 338)

The human soul naturally reaches out to God. We yearn to find God in the world, to contemplate God's grandeur, and to gain understanding of the nature of the cosmos and our tiny place in it. We ache to make contact with the Creator of the world, to sense the divine presence around us and within us. At the same time, we may crave a sense of God as very near to us, loving us, present in our every breath.

The poem above gives voice to the soul's paradoxical need to revere God in all God's majesty and also to dare to trust that God is near us in times of need. In prayer, we give praise to the One who created us and sustains the world at every moment, we pour out our hearts for help in our everyday concerns, and we thank God for the infinite gifts we receive at every moment of life. We pause amid our days to remember our connection to the divine, to acknowledge who we are, and to give thanks.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word for prayer, *l'hitpalel*, is a reflexive verb form meaning "to judge" (Alcalay, 2050), that is, to reflect on oneself. While prayer is all about awareness of God, it is also reflexive, turning our attention inward, as we examine our lives against the background of our highest aspirations. As best we can, we seek to emulate God's own traits of compassion, kindness, generosity, and wisdom. We remind ourselves that we were created "in the image of God" (Gen. 1:24): we are called to make God's essence real in the world, fashioning lives of holiness in accordance with God's command (Lev. 20:26).

***Discussion Questions:***

*How does prayer help you judge or reflect on yourself? What are your thoughts on the purpose of prayer? Why do you pray?*

**Ritual Prayer**

> It is a positive mitzvah [commandment] to pray every day, as it is said, "Serve Adonai your God" (Exod. 23:25). Tradition teaches that "service" means prayer, as it is said, "to serve God with all your heart: (Deut. 11:13). The Sages said: "What is the service of the heart? It is prayer." (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Prayer 1:1)

In ancient times, when the Temple stood in Jerusalem, Jews worshiped God through an elaborate system of daily sacrifices of animals and grain upon the altar, accompanied by special prayers. When the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans, in 70 CE, the time-honored system for accessing the divine presence was lost. The rabbis determined that prayer would replace sacrifice as the daily expression of devotion. They taught that daily prayer was required for Jews, an expression of the Torah's command that we are to serve God with all our hearts.

***Discussion Question:***

*How are the purposes and acts of sacrifice and prayer similar or different?*

Since sacrifices had been offered each morning and afternoon, morning services (called *Shaharit*, from the word for "morning") and afternoon services (*Minhah*, from the word for "gift") were instituted, followed by the evening service (*Ma'ariv*, from the word for "evening"). The rabbis, closely studying the Torah's description of the lives of the Patriarchs, associated *Shaharit* with the life of Abraham, *Minhah* with Isaac's, and *Ma'ariv* with Jacob's. They also added the *Musaf* (additional) service on holidays, corresponding with special sacrifices that had been offered in the Temple on sacred days.

Each of these services gradually developed an elaborate liturgical structure, followed by most synagogue-going Jews to this day. The morning service begins with an extended section of prayers of thanksgiving for finding oneself alive again this morning—the most basic gift of God each day, for the workings of the body and the breath, and for the gift of being a Jew and being a free person. Then comes an extended period of recitation of biblical psalms, using ancient words to express awe and praise for God and to prepare the soul for the key prayers to come. Morning and evening prayers both center on the recitation of the *Shema*, a biblical verse: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One" (Deut. 6:4), followed by biblical verses indicating how to express love for God in our daily lives, and accompanied by reflections on the primary ways we can know God: as Creator, as Revealer of the sacred wisdom of the Torah and its system of divine commandments, and as God the Redeemer of the people of Israel in the past, present, and future.

Each of the three daily services proceeds with an extended offering of silent prayers, called the *Amidah*, or "Standing Prayer." On weekdays (i.e., other than Sabbath), the *Amidah* comprises nineteen liturgical blessings: three expressing praise of God's majesty, thirteen asking for the things we need as individuals and as a community, and three closing blessings of thanksgiving and prayers for peace. Over time, these prayers became formulated and canonized; the individual is invited to add personal words and intentions in connection with the theme of a particular prayer. On Sabbath and religious holidays, most petitionary prayers are omitted, as we focus on thanksgiving rather than on our quotidian needs.

The following excerpts reflect three key themes of Jewish prayer noted above—praise for God, petitionary prayers, and prayers of thanksgiving:

> Your might, O God, is boundless. You give life to the dead; great is Your saving power. You cause the wind to blow and the rain to fall. Your loving-kindness sustains the living, Your great mercies give life to the dead. You support the falling, heal the ailing, free the fettered. You keep Your faith with those who sleep in dust. Whose power can compare with Yours? You are the master of life and death and deliverance. Faithful are You in giving life to the dead. Praised are You, God, Master of life and death. (adapted from *Siddur Sim Shalom*, 107)
>
> Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned. Pardon us, our King, for we have transgressed. For You are merciful and forgiving. Praised are You, God, gracious and forgiving Lord. (adapted from *Siddur Sim Shalom*, 111)
>
> We give thanks to You that You are the All-Merciful, our God, God of our ancestors, today and always. A firm, enduring source of life, a shield to us in time of trial, You are ever there, from age to age. We acknowledge You, declare Your praise, and thank You for our lives entrusted to Your hand, our souls placed in Your care, for Your miracles that greet us every day, and for Your wonders and the good things that are with us every hour, morning, noon, and night. Good One, whose kindness never stops, Kind One, whose

loving acts have never failed—always have we placed our hope in You. (adapted from *Kol Haneshama Daily Prayerbook*, 120)

***Discussion Questions:***

*What religious impulses does each of the aforementioned prayers seek to affirm and cultivate? Which of these themes is most prominent in your own prayer life?*

**Praise of God throughout the Day**

The Jew's prayer life does not begin and end with the required three prayer services each day. Rabbi Meir, one of the great rabbis of the formative period of Judaism in the second century CE, taught that one should recite one hundred blessings every day. This number is meant to include the liturgical blessings in the daily services as well as a wide variety of blessings to be recited at large and small moments of the day, invoking God's presence and evoking gratitude for rare as well as apparently ordinary events. Specific blessings are recited before consuming various categories of foods and before performing ritual actions. There is a prayer before drinking a glass of water and after using the bathroom, a prayer for seeing a wonder of nature or reuniting with an old friend, a prayer for receiving good news and bad news, a prayer acknowledging miracles done in a particular place and one upon receiving news of a loved one's death, to name just a few. An extended prayer is recited after eating, thanking God for the gift of food and for the full range of God's mercies in our lives. The result is a day constantly punctuated by prayer, particularly expression of gratitude, and regular reminders of the divine presence. Thus the Jew is led to live in accordance with the biblical intentions "I place God before me always" (Ps. 16:8) and "I bless God at all times; praise of God is always on my lips" (Ps. 34:2).

***Discussion Questions:***

*How do you remind yourself to acknowledge God's gifts throughout the day? When are you most keenly aware of the miracles of daily life? What tends to take you away from this awareness?*

**Discipline and Devotion**

Judaism, like every religious tradition with prescribed prayers, must wrestle with the balance between the requirements for prayer—specific words to be recited at particular times throughout the day, the week, and the year—and the spontaneous prayer of the heart. On the one hand, having liturgical words and established times of prayer prompts the soul to step away from the demands of the everyday and turn to God. Reciting ancient words of one's own tradition provides language for the inexpressible and also connects one pray-er with pray-ers throughout the world and across time. On the other hand, set prayer can degenerate into rote recitation, what twentieth-century Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel called "religious behaviorism."

The rabbis of the Talmud identified these two contrasting dimensions of the prayer experience: *keva*, the fixed aspect of times and words of prayer; and *kavvanah*, the intention and outpouring of the heart. Heschel described these as dimensions of the life of prayer that are both indispensable and necessarily in tension, the kind of polarity of which rich and multifaceted religious life is made.

> We must neither disparage the body, nor sacrifice the spirit. The body is the discipline, the pattern, the law; the spirit is inner devotion, spontaneity, freedom. The body without the spirit is a corpse; the spirit without the body is a ghost. (Heschel, 341)

> The soul would remain silent if it were not for the summons and reminder of the law…. The Jewish way of life is to reiterate the ritual, to meet the spirit again and again, the spirit in oneself and the spirit that hovers over all beings…. The very act of going to the house of worship, every day or every seventh day, is a song

without words. When done in humility, in simplicity of heart, it is like a child who, eager to hear a song, spreads out the score before its mother. All the child can do is to open the book. (Heschel, 343–44)

***Discussion Question:***

*How do traditional words and times of prayer connect to the prayers of your heart and the unique rhythms of prayer in your life?*

**Communal Prayer**

While many prayers are inevitably offered in private moments, Jewish tradition has a distinct preference for communal prayer. The words of the prayers, even when recited alone, are predominantly phrased in the plural, even intensely personal confessional prayers. When I thank God, I express gratitude not only for gifts given to me and to my own family but for God's grace to all. When I confess transgression, I align myself with all Jews, each with particular vulnerabilities, but all of us wrestling with the same human frailties and failures. We pray as part of a worldwide and historical community even when we are alone in our own homes.

While most prayers can be recited alone when necessary, there is a sense that the communal prayer voice is stronger and more desirable to God. A few of the central prayers can be recited only in the presence of a minyan (quorum)—traditionally, ten men; but in non-Orthodox communities around the world, ten Jews of either gender. This preference for communal prayer brings people together throughout the day and week, building a sense of community and shared religious striving.

Throughout 2,500 years of postbiblical history, Jewish communities in different times and places have made their own unique contributions to the corpus of Jewish prayer. The siddur (literally, "ordering"; the Jewish prayer book) is an ever-growing anthology, regularly augmented by newly created poetry and interpretation, both in Hebrew (always and everywhere the traditional language of Jewish prayer) and in the vernacular spoken in various communities. Modest differences have developed in the wording and traditional chant of prayer in various regions of the world where Jews live. Still, a Jew traveling anywhere in the world can easily recognize and join in the shared corpus of prayer, even without understanding that community's vernacular language.

From the nineteenth century onward, more significant differences have emerged in prayer texts and practices, with the creation of the modern movements in Jewish religious life: Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reconstructionist, all of which have sought to address how Jews and Judaism were to adapt to a modern world in which Jews were, for the first time, welcome to participate as neighbors and equals.

To summarize a range of theological and communal differences briefly: Reform services tend to have more English (or other non-Hebrew language spoken in the community); while following the basic structure of Jewish prayer, these services generally include shortened versions of traditional prayers and more contemporary poetry and reflection on the same themes. Orthodox prayer is generally the most traditional, focused on classical Hebrew prayers, with relatively few additions or changes to the canonical prayer book. Conservative prayer is somewhere in-between, staying faithful to the body of traditional Jewish prayer while recognizing the need for prayers in the vernacular and contemporary readings and reflections that speak in an idiom that is spiritually resonant for contemporary Jews. Reconstructionist prayer includes richly poetic translations and readings, emphasizing non-anthropomorphic images of God.

**Jewish Prayer in Contemporary America**

Since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, the synagogue has been the most important institution of Jewish life. The synagogue has functioned as *beit knesset* (house of gathering), *beit midrash* (house of study),

and *beit tefilah* (house of prayer). All these functions take on particular importance in the life of the contemporary American Jewish community, vibrant but still keenly aware of its minority status in the United States. The American synagogue functions as the focal point of Jewish life (second only to the home), nurturing Jewish lives with regular experiences of study, prayer, and celebration, as well as offering support in times of illness and loss. It serves as a community center, in which Jewish life and community is not secondary or "other" but primary, multifaceted, and treasured. Relationships among community members are nurtured, and spiritual and personal needs are provided for.

In the twenty-first century, as great numbers of American Jews, particularly younger ones, question the value of institution-based Jewish life, synagogues (particularly the non-Orthodox) are challenged to innovate to appeal to the younger generation, without losing the authenticity and beauty of classical Jewish forms. Clergy are experimenting with creative forms of prayer, more engaging music, the introduction of forms of meditation, and other modalities to highlight the salience of traditional Jewish prayer for contemporary Jews. In some cities, new independent prayer communities have sprung up, replacing the elaborate communal structure of the synagogue with an organic, participatory, and non-hierarchical form of community that is sometimes more compelling to younger members of the community.

***Discussion Questions:***

*What functions does the house of worship play in your religious community? What role does it play in your life?*

*How does contemporary American culture challenge religious life for your community?*

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# Life-Cycle Events in Judaism

**Rabbi Ita Paskind**

Life-cycle events in the Jewish tradition are occasions for the community to gather, whether to celebrate or to comfort. One cannot live a Jewish life in a vacuum, and the presence of the community serves to enhance the milestone being celebrated or endured. One theme that runs throughout Jewish life-cycle events is equality in the human experience. We see this in the requirements for wedding rings as well as in the customs for preparing a body for burial. We may achieve different goals in life, but traditions remind us that we are all human at the end of the day; and there is great comfort in sharing that fact.

Another theme in many Jewish life-cycle rituals is the number seven, which recalls the six days of Creation and the seventh Sabbath day: seven wedding blessings, recited for seven days of celebration; seven days of mourning after a burial; and the many other sevens in Judaism, which all refer back to one another and recall God's involvement in our lives.

**Birth**

In the Jewish tradition, as in all traditions, the birth of baby is cause for great joy. Each new life is considered to possess infinite potential for good in the world, heretofore unmarred by sin. Every human being, according to the book of Genesis, is created in God's image and contains a spark of the divine that remains throughout the person's life. Additionally, the birth of a baby fulfills the first commandment to humanity: "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28), which the rabbis later defined as two children, one male and one female. Welcome ceremonies for Jewish babies involve two elements: a ritual to bring the child into the covenant between God and the Jewish people, and a prayer announcing the child's Hebrew name to the community. The celebration continues with a communal celebratory meal.

Welcoming Baby Boys: *Brit Milah* (Covenant of Circumcision)

Jewish baby boys join the ancient covenant first entered into by Abraham: the covenant of circumcision. This ceremony is the most explicitly defined life-cycle ritual in the Torah and one of the most adhered-to commandments. In Gen. 17:10–14, God commands Abraham to be circumcised, an act to be followed by his descendants:

> Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow, which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days. As for the home-born slave and the one bought from an outsider who is not of your offspring, they must be circumcised, homeborn and purchased alike. Thus shall My covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact. And if any male who is uncircumcised fails to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his kin; he has broken My covenant.

> Lev. 12:3 reiterates: "And on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." Jewish tradition holds fast to several ideas from these verses: that this physical mark is a sign of the covenant of the Jewish people; that, as long as the baby is healthy, the ceremony must take place on the eighth day of life; and that failure to circumcise a baby boy may have serious ramifications later in life (e.g., one who chooses to become circumcised as an adult will need to undergo a full surgical procedure). *Brit milah* is observed the world over in a uniform fashion.

Throughout American Jewish history, circumcision has been considered at times medically beneficial and at other times a neutral, or even detrimental, act. Jewish tradition never seeks to harm an individual, let alone an eight-day-

old baby boy, but the focus of a *brit milah* is on ritual and covenant, not on medicine. Jewish parents throughout history have found satisfaction in the knowledge that their sons are brought into the covenant exactly the way that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as every other Jewish male throughout history, have—and that they *look like* their fathers. This source of joy and pride provides a sense of belonging.

The ceremony can take place at the family's home or in a synagogue. It must be on the eighth day, even if that day falls on the Sabbath, as long as the baby is healthy and the family has access to a mohel, who performs the circumcision. If it must be postponed, it should be done as soon thereafter as possible—but not on the Sabbath or other holiday. The ceremony includes the circumcision itself, accompanied by blessings, passages of Torah about Abraham's circumcision, and the official granting of the baby's Hebrew name. As this is a ceremony of welcoming into the family and into tradition, it is customary for various family members to participate by holding the baby at different points in the ceremony, including during the actual circumcision.

Traditionally, the baby's father is obligated to perform the circumcision and, very rarely, a father does elect to make the cut (with the help of a professional). In most communities, the mohel leads the ceremony, often sharing the privilege of naming the baby with the family's rabbi. The baby's parents have the opportunity to share the meaning behind the name they chose for the baby, and all are invited to the celebratory meal.

Welcoming Baby Girls: Naming, *Simhat Bat* (Celebration of a Daughter)

The Torah does not specify a ritual ceremony for welcoming baby girls into the covenant of the Jewish people. For hundreds of years, the most traditional custom in Ashkenazi communities was for a girl to receive her Hebrew name during the reading of the Torah, often with only the baby's father present. This could be done as early as the first Monday, Thursday, or Sabbath morning (days when the Torah is read) and has no deadline. A special blessing of gratitude is recited for the healthy delivery of the baby and for the health of the mother. This style of welcoming a baby girl remains prevalent today in many Orthodox communities. In Sephardic communities, the long-standing custom is to name baby girls in the home within the first month of life, along with blessings of gratitude and for the health of the mother.

Today, many Jewish communities and families look for more creative ways to bring baby girls into the covenant, which parallel circumcision in message. A number of objects represent the covenant in welcome ceremonies for girls. In many communities, the Torah—the covenantal text between God and the Jewish people—symbolizes the covenant: parents are called to the Torah during a prayer service, and the baby is brought to the Torah for the first time, where she then receives her Hebrew name. In other communities, and more commonly in private ceremonies, a baby girl is wrapped in a tallit (traditional Jewish prayer shawl), which represents the totality of the commandments. By wrapping the baby in a tallit, parents express the desire for their daughter always to be enveloped by Jewish traditions. Other covenantal expressions include lighting candles, as the book of Proverbs teaches: "The *candle of God* is the *soul* of a *person*" (Prov. 20:27), and the pouring of water over hands and feet, as Jewish tradition likens Torah and its study to ever-flowing water.

***Discussion Questions:***

*What rituals did you participate in around the birth of your children, or of other children in your family? What special meaning do they hold for you?*

Naming Jewish Babies

Beginning with the first names ever given to a human being, Adam (meaning "from the earth") and Eve (meaning "mother of all life"), names have great significance. Interestingly, in the Bible, we learn by negative example that names are deeply connected to the character of an individual: "Please, my lord, pay no attention to that wretched

fellow Naval. *For he is just what his name says*: His name means 'boor' and he is a boor" (1 Sam. 25:25; italics added).

Jews have usually named baby boys and girls after beloved family members, especially when selecting Hebrew names (if there will be different English and Hebrew names)—but this practice takes different forms in Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities. In Sephardic communities, babies are often named for grandparents or other relatives who are still alive. This is considered a great honor for the namesake. In Ashkenazic communities, however, there is a great taboo against naming a baby after someone still alive. For babies who are named after relatives who are no longer alive, it is a tribute to that relative, a testament to the relationship between the relative and the baby's mother or father, and a wish for the child to embody the values and characteristics of the namesake.

In both communities in American Judaism, many parents have followed the trend of creativity when choosing baby names, but will often tie one of their child's names or at least the first letter of one of the names to a namesake.

***Discussion Questions:***

*What might be the reasons for naming a child to honor a relative who is alive versus to honor one who is deceased? Why might one be taboo in some cultures and traditional in others? If you have children, how did you choose their names?*

**Coming of Age: Bar/Bat Mitzvah**

The coming-of-age ceremony in Judaism takes place at age thirteen and is called bar mitzvah ("son of the Commandments") or bat mitzvah ("daughter of the Commandments").While this age is young compared with other modern American coming-of-age rites—driving, voting—this is around the age when children come into an awareness of their role in the larger society or community. While there is no biblical basis for this ceremony, it was clear throughout the rabbinic period (certainly by 220CE, when the earliest Jewish law code was redacted) that this is the age when one is permitted to, and becomes responsible for, observing the Commandments, including wearing a tallit, having one's presence count in a minyan (group of ten Jewish adults needed for public prayer), and fasting on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

Because there is no biblical basis for celebrating becoming bar/bat mitzvah, there has been great variation throughout Jewish history and among modern communities as to how it is celebrated. Not surprisingly, the bar mitzvah has existed for many generations longer than has the bat mitzvah. The first bat mitzvah was held on March 18, 1922, when the daughter of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan was called to recite the blessings over the Torah reading. For many years, a bat mitzvah was differentiated from a bar mitzvah by taking place on Friday night (as opposed to Saturday morning), and the training that girls received was not as thorough as boys' training. Today, the bat mitzvah is ubiquitous in all non-Orthodox and most Modern Orthodox communities. A bar mitzvah can take place as early as a boy's thirteenth Hebrew birthday; whether a girl celebrates becoming bat mitzvah in public or not, her status changes on her twelfth Hebrew birthday (or, in some egalitarian communities, on her thirteenth Hebrew birthday).

Traditionally, celebrating a bar/bat mitzvah involves, at the minimum, being called by one's Hebrew name to the Torah on a Sabbath morning, in the presence of the community, and reciting the blessings over a small section of the weekly reading—an honor reserved for adult Jews. In traditional communities, students also study the chanting of a Haftarah (weekly selection from one of the biblical Prophets) or the skill of chanting from the Torah itself. Various communities encourage and teach students to lead part of the Sabbath morning or Friday evening Sabbath service and teach the congregation a lesson from the weekly Torah reading. Reciting the blessings over the Torah reading is the minimum requirement and a cause for celebration, but each other element further demonstrates a bar/bat mitzvah student's skills that have been built over years of study as well as his or her commitment to Jewish tradition.

Today, not all Jews see the inherent value in celebrating a bar/bat mitzvah in the traditional way, especially if synagogue life has not been part of their personal observance. Various streams of Judaism and individual synagogues have taken different approaches to make this milestone as meaningful for the family as it is for the community. Most recently, some modern Reform communities have begun to provide alternative, non-ritual-based programs for preparing to celebrate this life-cycle event. Students select an area of study or social action on which to focus, and parents are more intimately involved with the content than they would be while their child studies synagogue skills. No matter what form the celebration takes, a celebratory meal accompanies the ceremony. Most places in the Jewish world have also adopted the culture of an elaborate party to accompany the celebration.

***Discussion Question:***

*In the modern era, when responsibilities and expectations for twelve- and thirteen-year-olds are different from in the past, what do you think about marking a child's entrance into adulthood at this age?*

**Marriage**

Judaism views marriage as a core value because it helps build community and promotes the fulfillment of the first commandment, to procreate. Indeed, the Bible quotes God lamenting that Adam had no partner: "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him'" (Gen. 2:18). In terms of ceremonies, however, where the Bible lacks, the rabbis create.

Betrothal and marriage came to constitute two distinct ceremonies. Until at least the early to mid-third century CE, these ceremonies could take place up to a year apart, with the woman remaining in her parents' home until the marriage was complete. Betrothal consisted of a gift from the man to the woman—a coin, an object worth the equivalent of a coin, or a marriage document detailing the partnership between the two individuals. Today, both ceremonies take place on the day of the wedding and are separated symbolically by a reading from the *ketubah*, the marriage document, now required for all Jewish weddings.

Jewish weddings are replete with symbolism, for sometimes the symbols and the rituals speak even more clearly than the words uttered at a wedding. Traditional Jewish couples consider their wedding day a once-in-a-lifetime mini–Day of Atonement—a day on which their sins are forgiven and on which they have extra strength to offer blessings to others—and so they fast until the wine that they are given to drink during the ceremony. Before the ceremony begins, the bride circles the groom seven times in a loving demonstration of bringing him to the center of her world. In many non-Orthodox weddings today, the groom will also participate in the circling, either by circling the bride or by walking in a circle with her.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Why is the day of marriage an appropriate time for the couple to experience a "mini–Day of Atonement"? If you are married, was this relevant to your wedding-day experience?*

*Non-Orthodox Jews have added to or changed traditional rituals to emphasize the equality of women (naming ceremonies, bat mitzvahs, wedding rituals, etc). What are your thoughts on this? Are there potential limits to such changes, or is it necessary to adapt to changing times?*

The couple stands during the ceremony beneath a wedding canopy that is covered on top and open on all four sides, symbolizing the open and welcoming home that the two will create together. The rabbi stands with them beneath the canopy, and they are often surrounded on each side by their parents and sometimes also by their siblings.

Many blessings are invoked during the two portions of the ceremony, including the blessing over wine, which accompanies all holidays and special occasions; the bride and groom each sip from the cup. During the betrothal portion, the groom gives the bride a ring—a solid metal band with no stones or other additions—symbolizing the unending and continuous love between them, and recites in Hebrew the simple yet powerful words "You are hereby betrothed to me with this ring according to the laws of Moses and Israel." In most non-Orthodox weddings, the bride gives the groom a similar ring and recites a statement of her commitment and love as well. The marriage portion of the ceremony consists of seven blessings. Recited over another glass of wine, these blessings not only rejoice in the union of the two individuals getting married but also place their union in the context of universal harmony and the overarching narrative of the Jewish people. When a Jewish couple joins together in love, the entire Jewish people look toward the future with hope.

Anyone who has attended a Jewish wedding or seen one on TV knows that it ends with the groom stomping on a glass. The symbolism is often lost, however. Shattering a glass is not a cause for joy. Before completing the marriage ceremony, all those in attendance take a moment to remember that not all is right in the world, just as not every moment of the new couple's life together will be flawless. Breaking the glass originally recalled the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (first in 586 BCE by the Babylonians and again in 70CE by the Romans) and our hope for its rebuilding. Today, it reminds us that we—the couple and everyone in attendance—are charged with repairing the damage we find in our world.

While our discussion focuses mainly on weddings between a bride and a groom, much innovation is taking place in modern non-Orthodox Judaism regarding wedding ceremonies for same-sex couples. Ceremonies range from simply changing genders in the language to match the partners, to creating new, more egalitarian, liturgy for same-sex couples.

**Divorce**

Jewish divorce receives a relatively great deal of attention in the Torah, where we learn that a proper Jewish divorce must be initiated by the man and written in a document called a *get*, which is then placed in the hands of the woman and accepted by her. Such attention leads to very strict rules, which are also enforced to protect the woman's right to be free of the man and to remarry. There was a great fear of creating an ambiguous or invalid status for the children that a woman might bear with another man if her first marriage was not properly dissolved. Early rabbinic law developed a particular formula for the wording of the *get*, which remains in force today. It is written by hand by one certified to do so and is delivered to the woman in the presence of two witnesses. A record of the delivery is kept on file, but the *get* itself is never reopened and the divorce never questioned.

The man-initiated system of Jewish divorce has created the problem of the "chained woman," who desperately wants a divorce but whose husband will not initiate it. Entire organizations are devoted to helping women in this position. The Conservative movement, the centrist stream of American Judaism, effectively annuls a marriage if a man refuses to give a woman a *get*, as her ability to remarry or simply to separate from him is of paramount importance.

***Discussion Question:***

*Do you think it appropriate to update the laws pertaining to divorce to make them more gender-balanced and give women more power over ending their marriages?*

**Death, Burial, and Mourning**

Judaism views death as a natural part of life. The body returns to the earth, bringing the cycle of life back to its beginning, when Adam was created from the earth. The soul is said to return to God, from where it came, as well as to live on figuratively in those who now mourn. The Torah records the death of most important figures but usually does not give details of their burial or the mourning process. Several overarching rabbinic values, however, bring together the many details of Jewish burial and mourning customs. Taken together, these customs are widely considered to be some of the best that Judaism has to offer, as they speak deeply to the psychological and emotional state of the mourners.

*"He shall not remain"*: Taken from a scenario in the Torah in which a person is punished by capital punishment, we learn that a quick burial is imperative for every Jew. Indeed, in Israel, burial often takes place on the same day as a death. Burial is postponed only in the case of family members who live farther away and thus need time to travel to the funeral.

*Respect for the deceased*: The body, which housed the soul, is treated with the utmost care and respect. In traditional communities, it is never left without a Jewish person's presence to keep watch and to recite Psalms. It is ritually washed and dressed in plain shrouds, according to ancient custom. Prayers asking for pardon from sin are recited during this ritual, and the body is placed in a plain pine box. Jewish tradition places much emphasis on equality in death—irrespective of the wealth one acquired in life, every Jew is dressed the same in death and placed in a simple casket. The body is buried in a Jewish cemetery with the feet pointed toward Jerusalem, the central point of holiness for all Jews. It is considered one of the greatest acts of kindness—a kindness that cannot be repaid—to participate in placing earth in the grave after the casket has been lowered.

***Discussion Question:***

*Why do you think that placing earth on a fresh grave is considered one of the greatest acts of kindness that a person can perform?*

*Comforting the mourners*: The conclusion of the funeral shifts the focus of those present to the immediate mourners—children, parents, spouse, and siblings of the deceased. For the next seven days, these mourners observe shiva, the seven-day period devoted exclusively to mourning through visits from friends and community members, remembering the loved one, and prayer services, during which mourners recite the Kaddish (memorial prayer). The period begins with a meal of comfort upon return from the cemetery, comprising round foods—hard-boiled eggs and lentils are common—to symbolize the circle of life and the possibility of healing. During shiva, mourners refrain from shaving, washing, wearing leather (a sign of celebration or wealth), greeting others, and sexual intimacy. Reciting the Mourner's Kaddish at synagogue services is the main observance that continues after shiva concludes: parents, spouses, and siblings recite Kaddish for thirty days; children of the deceased recite it for eleven months. The anniversary of death is observed each year by lighting a special twenty-four-hour candle and reciting the Mourner's Kaddish at the synagogue. Memorial prayers are also recited on major holidays along with all others who have lost loved ones.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Why do you think that children are required to recite Kaddish for their parents for so much longer than parents are required to recite Kaddish for their children? Does this seem surprising or appropriate?*

**Conclusion**

There is much to celebrate and commemorate throughout life. Jewish tradition has developed customs and rituals that have always drawn and will continue to draw on the emotions that individuals, families, and communities experience at these momentous occasions. In turn, much of what Jews feel at important times in their lives flows out of their connections to tradition and history—pride in circumcision, joy as a child reads from the Torah, comfort in the ritual of reciting memorial prayers. A religion thrives to the degree that it enriches and deepens the lives of its adherents. On this scale, Jewish life-cycle celebrations and rituals are deeply fulfilling.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Do you and your family have special traditions or rituals to celebrate these life-cycle events? Are there other life-cycle events that are important to you and your family? How do you celebrate or commemorate them?*

# Life-Cycle Events in Islam

**Sohaib Sultan**

The Qur'an calls upon its readers to reflect often on the great life-cycle events of birth (23:13–14), marriage (30:21), and death (2:180). Muslims take these events in their lives very seriously and treat them as sacred. These three life-cycle events merit special religious ceremonies to commemorate their importance in the life of a Muslim, and each is explored below. We will also devote attention to coming-of-age ceremonies and divorce, as both are cultural realities in American Muslim life today.

**Birth**

The birth of a child is a joyous occasion in the life of a Muslim. The birth of a child is described as one of the great signs of God in the Qur'an (39:6). The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) celebrated the birth of each of his six children as well as the birth of children in his community with joyous commemoration.

The Qur'an does not mention specific rites to commemorate the birth of a child, but commemorative practices are taken from the *Sunnah* (ways of the Prophet Muhammad, PBUH), recorded in hadith (written accounts of the Prophet's life). (See, e.g., the book on welcoming newborns in Muslim's collection of hadith.) Many of these rituals can be traced back to the cultural practices of pre-Islamic Arabs but were modified by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Muslim scholars sought to further trace some of these commemorative practices back to the Prophet Abraham; therefore, many of these practices are referred to as "pathways of Abraham."

When a child is born into a Muslim family, the first commemorative practice is for the father or closest Muslim male relative present to gently make the *adhan* (call to prayer) in the right ear and call to stand for prayer in the left ear of the child as soon as possible. These are ideally the first words that a child hears, and they symbolize the introduction of the child into the faith with the chant of the testimony of faith, praise of God, and urging to the life of prayer.

Names

The Prophet (PBUH) said that from among the rights that a child has over his or her parents is that they give the child a "goodly name" (from Bukhari, Social Etiquettes, Names). This has been interpreted in Muslim tradition to mean that a child's name should have a good meaning or be from an extraordinary role model; children should be proud of their names as they grow up. If it is a boy, many Muslim parents will choose to name him one of the well-known names of the Prophets who are mentioned in the Qur'an. Muhammad or one of its derivatives (such as Ahmad or Mehmet, as the Turks pronounce it) is the most common name in the world today. If the child is a girl, the names of famous women in the Qur'an (such as Maryam, after the mother of Jesus) or the close family members and companions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) are often chosen.

In America, parents are often concerned that their child's name will not be easily pronounced. As such, names are sometimes narrowed down to those that will be easily pronounced by non-Muslims. Meticulous concern is also often given to the proper transliteration of the name so that it is more easily pronounced.

Ceremonies of Blessing and Celebration

When a child was born in the Prophet's community, the parents would bring the child to the Prophet (PBUH) to offer blessings. He would rub date paste or honey on the child's gums, a continuation of a cultural practice from before the advent of Islam. Thus, some Muslims take their children when they are only a few days old to a pious member of the family or community to confer blessings and to rub a bit of date paste or honey on the child's gums.

The last major commemorative practice around the birth of a child is a communal celebration known as *aqeeqah*, on or around the seventh day after the child's birth. This is when family, friends, neighbors, and other members of the community are invited to rejoice and offer blessings, and specific rituals are performed. The *aqeeqah* ceremony involves shaving the child's hair, measuring the shaved hair in weight, and giving charity according to the measurement. Gifts or donations to a cause specified by the parents are usually part of the tradition as well.

Traditionally, a goat is sacrificed for the feast of the *aqeeqah*, as the Prophet (PBUH) insisted that a goat be sacrificed for the birth of a boy or girl. But perhaps to satisfy the patriarchal Arabs (whose tradition held that a goat be sacrificed only for the birth of a boy), he sacrificed two goats for the birth of a boy and one goat for the birth of a girl. The practice largely continues to this day. Generally, the Prophet's teachings urge parents to treat their male and female children equally.

***Discussion Questions:***

*How do these ceremonies and rituals around the birth of a child reflect Muslim values, traditions, and heritage more broadly? What do you think is the significance of the honey or date-paste ritual?*

Circumcision

In most schools of Islamic practice, the circumcision of a boy is recommended but not obligatory. However, the normative practice is to circumcise boys soon after birth, usually before the *aqeeqah*. There is no particular commemoration or celebration around the circumcision.

The circumcision of girls, which has often made news as a brutal practice, is not at all an Islamic commemorative practice. It is a cultural practice in some parts of the Muslim world that represents a continuation of a pre-Islamic cultural practice. (Existing cultural practices of a people are generally preserved and honored in Islamic law.) As the physical and psychological harm of female circumcision became known to Muslim scholars of later generations, a movement to strongly discourage or to prohibit female circumcision began and still continues.

In all these commemorative practices, many different cultural flavors determine exactly how these commemorations are celebrated. In America, young Muslim families will often adopt the cultural celebrations of their parents' homeland. Many Muslims in America are marrying other Muslims from different cultures, resulting in the mixing of cultural practices around the birth of a child. Muslim Americans are also trying to produce their own original cultural practices that may or may not last into the next generations—only time will tell.

***Discussion Questions:***

*How do the ceremonies around the birth of a child connect a child to his or her family, community, and heritage?*

*Have you created, taken part in, or witnessed any original cultural practices around the birth of a child that developed out of Muslim or Jewish tradition?*

**Coming-of-Age Ceremonies**

Culture also plays an important role as children get older and in so-called coming-of-age ceremonies. There are no traditional Islamic practices shared by all Muslims to mark the different stages of a child's life; however, some Muslim communities have their own coming-of-age rituals.

One commemoration, originating from South Asian Muslim cultural practices, is a ceremony for children when they are about four or five years old to mark the beginning of their learning how to recite the Qur'an in Arabic. This ceremony is known as *bismillah* (literally, "in the Name of God"), which is the first word of the Qur'an. This com-

memoration is usually celebrated with family and friends and involves the child uttering his or her first words from the Qur'an with the guidance of a teacher, followed by a feast. Several years later, after a child has completed the recitation of the Qur'an from beginning to end, another big celebration is thrown to honor the child's achievement in what is called *khatam* (literally, "completion").

In America today, Muslims from various cultural heritages have embraced this or similar practices to encourage the next generation to take the scripture seriously and continue transmitting the Qur'an in every age. Many communities have begun initiatives like Sunday schools or full-time Islamic schools, largely modeled on Catholic and Jewish schools in America.

***Discussion Questions:***

*What do you see as the benefits of having a religious coming-of-age ritual like the ones described above? Do you feel that such rituals are more necessary or important in our society than in the past, or less so?*

**Marriage**

Marriage in the Islamic tradition—as in most ancient traditions—is the joining of a man and a woman in a legal contract and spiritual covenant to live together as husband and wife and build a family. Marriage is strongly encouraged in the Qur'an and through the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The Qur'an does not offer marriage as a commandment but offers so much guidance on marriage that its importance is evident. The Prophet (PBUH), more directly, is recorded as having said that "marriage is half of faith" (*Mishkat*, Marriage) and that "marriage is from my way [*Sunnah*] and whoever abandons my way is not of me" (Bukhari, *Book of Marriage*), and much more.

<u>Courtship and Engagement</u>

Traditionally, Muslim marriages were arranged by parents and family elders with, at times, only symbolic approval sought from the marrying couple. However, things have changed and continue to change. Few religious injunctions specify what this stage of the process should look like except that the direct approval of both bride and groom must be formally acquired for a marriage to be acceptable under Islamic law.

Nowadays, it is common for young single Muslims in America to engage in courtship. I use the term "courtship" because dating is still largely viewed as taboo, since it assumes engagement in the type of premarital relations that would be morally unacceptable. This includes not only sex but even close physical contact or engaging in too much verbal intimacy. Courtship, on the other hand, is more about two people getting to know each other for the purpose of marriage. Often, young Muslims who are trying to live an Islamic moral life tread carefully and seek the practical advice of religious scholars or guides.

Many Muslims today, especially women, find themselves single well into their thirties and forties because the traditional semi-arranged setup did not work for them. Muslims are divorcing at growing rates as well, so more emphasis is placed on premarital education and counseling through mosques and other Muslim social organizations than there once was.

Once a courtship has reached a positive conclusion, there is usually an engagement ceremony for close family and friends, as well as the exchange of goodwill gifts between the families. Engagement ceremonies are much more cultural than religious. Engagement holds no official status as a relationship in Islamic law, so this period can be challenging in terms of what is and is not appropriate interaction between the engaged couple. Culturally, it is often assumed that a couple should not get married until there is some level of "stability," meaning that at least the husband-to-be has work and can support a family. Today, some young couples, despite resistance from their families, are happy to build their lives together from scratch and experience those years of poverty (or "instability") together.

The Wedding

There is a lot of cultural variance in how a Muslim wedding is celebrated. The colors, the clothing, the music—just about everything is culturally dependent. For example, South Asian weddings tend to unfold over the course of an entire week, with many celebrations leading to the actual wedding and a celebration the day after the wedding. Marriages between people of different cultural heritages in America can be interesting; sometimes, if there are too many cultural differences, the couple will throw two back-to-back celebrations, according to each respective cultural tradition.

Specific religious aspects of a wedding, however, are practiced universally. The religious wedding ceremony usually begins with an introduction from an imam-like figure. Then the wedding imam will offer a melodious recitation of God's praises, renewal of the testimony of faith, praise of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his followers, and one or more passages from the Qur'an that call on believers to have God-consciousness in all their affairs. There is usually a natural transition into the wedding sermon, which typically consists of short advice to the new couple, using supportive passages from the Qur'an and teachings of the Prophet (PBUH). Probably the most well-known wedding sermon passage from the Qur'an is:

> And among God's signs is this: He creates mates for you out of your own kind, so that you might find tranquility in them. And God engenders between you love and compassion. In this, behold, there are signs for people who think. (30:21)

After the sermon, the wedding imam will ask the couple to engage in what is known as "proposal and acceptance." This can be done in two ways, depending on the preference of the couple and their families. One way is to offer the proposal on behalf of the bride through her father (or closest present living Muslim male relative); the groom receives the proposal and issues his own proposal and acceptance of the bride's proposal.

The second way is to do the proposal and acceptance directly between bride and groom. The words exchanged, in their most basic form, read something like: "I, _____, marry myself to you, _____, according to the Book of God [the Qur'an] and the way of God's Prophet [*Sunnah*] with the mutually agreed-upon bridal gift [*mahr*]. Those present bear witness to this, and God is the best of witnesses." A couple may choose to add other vows between themselves.

The bridal gift is a goodwill gesture from the groom to the bride to express his seriousness and maturity in supporting her. At least two Muslim witnesses must be present at the wedding. After the verbal exchange, the bride and groom officially become husband and wife. Usually, the wedding imam leads the gathering in religious chants of congratulations and a prayer to mark the end of the religious part of the ceremony. There may be slight variations in the Muslim wedding ceremony, based on the couple's or imam's school of Islamic practice.

After the wedding ceremony comes the challenge of living together as a married couple. The Muslim community in America (and elsewhere) is struggling to offer young couples the guidance and support they need to survive and thrive, in large part through marriage workshops and seminars. Updating traditional marriage books and sacred legal opinions in which scholars give marriage instruction and advice based on completely different cultural assumptions is challenging. This larger and much more difficult project of rethinking and renewing Islamic family law is a subject of contention—and one in which the community is making only slow progress.

***Discussion Questions:***

*What part of the Muslim or Jewish wedding and marriage ritual is most meaningful or resonant for you?*

*Have you experienced or witnessed ways in which American culture has affected religious practices in marriage?*

**Divorce**

When Muslim marriages fail, divorce is an option. The Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) offer instruction about divorce, but there are serious differences of opinion about the process among the various schools of Islamic law. The Qur'an seems to urge a slow and cautious process over the course of a few months, beginning with mediation, and ending, if all fails, in a final irrevocable divorce. However, the divorce process was quickened with a husband being allowed to divorce his wife with three pronouncements of divorce in just one sitting. This has led to men often holding the upper hand in the matter of divorce. A female-initiated divorce exists as well, which requires a woman to go to a religious judge with her complaints against her husband; the religious judge may nullify the marriage.

All these procedures are complicated for Muslims in America because they do not have Islamic courts or judges to arbitrate these issues. Muslim couples will usually consult with a Muslim scholar or their local imam, but nothing is legally binding about Islamic resolutions in the American courts if the couple continues to disagree on terms. Thus, many Muslims go through the American legal system to process their divorces.

**Death and Funeral Rites**

The Qur'an devotes many passages to asking its readers to ponder their death and the short span of life. The life of this world is seen in the Islamic tradition as important but ultimately only a temporary abode in the soul's journey, which began before coming into the world and continues into the afterlife. Wise Muslim sages have pointed out that at birth, there is a call to prayer but no prayer; and at a funeral, there is prayer but no call to prayer. The reason is that the first call to prayer (at birth) suffices for the prayer that is made at the funeral, given how short and transient life is. This attitude toward death may help explain why the commemorative practices around death and funerals are quick and simple.

When Muslims are on their deathbed, they are encouraged to repeat (frequently, to the degree that they are capable) the *shahada*, the testimony of faith. This is seen as helping the soul transition peacefully into the afterlife and to return to God with full conviction. Any Muslim present at the time of someone's death is also encouraged to continually chant the *shahada* and recite passages from the Qur'an to help give tranquility and ease to the departing soul. There are no final rites or anything similar in the Islamic tradition, nor is there an expectation that a religious figure should be present. Greater emphasis is placed on having family and loved ones present and offering special prayers. Chapter 36 of the Qur'an is marked for recitation during such occasions, as its verses deal with death and the afterlife.

***Discussion Question:***

*Why do you think that it is more important to have family and loved ones present rather than a religious figure or leader at the time of death?*

When individuals die, it is seen as their right that their body is taken care of by the Muslim community if family is not present or is unable to do so. Most established Muslim communities have a group of people trained in taking care of the body of the deceased. This involves thoroughly washing every part of the deceased's body, applying scented oils on the body, and then covering it in two long pieces of white cloth for men (one for the upper body; one for the lower body) or one long unstitched cloth for the entire body for women. Then the body is placed in a coffin and laid before a community that has gathered to offer funeral prayers.

Attending the funeral prayer is among the most virtuous deeds; therefore, Muslims tend to come out for funeral prayers even if they didn't know the deceased. When the coffin is laid before the community, they join ranks and offer a special prayer together in which they ask God to forgive the departed soul and grant it the best of places in paradise. It is also a time for mourners, in their grieving, to gather with the community for comfort.

Finally, the body is taken to the burial grounds and laid to rest in the earth. Prayers are made at the burial grounds, but there is not as much of a tradition of funeral sermons except for perhaps brief words from a close family member or friend. Everyone present is encouraged to help fill the grave with soil to participate in the farewell. People are encouraged to leave the burial place slowly and not all at once, as the soul of the deceased becomes anxious upon hearing the departure of loved ones.

For Muslims, it is imperative that they bury their dead as quickly as possible, in twenty-four hours or less, if possible. The idea is that the body should return to the earth from where it came as soon as the soul has departed. In America, this is not always easy because of many regulations. Muslims often try to plan ahead by purchasing their burial plot in a Muslim cemetery so that the process can take place as quickly as possible.

Families and friends engage in about three days of official mourning, in which people come to visit and offer condolences. There is usually a recitation of the entire Qur'an—in portions, by family and friends—in honor of the deceased and in the hope that the divine reward for the recitation will go to the departed soul. Once again, a variety of cultural practices are taken from many ancient traditions. Whatever the particular traditions, death brings family and friends closer together and, in a time of sadness, gives a loving community to those close to the deceased.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Why do you think that attending a funeral prayer is seen as one of the most virtuous deeds that a Muslim can perform?*

*In what ways do the Muslim rituals around death and burial honor the deceased? In what ways do they provide comfort to loved ones?*

Life-cycle events in the Islamic tradition are as much about respecting God as they are about respecting community and relationships. With each life cycle comes an opportunity to bring community into the lives of individuals and to recognize oneself as part of a greater whole.

# Holidays in Islam

**Sohaib Sultan**

The two major Islamic holidays celebrated in the Muslim community, irrespective of differences in schools of thought, are Eid ul-Fitr (Festival of Breaking Fast) and Eid ul-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice). Interestingly, neither holiday is specifically mentioned in the Qur'an, but both are well-known traditions dating back to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his early community through authenticated transmissions (*mutawattir hadith*). These two holidays are preceded by two significant pillars of Islam: the month of fasting in the Islamic month of Ramadan precedes Eid ul-Fitr; and the major pilgrimage to Mecca, known as the Hajj, precedes Eid ul-Adha.

**Ramadan**

Ramadan is the ninth month in the Islamic lunar calendar and is the most blessed month in the calendar for Muslims. The Qur'an states:

> It was in the month of Ramadan that the Qur'an was revealed as guidance for mankind, clear messages giving guidance and distinguishing between right and wrong. So any one of you who is present in that month should fast, and anyone of you who is ill or on a journey should make up for the lost days by fasting on other days later. God wants ease for you, not hardship. God wants you to complete the prescribed period and to glorify Him for having guided you, so that you may be thankful. (2:185)

Ramadan is a celebration of the Qur'an and its guidance. The core spiritual discipline of the month is fasting from eating, drinking, and sexual release during daylight hours, from dawn to dusk. Restraint from the most basic desires is meant to instill spiritual and moral restraint from the larger and, at times, even more difficult temptations of life, from anger and greed to backbiting and injuring. Fasting is about struggling against one's base desires and evil inclinations to achieve a higher spiritual station and character. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) indicated this higher level of fasting when he said, "Whoever does not give up false speech and evil actions, God is not in need of his leaving behind food and drink" (Sahih al-Bukhari, 1903:6057).

***Discussion Questions:***

*How do you interpret the broader message of the month of Ramadan and the fasting associated with it? How is this message meaningful for you?*

Since Islamic months run according to the lunar calendar, the month of Ramadan begins with the sighting of the new moon. This is not as straightforward as it may seem. Tradition-bound Muslims insist that the new moon be witnessed by at least one or more reliable members of the community, just as it has been done for centuries. Other Muslims are more comfortable relying on modern technology and astronomical calculations to predetermine the beginning and end of lunar months. Yet other Muslims insist that there should be one global sighting of the moon in the holiest of holy cities—Mecca—that Muslims worldwide should follow. So every year, different factions argue about when Ramadan begins and ends, and often a two- or three-day span of possibilities results from these differences. In America, many Muslims will follow whatever their local mosque has decided. Mosques usually decide based on a pre-established criterion set by the board or some other governing body.

Muslims are strongly encouraged to wake up in the predawn and have a light meal (known as *suhoor*) before the fast begins each day. In Muslim societies, the call to prayer (*adhan*) for the dawn prayer inaugurates the day's fast. In America, most Muslims will carefully watch their clocks or set their alarms to know when to stop eating. What Muslims eat for *suhoor* depends on their cultural background; some will eat eggs and toast, while others will eat a more ethnic dish typical of a morning meal. They are encouraged to eat lightly (for spiritual and physical reasons).

Usually, *suhoor* is eaten with family at home. Some mosques host *suhoor* every morning or on weekends or during the last ten nights of Ramadan so that people can eat with minimal disruption to their worship.

Similarly, the *adhan* for the evening prayer (*maghrib*) indicates the time to break the fast, known as *Iftar*. The initial *Iftar* is usually very light; the tradition, traced back to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), is to break the fast with a few dates and some milk. After breaking the fast, the *maghrib* prayer is completed, and then a more substantial *Iftar* meal is eaten. Again, what Muslims will eat for *Iftar* is culturally determined.

*Iftar* is often an opportunity for family and friends to gather and eat together. People usually issue *Iftar* invitations well in advance. Mosques, too, often host *Iftar*. In America, *Iftar* presents a special opportunity to invite non-Muslim friends, neighbors, colleagues, and community members to a Muslim home or an Islamic center. Whether Muslims break the fast at home with family or in community, *Iftar* tends to be festive: much good food, laughter, and sharing. Recently, non-Muslims have hosted *Iftar* dinners in places as diverse as The Jewish Theological Seminary or the White House.

At the same time, many devout Muslims often rush to finish the *Iftar* and conclude the gathering so that they can begin—usually at the mosque—a night of devotion, which commences with the night prayer, followed by longer communal prayers (known as *taraweeh*) that stretch into the night for an hour or two. These prayers are optional, but even less devout Muslims often see them as an opportunity to make up for what was missed in the rest of the year. The *taraweeh* prayers usually involve reciting a portion of the Qur'an each night, so that the entire Qur'an is recited by the imam and heard by the congregation over the course of Ramadan. The imam is usually someone who has memorized the entire Qur'an (known as a *hafiz*, or preserver of the Qur'an) and who has a melodious voice. In America, because of a dearth of such specialized imams, many mosques import someone from the Muslim world for a month, just to lead *taraweeh*.

***Discussion Questions:***

*How is it more difficult to uphold the traditions of Ramadan in American society versus in a predominantly Muslim society?*

*What is the significance of having memorized the entire Qur'an?*

**Laylat ul-Qadr**

The last ten nights of Ramadan are even more blessed than the rest of the month. On these nights, Muslims anticipate what the Qur'an eloquently describes as the Laylat ul-Qadr, the Night of Glory:

> We sent it [the Qur'an] down on the Night of Glory. What will explain to you what the Night of Glory is? The Night of Glory is better than a thousand months; on that night, the angels and the Spirit [the Angel Gabriel] descend again and again with their Lord's permission on every matter. Peace it is until the rising of dawn. (97:1–5).

Muslims believe that every act of worship and good deed done on this night is multiplied in blessings as if it were done continuously for a thousand months. It is a night on which pardonable sins are erased and we aspire to new beginnings. It is also a night that is spent asking God for blessings and relief from distress in the coming year and beyond. The Night of Glory is alternatively translated as the "Night of Decree" or "Night of Destiny." It is perceived as a night in which a person's destiny or decree is revisited.

For all the importance of this night, there is uncertainty about which night it falls on, other than that it falls on one of the last ten nights of Ramadan. Some narrations from the Prophet (PBUH) indicate that it could be any of these

nights; others seem to indicate the twenty-seventh night, according to Sunni chains of hadith transmission; and the twenty-third night, according to Shia chains. The safest route, many Muslims assume, is to spend all ten nights in the hopes of receiving Laylat ul-Qadr. During these nights, mosques often overflow with worshipers.

One devotional practice during Laylat ul-Qadr has its roots in the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH): one goes into a state of seclusion (known as *itikaf*) during the last ten nights or a portion thereof. In this state, one spends almost all waking hours in prayer and meditation, usually in a mosque. Some mosques only accommodate men for *itikaf*; many women who perform *itikaf* will do so in a secluded part of their own home, as was the practice of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Some Muslims in America save up their vacation days to ensure that they can partake in this special devotion.

***Discussion Questions:***

*How are the alternate meanings of qadr—"glory," "decree," and "destiny"—all relevant and tied together in Laylat ul-Qadr? Why is* itikaf *a particularly appropriate practice during Laylat ul-Qadr?*

**Eid ul-Fitr**

The end of Ramadan is marked with the same controversy over exactly when it occurs, due to conflicting opinions over the timing of the new moon. When it is finally announced, there is both joy and some sadness: joy over the completion of the blessed month of Ramadan and the beginning of a three-day festival known as Eid ul-Fitr; and sadness because Ramadan is a special month, spiritually and communally, and its end can feel like bidding farewell to a good friend.

Eid ul-Fitr celebration usually begins by waking up early in the morning, taking a shower, putting on one's best scents and clothing, and eating a light breakfast with some sweets. Then there is a communal gathering (usually two or three hours after the dawn prayer) for special Eid prayers and a sermon. The tradition, weather permitting, is for this gathering to be held outside rather than in an enclosed space. All, including women, are strongly encouraged to attend. It is both a spiritual gathering and a show of the community's strength in numbers.

After the sermon concludes, people get up and hug one another (usually three times—right, left, right) with greetings of *Eid Mubarak* ("Blessed Festival") or *Eid Sayeed* ("Happy Festival"). The rest of the day is often spent visiting family and friends, eating a bit at each destination. There is not a prominent culture of adults exchanging gifts, but children expect gifts or money from adults. Eid is celebrated as a holiday for three days.

In America, celebrating Eid takes special effort, so for many Muslim families, it occurs with little fanfare. But many others go out of their way to make it as special as possible.

***Discussion Questions:***

*For Muslims: To what extent do you celebrate Eid?*

*How do the traditions of Eid ul-Fitr differ from those of other Muslim holidays? Why do you think that this is?*

**Hajj**

The second major celebration in the Islamic calendar comes almost two months after Ramadan. This celebration is preceded by the fifth pillar of Islam: the pilgrimage to the sacred precincts of Mecca, known as the Hajj. The Hajj is a physical and spiritual journey that every able-bodied and financially able Muslim is required to make at least once. The Hajj is a commemoration of the ancient footsteps of Abraham, his wife Hagar, and his son Ishmael (AS), who are remembered in the Islamic tradition as pure monotheists and sincere devotees of God. It is believed in the

Islamic tradition that when Abraham took Hagar and Ishmael to the barren deserted land to fulfill God's command, the destination was Mecca. The rituals of the Hajj largely retrace these steps.

Before descending to the site of the Hajj, Muslim pilgrims change into the simplest of garments (known as *ihram*) to express their humility before God and to remind them of their primary identity as servants of God. Once people are in a state of *ihram*, they are expected to be on their best behavior and to show as much patience and gratitude as possible (2:197).

Before the Hajj actually begins, the pilgrims first visit the *ka'ba*, which the Qur'an says Abraham and Ishmael built together for the purpose of worshiping one God:

> We made the House a resort and a sanctuary for people, saying, "Take the spot where Abraham stood as your place of prayer." We commanded Abraham and Ishmael: "Purify My House for those who walk round it, those who stay there, and those who bow and prostrate themselves in worship." (2:125)

The pilgrims walk around the *ka'ba* seven times as they chant:

> I respond to Your call, O God I respond to Your call. I respond to Your call, You have no partner. I respond to Your call. Indeed, the praise and grace are yours as well as sovereignty. You have no partner. (Sahih al-Bukhari, *The Book of Hajj*)

After this rite, pilgrims commemorate the footsteps of Lady Hagar, Abraham's second wife (AS). The ritual takes place between two mountains: Safa and Marwa. It is believed that it was here that Hagar found herself alone with her young child after Abraham had abandoned them by God's command. As Abraham was leaving, Hagar cried out and asked why he was doing so, but Abraham had no response. Finally, Hagar asked if this was the will of God. When Abraham said that it indeed was, Hagar found strength and declared that God would not abandon them. She then began running between the two mountains searching for sustenance and help, all the while remaining steadfast in her faith.

After running back and forth seven times (seven is not taken literally but rather as an expression of many times), an angel of hope spoke to her, calming her fears. Then a miraculous spring of water emerged from the earth, giving life not only to her and her child but to an entire community. She taught the people of that community about Abraham's monotheism and prepared the way for Abraham and Ishmael to build the *ka'ba* years later. (This is a summary of the story of Hagar, as found in hadith traditions collected by Muslim, narrated by Ibn Abbas.) Hagar's story inspires faith, striving, and trusting God. When pilgrims arrive at this site, they walk and run between Safa and Marwa, in the footsteps of Hagar.

Now the pilgrims are ready for the rites of the Hajj. On the first day of the Hajj, they travel from Mecca to a small village east of the city, known as Mina, where they spend the day and night outside in tents, devoting themselves to worship and preparing for the next day.

Many Muslims who are unable to go to the Hajj in a given year will still try to feel part of the commemoration taking place thousands of miles away, by fasting and committing themselves to extra devotions to mark these holy days.

***Discussion Questions:***

*What is the significance of retracing the steps of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael? Why is the Hajj a pillar of Islam?*

Day of Arafat

On the second day of the Hajj, pilgrims leave Mina to visit the Plain of Arafat, where they spend the entire day standing or sitting as they ask God for forgiveness and blessings. It is, in some ways, a preparation for the final day of gathering, when all will be brought before God to answer for the lives that they led, according to Islamic beliefs. This second day is known as the peak of the Hajj experience for most pilgrims. Those who do not go on the Hajj are especially encouraged to fast on this day, in solidarity with the pilgrims. After dusk, the pilgrims slowly leave Arafat and make their way to an open plain area known as Muzdalifah, where they spend the night, praying and resting, as well as collecting small pebbles for the next day's ritual.

Stones and Sacrifice

On the third day of the Hajj, the pilgrims return to Mina, where they encounter three symbolic pillars that represent the temptations of Satan. This ritual takes pilgrims back to one of the most eventful moments in Abraham's story. According to the Qur'an, when Abraham's son is of age (the name of the son is not mentioned, but most modern commentators say that it was Ishmael), Abraham sees in a dream that God has commanded him to sacrifice his son. Abraham is stunned and consults with his son, knowing that his son, too, is a righteous Prophet of God. Abraham's son gives his father moral resolve and tells him to do as God has commanded, and that he will bear it patiently. Abraham is preparing to sacrifice his son when Satan appears three times and tries to dissuade him. Each time, Abraham picks up dust and pebbles from the earth and casts it toward Satan. Just as he is about to offer the sacrifice, God calls out and says to Abraham that it was only a test. The boy's life is spared, and God commands Abraham to sacrifice an animal instead and to give its meat to the poor (37:100–111).

Many commentaries and lessons are to be drawn from this story. A dominant interpretation is that God wanted to test Abraham's faith through this very difficult trial but also wanted to teach Abraham that human sacrifice was not the way of monotheism. So pilgrims cast small pebbles at three symbolic pillars that represent Satan, remembering the story of Abraham as they also attempt to cast away their own devils. Then pilgrims sacrifice (or pay someone to sacrifice) an animal—usually a sheep or a goat prepared for the occasion—to show their willingness to sacrifice for God.

***Discussion Questions:***

*What is your interpretation of the sacrifice of Ishmael (or, in Judaism, Isaac)? What do you learn from or find most significant in this story?*

**Eid ul-Adha**

When the pilgrims in Mecca complete the core part of the pilgrimage and sacrifice their animals and the men shave their heads, Muslims worldwide join them by celebrating Eid ul-Adha, the Festival of Sacrifice.

Muslims begin the day early in the morning by taking a shower, applying scents, and dressing in their best clothing. Then they go to the Eid prayers and sermon—which emphasizes the story of Abraham and sacrifice. Afterward, many men will go to a halal slaughterhouse to purchase a goat or sheep to be sacrificed. The meat is apportioned into three parts—one-third for the household and family; one-third for neighbors and friends; and one-third for the poor and needy. Muslims are encouraged to deliver the meat to the poor themselves and to spend time with them. Alternatively, many Muslims pay for a sacrifice to be done on their behalf somewhere in the world where there is poverty, usually through an Islamic relief agency.

The celebration of Eid ul-Adha continues for three more days, with traditional visits to the homes of family and friends. Throughout these three days, after each of the five daily prayers, Muslims chant the pilgrim's "I respond to Your call, O God."

***Discussion Question:***

*If any Muslims present have taken part in the Hajj, could you share your experiences?*

Islamic holiday observances all reflect a deep respect for God and an opportunity to recommit to that virtue of brotherhood that is formed in community. Holiday rituals tend to be simple, but profound in their meaning and symbolism. Every rite carries larger meanings for the life of a faithful Muslim.

# Holidays in Judaism

**Rabbi Rachel Kahn-Troster**

If Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, is the Jewish anchor to the week, the Jewish holidays create an order to the year. Commemorating sacred moments in time and God's blessings as manifested in the world, the holidays are an occasion for Jews to gather as families and communities to celebrate. The holidays serve as a link to the stories and rituals of the Jewish past, while creating theological reminders of the Jewish people's relationship with God for the present generation. On a more personal level, the holidays are an opportunity to tell family stories, share recipes passed along for generations, and create new traditions.

Traditional observance of Jewish holidays shares many characteristics with keeping Shabbat. The Torah refers to each of these days as a holy event and instructs the Israelites not to perform any work on the holiday. As with Shabbat, the Jewish holidays begin an hour before sundown and last until darkness (when stars may be seen in the sky) on the day they end. Many observant Jews refrain from using electricity and driving on these days. Candles are lit before sundown, and meals include the blessings over wine and challah (traditional bread eaten on Shabbat and holy days), except on Yom Kippur, which is a fast day. Today, most Jews outside Israel celebrate holidays for two days, while Jews in Israel celebrate all but Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish new year) for one day.

***Discussion Questions:***

*In what other ways is the Sabbath like religious holidays? Why do all the holidays have a common core of observance?*

**The Season of Repentance**

The Jewish year begins with the High Holidays, the Yamim Noraim ("Days of Awe"). Unlike the secular New Year, with its emphasis on resolutions for personal improvement, the High Holidays are a moment of reckoning between individuals and God. The Hebrew word for repentance, *teshuvah*, means "returning," showing an awareness that before one can truly begin a new year as a fresh start and receive forgiveness from God, one must return to places where one has wronged others and ask for forgiveness. Likewise, people will undertake a personal accounting, to see where they have room for improvement. Jews begin preparing for the High Holidays a month in advance, at the beginning of the Jewish month of Elul. The shofar (ram's horn) is sounded each day as a wakeup call that the season of repentance is at hand.

**Rosh Hashanah: The New Year**

> In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts. (Lev. 23:24)
>
> You God, recall all that is forgotten, and will open the book of remembrance, which speaks for itself, for our own hands have signed the page…. The great shofar will be sounded and the still small voice will be heard…. All that live on earth will pass before You like a flock of sheep. On Rosh Hashanah, it is written and on the fast of the Day of Atonement, it is sealed. (Rosh Hashanah liturgy, *U'netanehtokef*)

Rosh Hashanah ("head of the year") is the Jewish New Year. Lasting two days at the beginning of the Hebrew month of Tishrei (usually in early to mid-September), it includes two days of festive meals at home and long services in the synagogue. The liturgy reflects the spiritual preparation for the Day of Judgment at Yom Kippur, with each person's year reviewed by God and written into the Book of Life. Themes include God's rule of the world, God remembering us and hearing our prayers, and the sounding of the shofar (see below). Prayers call on God to be merciful in judgment. Readings from the Torah and the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible reflect these themes of remembrance and the value of prayer, with God taking note of those in need (remembering Hagar and Ishmael

in the wilderness, rescuing Isaac from sacrifice by Abraham, hearing the prayer of Hannah for children, and hearing the weeping of the matriarch Rachel for her children in the writings of Jeremiah).

One of the most well-known Rosh Hashanah synagogue rituals is the sounding of the shofar, a hollowed-out ram's horn that makes a trumpet-like sound when blown. There is a theological link between the horn and the ram that was sacrificed by Abraham in place of Isaac on Mount Moriah (the story is the Torah reading on the second day of the holiday). The shofar has come to symbolize both the need to awaken our senses for repentance and the herald of God's sovereignty re-enthroned for the new year.

***Discussion Question:***

*In what ways besides the ram's horn might the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac connect to the themes of Rosh Hashanah?*

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, Jews perform *tashlikh* (literally, "you will throw"), casting bread crumbs into a river to symbolize ridding oneself of sins and misdeeds and beginning the year afresh. Despite the solemnity of the occasion, it is also a time of celebration, a moment of hope for a sweet new year. Jews dip apples into honey during meals at home, symbolizing the desire for a good, sweet year ahead. Sephardic Jews will also celebrate a Rosh Hashanah seder (ritual meal) with symbolic foods. It is traditional to eat round, instead of braided, challah, in honor of the circle of time or God's crown as ruler.

***Discussion Question:***

*Does your family have any new year rituals—religious or secular—that embody the themes of repentance and renewal?*

**Yom Kippur: The Day of Atonement**

> God spoke to Moses, saying: Mark, the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be a sacred occasion for you: you shall practice self-denial, and you shall bring a gift to God; you shall do no work throughout that day. For it is a Day of Atonement, on which expiation is made on your behalf before Adonai your God. (Lev. 23:26–28)
>
> God merciful and compassionate, patient, abounding in love and faithfulness, assuring love for thousands of generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, and granting pardon. Forgive our transgressions and our sins; claim us for Your own. Forgive us, our creator, for we have sinned. (Thirteen Attributes of God, Yom Kippur liturgy, adapted from Exod. 34:5–7)
>
> *Aveinu malkeinu* (our parent, our sovereign), have mercy on us, answer us, for our deeds are insufficient; deal with us charitably and lovingly, and redeem us. (*Aveinu malkeinu* prayer, Yom Kippur liturgy)

Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the Jewish year, the day on which we stand in judgment before God for our actions of the past year. Building on the biblical idea that one should afflict our souls on this day, Jews fast (refraining from all food and drink for the entire night and day), refrain from sexual activity and bathing, avoid wearing leather and jewelry, and focus attention on spiritual rather than physical needs. Because of its sacredness, Yom Kippur is the only fast day on the Jewish calendar that can override Shabbat.

If on Rosh Hashanah, one's individual fate is written into the Book of Life, on Yom Kippur the decree is finalized for the year ahead. Only prayer, acts of charity, and repentance are seen as having the ability to mitigate God's decree. The congregation stands and recites confessional prayers, with many people beating a fist on their chest in penitence. The confessional prayers are all written in the plural because we take collective responsibility for all our misdeeds.

The symbolism of having a chance each year to start afresh, both in one's community and internally, is powerful. We are given the opportunity to heal wounds with loved ones and challenge ourselves to be the best versions of ourselves. Yom Kippur begins with the Kol Nidre prayer, which releases Jews from all unfulfilled vows. In Jewish tradition, a vow made in God's name must be completed or sin incurred. Kol Nidre's haunting melody begins a day of atoning, contemplation, and prayer.

In biblical times, the high point of Yom Kippur was an elaborate Temple ritual in which the high priest would perform animal sacrifices and atone for the entire nation. With prayer having replaced sacrifice, these rituals are read about in the service rather than performed. The Yom Kippur liturgy also contains a martyrology, commemorating those who died because of their faith, and a remembrance service for family members who are dead.

***Discussion Questions:***

*How do you feel about taking collective responsibility for sins that you did not commit, as in Yom Kippur's confessional prayers? How might this be viewed differently in ancient times versus today?*

*How does animal sacrifice, martyrology, and remembrance of loved ones connect to the themes of Yom Kippur?*

**Sukkot**

> On the fifteenth day of this seventh month, there shall be the Feast of Booths to God [to last] seven days…. On the first day, you shall take the product of hadar trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before Adonai your God seven days. You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I Adonai your God. (Lev. 23:33, 40–43)

Of the three pilgrimage holidays in the Jewish year, Sukkot is the most unabashedly agricultural, celebrating the end of the harvest and God's blessing of sustenance. The Torah teaches that we should live in booths for the holiday, called "sukkot" (sing., sukkah) to remember the dwellings that the Israelites lived in during their forty years in the wilderness. These temporary structures, built outside with a roof of branches that allows one to see the stars, symbolize the fragility of life and the importance of God's protection (which is sometimes called a "sukkah of peace"). Many Jews build a sukkah at home and eat their meals in it during Sukkot. The sukkah is brightly decorated, as it is considered a mitzvah to celebrate and rejoice on Sukkot. It is also traditional to invite actual as well as symbolic guests into the sukkah (traditionally, the Patriarchs and Moses; many people today also invite great women of Jewish history). Many synagogues host a communal sukkah for use after services or for congregants who do not have one at their home.

Another custom is the shaking of the *lulav* (palm branch). Based on the biblical verse indicating that one should take branches or fruit of four different species to celebrate the holiday, we gather palm fronds, myrtle, and willow braches, with the citron fruit called an *etrog*, and shake them together at various points in the morning service. Congregants process around the synagogue with the *lulav* and *etrog*. This liturgy echoes the themes of the High Holidays, asking God to remember and deliver us.

***Discussion Question:***

*Why might asking God to remember and deliver us be particularly appropriate during the Sukkot holiday?*

Sukkot lasts seven days. After the five intermediate days comes the holiday of Shemini Atzeret (literally "eighth day of assembly"). Customs include reciting the memorial prayer for the dead, singing God's praises from the Psalms, and reciting the seasonal prayer for rain. The second day of this holiday is Simhat Torah ("rejoicing of the Torah").

A holiday born of custom rather than textual tradition, Simhat Torah celebrates the end and new beginning of the yearly cycle of the reading of the Torah each Shabbat. With singing and dancing, a synagogue's Torah scrolls are carried in a procession around the sanctuary seven times. Community leaders are honored with special readings from the Torah. The last section of Deuteronomy is read, followed by the beginning of the book of Genesis, symbolizing the ongoing commitment to the public reading of the Torah. Much less formal than other holidays, Simhat Torah is a raucous end to the solemn season of repentance.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Why might ending a season of solemn, serious holidays with Simhat Torah seem appropriate—or out of place?*

*Why might the completion of the annual cycle of Torah reading be so significant that it warrants a special holiday?*

**Hanukkah**

Hanukkah is an eight-day holiday celebrated in late fall or early winter. It commemorates the victory of the Maccabees (the predecessors of the Jewish kings of Israel in the Greek and Roman periods) over the Seleucid (Syrian Greek) army and the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem, which had been converted into a pagan shrine. Hanukkah also celebrates Jewish identity in the face of cultural assimilation, describing the victory of the small Jewish army over its more mighty foes. It has become the archetypal Jewish story of overcoming adversity in the name of faith.

Hanukkah is celebrated by lighting an eight-branched candelabra, called a menorah or a *chanukiah*, on each night of the holiday. The Talmud tells the story of what has become a well-known Hanukkah miracle: when the Temple was rededicated, there was only enough oil to light the menorah for one day; but it miraculously burned for eight days, until more oil could be processed. Each night, an additional candle on the menorah is lit, so that on the last night, all eight candles are burning. The blessings said over the candles commemorate the idea that God performs miracles both for our ancestors and for us. The menorah is usually displayed in a front window so that it can be seen from the street, thus publicizing God's miracle for the Jewish people.

In commemoration of the miracle of the oil, Jews eat foods fried in oil, including jelly doughnuts and potato pancakes (latkes). Families often hold parties; children spin tops (dreidels), and people exchange gifts. While Hanukkah is a minor holiday, religiously speaking, it has achieved considerable prominence because of its proximity to Christmas, enabling Jews to have their own celebration during a time of general societal celebration.

***Discussion Question:***

*What do you think about a minor religious holiday taking on significant meaning and prominence in order to align more closely (or perhaps compete) with the religious calendar and celebrations of the majority?*

**Purim**

Purim is based on the story of Jewish survival found in the biblical book of Esther (or Megillat Esther, the scroll of Esther; often just called "the Megillah"). Following the destruction of the first Temple, the Jewish community lived in exile in Persia. An evil advisor to King Ahasuerus, Haman, persuaded the king to kill all the Jewish people living in his kingdom, taking advantage of fears that Jews were not sufficiently assimilated or loyal. The queen, Esther, was Jewish but had hidden her heritage from the king. Urged on by her cousin Mordechai and risking her own life, Esther approached the king and told him that Haman's plot would mean her death as well. Haman was executed, and the Jews of Persia rose up to defeat their attackers. Purim is celebrated in recognition of the Jewish escape from destruction.

On Purim, it is customary to go to synagogue to hear the Megillah read aloud. People make noise to drown out the reading each time the name of the villain Haman is mentioned. Modern Purim celebrations often resemble a kind of carnival, with people arriving to hear the Megillah while dressed in costume (including adults). A festive meal is customary, and people exchange gifts of food with their friends and neighbors. Synagogues often hold extensive children's programming, as well as a Purim play for adults that might satirize community events. Like Hanukkah, Purim has none of the work restrictions associated with most of the other holidays.

***Discussion Question:***

*Purim celebrations involve festivities and childlike fun; however, the subject of the holiday is very serious. How do you reconcile the celebration with the subject matter?*

**Passover**

> And Moses said to the people, "Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt, the house of bondage, how God freed you from it with a mighty hand: no leavened bread shall be eaten…. And you shall explain to your child on that day, 'It is because of what God did for me when I went free from Egypt.' " (Exod. 13:3, 8)
>
> This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate while in Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat…. Today we are slaves, next year, we shall be free. (Passover seder liturgy)
>
> In every generation, one is required to see oneself as if he had gone free from Egypt…. Not only our ancestors were redeemed by the Holy One, blessed be God, but we were also redeemed by God. (Passover seder liturgy)

Passover (*Pesach*, in Hebrew) celebrates the Israelites' redemption from slavery in Egypt. This journey from slavery to freedom, God's redemption of the Jewish people, is the heart of the Jewish moral imperative in the world. Throughout Jewish texts, we are reminded that we should protect the most vulnerable members of our society because we were slaves in Egypt.

The most well-known ritual for Passover is the seder, a ritual evening meal during which participants eat symbolic foods and tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. The seder focuses on God's role in redeeming the Jewish people from slavery. All elements of the seder are meant to elicit the telling of the story of freedom: for example, the youngest child asks four questions about what makes the seder night special, so that the parents can reply that "it is because of what God did for me when I left Egypt"; symbolic foods relate to the bondage of the Jewish people and the miracles that God performed; and four cups of wine are drunk to commemorate the four ways in which God redeemed the Jewish people. However, the seder is not stuck in the past. The festive meal grounds the experience in the miracles of the present, so that all present should feel as though they personally had left Egypt. The post-meal section of the seder imagines God's role in the redemptions of the future.

During Passover, the home ritual not only includes special meals but also a special kind of keeping kosher. The Torah teaches that on Passover, anything made with leavening (specifically, bread) must be removed from one's house for the duration of the holiday. This reflects the idea that when the Jews left Egypt in a rush, the bread they were preparing did not have time to rise, so they ate unrisen bread (matza), which today resembles a large, flat cracker. Matza is seen as the bread of poverty, the food of slaves, rather than the food of freedom. Over time, the prohibition against leaven led to any food that might have come into contact with leaven or that contained certain prohibited ingredients. Many Jews also hide all their regular food and buy special kosher for Passover food, conduct an extensive cleaning of their kitchen, and maintain separate Passover dishes.

***Discussion Questions:***

*What does it mean that every Jew should see oneself as if he had gone free from Egypt? Why is this important?*

**Shavuot**

> On the day of first fruits, your Feast of Weeks, when you bring an offering of new grain to God, you shall observe a sacred occasion; you shall not work at your occupation. (Num. 28:26)
>
> Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. (Ruth 1:16)

Shavuot falls fifty days after the beginning of Passover and commemorates both the giving of the Torah at Sinai and the dedication of the first fruits at the beginning of the harvest. If Passover celebrates redemption, Shavuot celebrates the revelation of God's word. During synagogue services, the Ten Commandments are read as the Torah portion. It is customary to read the book of Ruth. Telling the story of the pious ancestor of King David set during the barley harvest links it to Shavuot.

Common traditions including eating only dairy as a sign of purity prior to receiving the Torah (notable because traditional Jewish festive meals are assumed to include meat) and conducting an all-night (or, at least, a late-night) study session in the synagogue, taught by the rabbi and other community members, ending with a morning service at dawn. Sometimes synagogues will join for a communal study session. With Torah and Jewish learning as the overriding nonagricultural themes of the holiday, many synagogues hold their Hebrew school graduations on Shavuot.

***Discussion Questions:***

*Why is Shavuot an appropriate holiday for Torah and Jewish learning?*

*Why do you think that Shavuot lacks a home ritual, with importance placed on its being observed as a community?*

*What might tie the themes of Passover and Shavuot—redemption and revelation—together?*

**Modern Holiday Observance**

Jewish observance of the holidays is extremely diverse, and because of the varieties of practice within the Jewish denominations, American Jews are most likely to observe Yom Kippur, Passover, and Chanukah. On Yom Kippur, Jews may fast even if they do not go to synagogue. On or around Passover, families will often gather for a meal at which they will serve matza and observe some elements of the seder. And on Chanukah, Jews will light candles on each of the holiday's eight nights and give gifts.

Jewish holidays provide Jews with an opportunity to gather with family over a meal and celebrate. For Jews who are more secular, the memories associated with these gatherings may be more important than any particular ritual practice.

***Discussion Question:***

*In what ways has your family made religious holidays your own, making changes or adding modern flavor or new meaning to holiday traditions and rituals?*

# MUSLIM-JEWISH ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS

# Muslim-Jewish Engagement Programs

We have compiled twenty-four examples of Jewish-Muslim community programs that have taken place—or are still taking place—around the country. These programs are meant to serve as examples and inspiration for the development of your own community interfaith programs.

The programs involve groups large and small; adults, children, and teens; religious leaders, lay leaders, and the general public; and they cover many subjects. The names of some of the program organizers are listed so that you may contact them for further information and guidance on how to begin your own similar programs.

The programs appear in alphabetical order, with categories indicating the type of program. A list of the programs by category appears below, with the page number on which each program appears. Most of the programs fall into more than one category and are therefore listed more than once.

Culture, Arts, and Multimedia


Curricula


Discussion and Social Groups


Holiday Celebrations

Panel/Roundtable Discussions


Shared Meals


Social Action


Storytelling


Teen Programs


Text Studies


Women's Groups


Worship Services

**Abraham's Table**
**(Holiday Celebrations; Panel/Roundtable Discussions; Shared Meals)**
Congregation Mishkan Israel, the Turkish Cultural Center, the Church of the Holy Spirit, and Hartford Seminary in Connecticut have for more than three years organized community forums called "Abraham's Table." These roundtable discussions have addressed such topics as "The Prophet Noah," "Peace," "Fasting in Our Traditions," and "Prayer." Local imams, priests, and rabbis, as well as faculty from Hartford Seminary, help organize the events.

The program concludes with an *Iftar* during Ramadan, where a discussion of the three Abrahamic faiths' views on fasting is followed by an evening meal. The lead organizations share the program expenses, and food is halal and kosher to accommodate everyone's religious dietary needs. The last event brought 120 members of all ages from all three faith communities to share a meal and to learn about one another in an informal setting. The program is so successful that it is now oversubscribed.

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**Abrahamic Roundtable**
**(Curricula; Discussion and Social Groups; Text Studies)**
Washington National Cathedral's Abrahamic Roundtable was initiated by Bishop John Bryson Chane, who hosts and invites fifteen scholars and congregational leaders to meet four times a year to explore what the sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam tell us about a particular topic that is challenging the practices of all religious traditions at the time. The first series of the Abrahamic Roundtable initially convened in 2003 and met six times before concluding its discussions in 2006. The discussions focused on what each tradition's scripture says about the reception of the stranger. A useful educational document, "The Abrahamic Family and the Other," was produced.

One series of discussions focused on "The Abrahamic Family and Creation," exploring how each faith tradition understands God's role and people's responsibility in creating and caring for our environment, the land, and all God's creatures. Another series dealt with how we interpret our sacred texts, and who has the authority to do so. It began with a study of the history of the Qur'an and how the words of God revealed through the Prophet Muhammad were memorized, recorded, collected, and compiled into a book, along with the hadith. The roundtable also studied the history of the recording and authority of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament. More information about this program and the Washington National Cathedral's other interfaith programs is available at http://www.nationalcathedral.org/learn/interfaithPrograms.shtml.

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**Annual Martin Luther King/Abraham Joshua Heschel Interfaith Service and Teen Party for Tolerance**
**(Teen Programs; Worship Services)**
Beth Shalom Congregation, Saint John's Baptist Church, Locust United Methodist Church, Howard County Muslim Council, and the Howard County Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday Commission come together annually on the Friday night of Martin Luther King weekend for an interfaith service for peace. The service is held at Beth Shalom Congregation. Members of the participating congregations meet several times prior to the event to practice as an interfaith choir. Representatives of each community participate in the service with readings and giving the message. The climax of the service is the singing of the Israeli peace song "Od yavo shalom aleinu" in Hebrew and in Arabic, with representatives of the three Abrahamic faiths holding hands on the *bimah* (the elevated portion of the sanctuary).

Following services, mingling is encouraged during a refreshment hour for adults and children. Teens participate in a separate Teen Party for Tolerance, which includes social icebreakers and directed dialogue triggers, run by congregational youth staff.

The event is very successful in bringing together the Muslim, Jewish, and African-American communities in and around Howard County and encouraging social interaction and mutual respect among these groups. The service attracts hundreds of members from the sponsoring congregations, members of the public, and local and national officials: about 50 percent are from the Jewish community; 30 percent are from the African-American partner congregations; 10 percent are from the Muslim community; and 10 percent are public and local officials. (Muslim participation has been increasing each year.) The prominent inclusion of the Muslim Council representatives two years ago was greatly appreciated by the Muslim community and laid the foundation for further collaboration.

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**Beyond Coexistence: Is It Possible?**
**(Panel/Roundtable Discussions)**
The Islamic Center of East Lansing, Shaarey Zedek, University Lutheran Church, and Red Cedar Neighborhood Association organized a quarterly interfaith panel where the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faiths were each explored in turn. The events featured expert speakers from each respective faith group, with the opportunity for audience members to ask questions at the end of the presentation. Each faith group hosted the presentation about its religion at its place of worship. The events were funded through donations from the respective faith group that hosted the panel.

The panels were very successful, with a hundred participants overall, ranging from high school students to senior citizens from the various faith groups. Participants, who felt that they learned something new in an enriching experience, appreciated the opportunity to listen to experts and ask challenging questions in a friendly setting.

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**Building Bridges through Learning**
**(Text Studies)**
"Building Bridges through Learning" is a project in the greater Boston area designed to bring imams and other Muslim community leaders together with rabbis to share in the study of each other's sacred texts. The text becomes the context through which these two "people of the book" encounter each other. Organized around a common theme, with texts selected from each tradition, the learning takes place in small groups to facilitate personal sharing and interaction.

Building Bridges through Learning began in 2007 with the goal of bringing together imams and rabbis who, for the most part, had not previously been involved with Jewish-Muslim dialogue. A planning committee of three Jews and three Muslims began organizing the events. The sessions alternate between the mosque and the synagogue, and the program has been funded primarily through a grant of the Abrahamic Family Reunion.

The first study program, in spring 2008, focused on the common place of Abraham in each religious tradition. Approximately twenty-five rabbis and twenty-five imams and other Muslim professionals participated. The topic of the second meeting was prayer. Before engaging with texts, participants shared with one another personal reflections on the meaning and experience of prayer in their own lives. At the end of the study and discussion about prayer, they prayed in one another's presence.

Envisioned in response to tension between the Jewish and Muslim communities in Boston, Building Bridges draws from spiritual wellsprings toward resolving conflict through personal relationships. Expressing the hope of reunion, Ahmed Elewa, a cofounder of the group, wrote at the time of our first program: *There is a natural kinship between Jews and Muslims. Sometimes I feel that family members are getting together after a long period of separation. We have so much catching up to do!* Now in its sixth year, Building Bridges through Learning is helping to end the long separation between Jews and Muslims, celebrating together as we continue to catch up.

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**Children of Abraham**
**(Panel/Roundtable Discussions; Teen Programs)**
Children of Abraham is an adult education program that features panel discussions with a rabbi, an imam, and a Christian pastor, reverend, or community elder, covering a wide range of subjects. One discussion concerned views of Jesus, Muhammad, and Moses; each speaker presented his or her faith tradition's views for ten minutes, after which panelists answered questions from the audience.

Children of Abraham programs take place quarterly, and have been running for five years. Hosting rotates between the participating synagogue, mosque, and church; the host congregation provides light snacks after the program. A similar program was designed for the youth of the community based on the adult program's success.

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**Home: True Stories from LA's Muslims and Jews**
**(Culture, Arts, and Multimedia; Storytelling)**

In December 2012, sixteen Muslim and Jewish organizations across Los Angeles joined together to create a unique cultural event called "Home: True Stories from LA's Muslims and Jews." Centered on the theme of "home" and inspired by the popular Moth StorySLAMs, the event featured three Muslims and three Jews—all nonprofessional storytellers recruited from the sponsoring organizations—telling what "home" means to them. Using music, stories, and interactive art installations, "Home" took audience members on a journey from Eastern Europe and London to Bangladesh and New York, as the storytellers shared everything from recipes for guava jam to tales of escaping from Torah camp.

The event drew more than 200 audience members, most of whom were in their twenties and thirties. Before and after the show and during intermission, guests explored the concept of "home" through interactive art exhibits and with other audience members. Representatives from the cosponsoring organizations were on hand to provide more information.

"Home" took place at a bar (no alcohol was served, out of consideration for observant Muslim guests), and $15 tickets funded the basic costs of the event. Proceeds raised beyond the cost of the event were donated to a local interfaith homeless shelter as a statement of the shared interest of Muslims and Jews in the welfare of their home community.

"Home" was the largest known collaborative event between the Muslim and Jewish communities in Los Angeles in the last decade and was covered by local and national news outlets. Organizations that sponsored the event: American Muslim Professionals, Bend the Arc, East Side Jews, IKAR, IMAN Cultural Center, Jumpstart, LimmudLA, LMU Jewish student life, Masjid Bilal, MECA SoCal, Muslim Bar Association of Southern California, Muslim Public Affairs Council, Muslims for Progressive Values, Shulamit Gallery, Six Points, and Young MALAC.

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**Interfaith Just Peacemaking**
**(Curricula)**
In 2009, an interfaith leadership team began laying the groundwork for the Interfaith Just Peacemaking conference and book project at the Pocantico Conference Center (20 miles north of New York City). Participants from the three Abrahamic faiths were invited to contribute to this project. The structure of the book was laid out to include an introduction, conclusion, and ten chapters, each addressing a particular Just Peacemaking practice, with a Jewish, Christian, and Muslim author for each chapter. The participants met together in 2010 for discussions that were highly intellectual and very productive. The initiative was funded by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

In 2012, the book *Interfaith Just Peacemaking: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives on the New Paradigm of Peace and War* was published. It is an excellent resource for understanding the Abrahamic traditions. It has been used as a textbook in universities and seminaries and has demonstrated that Abrahamic traditions can be resources for building just and sustainable political, economic, and social systems through nonviolent means.

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*Interfaith Just Peacemaking: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives on the New Paradigm of Peace and War* is available for purchase on Amazon.com.

**Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston and the Institute for Sustainable Peace Discussion Group**
**(Discussion and Social Groups)**
For over four years, five lay leaders from the Muslim community and five from the Jewish community have been meeting together under the umbrella of Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston and the Institute for Sustainable Peace. The leaders—all men, mostly in their late sixties—recently welcomed Christian representatives into their group. They meet monthly to address issues of interest and concern.

While the group has not followed a formal curriculum, it has followed a path of discovery. During its formative first two years, the group spent time learning about each other's faiths and issues that each community faces. Considerable time was spent on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and while there was no resolution, there was a deeper understanding of each other's narratives at the end of the discussions. The men also went on a weekend retreat together.

After its first few years, the group established a second group of mostly younger Muslims and Jews. This younger group took a more formal path, using a curriculum that addressed dialogic techniques and peacemaking. The group met monthly and ended with a successful retreat weekend where the group began making decisions on what is next.

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**Interfaith Speed Dialogue**
**(Discussion and Social Groups)**
Inspired by the way speed dating has enabled individuals to meet a large number of new people in a short time, Project Interfaith uses the format of speed dating (randomly matching people up to have conversations for brief periods) to spark quick dialogues about religious and cultural identity and diversity. This event was designed to enable up to fifty participants to meet others of diverse religious and cultural identities and to have quick dialogues. The program leads to longer conversations after the initial speed dialogue round and helps forge friendships.

Participants are provided with nametags and ground rules as they enter the room. After signing in, they are randomly assigned a partner and a table. Each table is given questions with which to begin a discussion. Once cued by the program leader, participants engage in conversation, answering the questions that were provided. When a bell is rung, participants rotate to the next table: one participant remains seated while the other moves on. Participants are given note cards on which they can indicate people with whom they would like to dialogue further. If the desire to continue the conversation is mutual, Project Interfaith notifies each dialogue partner and provides contact information. They then have the opportunity to meet after the event for more in-depth conversation. Refreshments are provided after the speed dialogue rounds end, so that all participants have the chance to mingle and socialize with one another.

Participation is limited to no more than fifty people, in order to preserve intimacy. Since these speed dialogues are very popular, the sessions fill quickly. Participants are a diverse mix of ages, religious and spiritual identities, ethnicities, and occupations. The speed dialogues have been held at cafés, coffee shops, and bars in the Omaha area, but can be held almost anywhere. The programs are funded through corporate sponsorship, ticket sales, and in-kind donations of refreshments from the host venue.

The success of the initial speed dialogue in 2011 led Project Interfaith to hold more speed dialogues in the community, all equally well-attended and favorably received. The popularity of this program and the desire to help other communities hold their own speed dialogues led Project Interfaith to develop a Speed Dialogue Kit, which was released in October 2013. More information on obtaining the kit is available on the Project Interfaith website, www.projectinterfaith.org.

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**Interfaith Storytelling Festival**
**(Culture, Arts, and Multimedia; Storytelling)**

An interfaith storytelling festival offered an engaging, accessible, cost-effective way to build a greater sense of community among religious groups in Omaha while also educating these groups about common values among major faith traditions. Held at the Omaha Community Playhouse in 2006, Project Interfaith's Interfaith Storytelling Festival featured three storytellers: a Muslim, a Jew, and a Christian. The festival included multigenerational art activities provided by the Omaha Children's Museum and a book fair provided by local independent bookstore Soul Desires, featuring high-quality children's and family literature about religious and cultural diversity.

The afternoon began with a check-in, during which participants browsed the book fair and participated in art activities together. Participants then gathered in the main theater to hear each storyteller share a tale from his or her tradition. The main storytelling session was followed by several workshops led by each participating storyteller, as well as a children's storytime. Each storyteller designed activities to help participants learn how to tell their own stories. The participants then gathered again in the main theater, where each storyteller performed another story from his or her tradition. Refreshments were served.

This successful event drew ninety-nine adults, along with fifty-one children. The program inspired future Project Interfaith programming for families, including children's storytime and a show-and-tell on the world's religions and

a parenting series. The event was sponsored and organized by Project Interfaith, with program partners including the Omaha Community Playhouse, the Rose Performing Arts for Children and Families, Soul Desires Bookstore, Omaha Children's Museum, Islamic Speakers Bureau of Nebraska, and the Plains States Regional Office of the Anti-Defamation League. The event was funded through grants and in-kind donations, including food and drink for the reception, from partner organizations.

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**Interfaith Thanksgiving Service at the Islamic Center of East Lansing**
**(Holiday Celebrations; Shared Meals)**
Several faith groups in East Lansing come together to participate in an annual Interfaith Thanksgiving service, where participants offer thanks to God by breaking bread together and forging a bond among people across religious barriers.

More than 200 people attended the 2012 Interfaith Thanksgiving Service, ranging in age from high school students to senior citizens. Each year, the meal is held at a different religion's prayer space, and the sponsor is in charge of finances. In 2012, the sponsoring organizations were the Islamic Center of East Lansing, Shaarey Zedek Synagogue, and several churches from the Greater Lansing community. There was also representation from the Buddhist, Hindu, and Baha'i communities, as well as other faith groups.

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**Islamic Speakers Bureau of Atlanta (ISBA) Jewish-Muslim Activities**
**(Culture, Arts, and Multimedia; Discussion and Social Groups; Panel/Roundtable Discussions; Shared Meals; Women's Groups)**
The Islamic Speakers Bureau of Atlanta is involved in many interfaith programs, including:

- Ongoing involvement with the American Jewish Film Festival in Atlanta, during which they have participated on discussion panels after viewings of films that involve Jewish-Muslim dialogue
- A Jewish-Muslim baking group, where Jewish and Muslim women come together to learn how to prepare a particular dish. The women share food as they share their traditions. They meet in one another's homes, and each brings something to munch on and share (all vegetarian to accommodate dietary restrictions). Many friendships were formed from these get-togethers (a link to a story about the group: http://www.interfaithstory.org/articles/Jewish-Muslim-Baking-Circle.shtml).
- More than three years ago, ISBA partnered with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) to put together a discussion event focusing on the Qur'an at a local synagogue. A Qur'an scholar spoke, after which there was a panel discussion with a rabbi, a scholar, and the executive director of the ADL. About 200 people attended.

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**Jewish-Muslim Community Building Initiative**
**(Culture, Arts, and Multimedia; Holiday Celebrations; Shared Meals; Social Action; Text Studies)**
Much of the Jewish-Muslim cooperation in Chicago takes place through the Jewish-Muslim Community Building Initiative (JMCBI) of the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs (JCUA). JMCBI was created in response to 9/11, when JCUA supporters were going to mosques to protect them from attacks during an upsurge of anti-Muslim sentiment. Their main partners are the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago, Council of American Islamic Relations-Chicago, Inter-City Muslim Action Network, Council for the Advancement of Muslim Professionals, and the Muslim Women's Alliance.

The work of JMCBI is three-pronged, focused on educational, cultural/religious, and social action programs. JMCBI's educational work includes a Jewish-Muslim text study group of thirty people that takes place in coffeehouses around the city, cosponsored by the Chicago Board of Rabbis and the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago. It is co-led by a rabbi and a Muslim leader, though the group decides on the topics for discussion.

Among the cultural events is Café Finjan, an annual night of performances in a coffeehouse. The event is jointly planned by JMCBI and a coalition of Muslim partners. A theme is chosen, and performers from both communities are enlisted to perform. For ten years, we have held interfaith *Iftar* dinners in various synagogues. On the tenth anniversary of the *Iftar* in the synagogue program, three synagogues from across the area hosted 900 people (about half were Jewish, and about half were Muslim) for an *Iftar* dinner and program.

JMCBI engages in joint advocacy for the Jewish and Muslim communities: it has condemned incendiary comments of a Chicago-area congressman about the Muslim community; supported the Jewish community when dangerous packages were sent to synagogues in the Chicago area from Yemen; and condemned the Islamophobic posters that appeared in El stops.

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**Jewish-Muslim Teen Learning**
**(Discussion and Social Groups; Teen Programs; Worship Services)**
The rabbi of Congregation Mishkan Israel and the Muslim leader of the Berlin Mosque in Connecticut each taught teens from their institution how to teach same-age peer groups about their faith tradition. Each group of teens then attended a worship service at the synagogue and the mosque, followed by presentations about Judaism and Islam.

Later, the Jewish and Muslim teens took a field trip to an ethnic center to view an exhibition on the Albanian rescue of Jews during World War II (Albania's population was 70 percent Muslim). The event ended with an ice cream party. Thirty-five high school students and teachers participated. Some of the Muslim students also attended a confirmation service for the Jewish students.

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**Jews and Muslims (JAM)**
**(Discussion and Social Groups; Text Studies)**
Jews and Muslims (JAM) is a discussion group comprising ten couples—five from the Muslim community and five from the Jewish community—that meets monthly at the local mosque. The group uses the Children of Abraham curriculum, developed by the Union for Reform Judaism and the Islamic Society of North America, but frequently veers into other topics. The group's conversation deals with culture, language, texts, cuisine, and contemporary challenges of our families. The group includes husbands and wives, so there is comfortable dialogue about raising children, as well as preserving identity and being a minority.

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**Living Room Jewish-Muslim Dialogue**
**(Discussion and Social Groups; Holiday Celebrations; Shared Meals; Text Studies)**
"Living Room Jewish-Muslim Dialogue" consists of a Jewish-Arab and Jewish-Muslim dialogue exchange in Brooklyn, New York. The program began in the 1980s, born of the deep respect and mutual affection of the Jewish and Muslim dialoguers. They were dissatisfied with the large formats and organizational agendas that were influencing their interactions, so they began to meet in each other's homes four to six times a year. The objectives were to forge deeper personal connections and explore commonalities as well as understand conflicting beliefs, and thereby overcome prejudices and misconceptions and build a stronger community and family of humankind.

The group consists of fifteen people, mainly laypeople, with a few clergy members. They typically choose a shared theme of interest in advance, and a Jew and a Muslim in the group present teachings from their respective faiths. They have had meals in the sukkah together for the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, participated in a model seder for Passover, and studied sacred texts of the Muslim and Jewish traditions. There has been no funding outside of what the group members themselves pay.

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**Muslim-Jewish Brunch Group**
**(Culture, Arts, and Multimedia; Discussion and Social Groups; Holiday Celebrations; Shared Meals)**
In 2012, the Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford presented a Jewish film series that included a film about an Israeli boy and a Palestinian boy. The Federation invited the Muslim community to cohost a separate screening for Jewish and Muslim teens, with pizza and socializing afterward.

The events were so successful that an interfaith subcommittee of the local Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) reached out to the Muslim community about creating an ongoing Jewish-Muslim group for adults. The participants are ten Jews and ten Muslims, aged forty to sixty. They have met six times for brunch, alternating between Muslim and Jewish homes. The group speaks about food in their traditions and gets to know one another on a personal level.

In 2013, the brunch group held a learning-oriented seder the week after Passover, and a gathering for Muslim prayers and a meal, as they would at an *Iftar* dinner. The conversations are currently informal, but are moving more into a topic-focused orientation. The group also discussed getting involved in a social action project together. The group is still in its early stages, but participants already refer to one another as Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters. The participants have made—and will continue to make—meaningful and lasting connections.

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**Muslim-Jewish Women's Dialogue**
**(Discussion and Social Groups; Holiday Celebrations; Women's Groups)**
For more than seven years, the Muslim-Jewish Women's Dialogue group of five Jews and five Muslims has been thriving in Baltimore. They have taken trips to the Jewish Museum of Maryland, to the Walters Art Museum for an Islamic exhibit, and participated in *Iftar* dinners in Muslim members' homes and seders in Jewish members' homes. Usually, conversations take place in someone's home. The conversations are not structured but are focused more on socializing.

Discussions are varied and engaging, and often revolve around members' own experiences and interests. The women discussed Mecca and the Hajj after some women went on pilgrimage; they have also addressed differences in Muslim and Jewish marriage practices. Occasionally, the group brings in guests who speak on various issues, such as domestic violence.

Over their years together, the women have built a strong foundation of mutual trust and respect and have started to tackle more difficult issues. Recently, the group discussed a Muslim member's first trip to Israel with her husband, through the Baltimore Jewish Council–Community Relations Council and the Muslim Israel Development Council, and political issues around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The group hopes to go to Israel together in the future.

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**Reuniting the Children of Abraham: A Multimedia Tool Kit for Community Engagement**
**(Curricula)**
Created by Brenda Naomi Rosenberg and launched in 2004, "Reuniting the Children of Abraham" (RTCOA) uses drama, music, improvisation, and interactive dialogue to build bridges of understanding among Christians, Muslims, and Jews. In more than a hundred presentations, RTCOA has enabled audiences to experience how reconciliation and peace are possible.

Inspired by a conversation with interfaith partner Imam Abdullah El Amin, the program brings together congregations of Christians, Muslims, and Jews, adults and teens, to learn about the four-step healing process in the RTCOA documentary and engage in interactive dialogue and workshops. The programs have been presented to audiences as small as fifty people and as large as 2,000 in mosques, synagogues, churches, and community centers.

The program was originally funded by the Michigan Humanities Council and area interfaith councils, synagogues, mosques, and churches. The cost of the documentary and support material is $60. RTCOA has been featured as a CBS network special in more than a hundred markets and on the National Muslim TV network *Bridges*, as well as being featured in a front-page story in Detroit and Duluth newspapers and the cover story of the Detroit *Jewish News*. RTCOA has been presented in Israel, the West Bank, Jordan, and Canada.

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**The Sisterhood of Salaam/Shalom**
**(Discussion and Social Groups; Holiday Celebrations; Women's Groups)**
The Sisterhood of Salaam/Shalom is a group of twelve Muslim and Jewish women in central New Jersey who want to build strong relationships with one another to promote the similarities between Judaism and Islam, the strength and value of such interfaith relationships, and the shared goals of educating the public and helping eliminate anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish sentiment. The women range in age from forty to sixty and have various levels of religious observance.

The group has been meeting for more than three years in one another's homes and has participated in various activities, including viewing films about Muslim-Jewish relations followed by a discussion, book reviews and discussion, general socializing, and sharing of holiday traditions such as *Iftar* and Sukkot. They also sponsored a photo exhibit on the Albanians (mostly Muslims) who saved Jews during the Holocaust, with an opening event that included a documentary and speakers. This event was attended by more than 200 people and resulted in the Rutgers Jewish

Film Festival showing the documentary. The group was so successful that a national organization is being developed to expand its work to other areas of the country.

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**Trialogue: Weekend of Worship and Interfaith Engagement**
**(Discussion and Social Groups; Worship Services)**
A trialogue coalition of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Dallas organized a weekend of experiencing the three faith groups' worship services in 2010. On Friday evening, members of the Islamic Center of Irving and Northwood Church were invited to services at the synagogue. On Saturday, members of the church and temple attended services at the mosque. On Sunday morning, members of the mosque and synagogue attended services at the church. At all three worship spaces, the pastor, the rabbi, and the imam answered questions from attendees. Each place of worship supplied food and the opportunity to socialize after worship. Hundreds of people of all ages and religious affiliations attended the programs.

The Trialogue weekend was so successful that the interfaith coalition initiated joint social action projects and women's programming (see below).

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**Trialogue: Social Action Weekend**
**(Social Action)**
Stemming from the success of the Trialogue weekend (see program description for "Trialogue: Weekend of Worship and Interfaith Engagement" above), Jewish, Muslim, and Christian religious groups in Dallas organized a weekend of social action in their communities. The three faith communities were spread out over the metro area. They coordinated with local municipalities to identify homes or parks in each faith community's neighborhoods that needed basic repairs, lawns mowed, graffiti removed, fences mended, and so on. Families signed up to travel to the "other" neighborhoods, and repairs were assigned so that Muslims, Jews, and Christians were working together toward the common goal of repairing their communities, side by side. Hundreds of people of all ages participated. The faith communities provided basic seed money, and volunteers brought necessary supplies as donations. This very successful event was featured on a local TV station.

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**Trialogue: Women's Group**

**(Discussion and Social Groups; Women's Groups)**

Stemming from the Trialogue weekends (see program listings above for "Trialogue: Weekend of Worship and Interfaith Engagement" and "Trialogue: Social Action Weekend"), women from the synagogue, church, and mosque in Dallas formed a women's group that meets once a month at one another's homes. This branch-off group started when it became clear that Muslim women, in particular, were uncomfortable in the large group trialogue. The host community organizes the discussion or activity, and participants also celebrate holidays together. Dozens of women of all ages have participated from Temple Shalom, the Islamic Center of Irving, and Northwood Church since the group began in 2011.

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# GLOSSARY

# Glossary

***Adhan* (Arabic):** The melodious call to prayer that emanates from mosques in the Muslim world five times a day.

***Allahu akhbar* (Arabic):** "God is greater," an invocation pronounced at the start of Muslim *salaat*, or prayer.

***Aqeeqah* (Arabic):** Muslim birth ritual that takes place on or about the seventh day after a child's birth.

**AS:** Abbreviation for *Alayhi salaam*, an Arabic phrase meaning "Peace be upon him."

**Ashkenazi [Jews]:** Jews who trace their origins to Franco-Germanic lands of the Middle Ages.

***Aslaha* (Arabic):** To seek reform, to reconcile, or to make peace.

**Babylonian exile:** The southern tribes of Israel (Judah) were exiled by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE. The exile formed the nucleus of the Jewish community of Iraq for millennia.

***Beit knesset* (Hebrew):** House of gathering, often used to refer to the synagogue.

***Beit midrash* (Hebrew):** House of study, often used to refer to the synagogue or academy.

***Beit tefilah* (Hebrew):** House of prayer, often used to refer to the synagogue.

***Bismillah* (Arabic):** A South Asian Muslim ceremony that marks the beginning of a child's learning to recite the Qur'an in Arabic. Literally, "in the Name of God."

***Brit milah* (Hebrew):** Ritual circumcision, performed on Jewish boys at eight days of age.

**Challah (pl., challot; Hebrew):** Traditional bread served during the Jewish Sabbath and holidays.

**Conservative Judaism:** Jews who mediate between traditional Jewish practice and modern change.

***Dhikr* (Arabic):** "Making remembrance" of God and invoking God for forgiveness and assistance. Takes place at the conclusion of formal *salaat*, or Muslim prayer.

**Dreidel:** Yiddish (Germanic Jewish language with some Hebrew and Slavic vocabulary) term for a toy top used in a game played during the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah.

***Du'a* (Arabic):** "Calling" (often translated as "supplication") on God for the fulfillment of needs and hopes for this life and the afterlife. Takes place after *dhikr*.

**Eid ul-Adha (Arabic):** The festival of the sacrifice, commemorating Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Ishmael (AS).

**Eid ul-Fitr (Arabic):** The festival of breaking fast, marking the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

***Etrog* (Hebrew):** A beautiful-smelling citrus fruit, shaken with a *lulav* during a Sukkot ritual.

**Five Pillars of Islam:** Profession of faith in Allah and Muhammad (PBUH) (*shahada*); prayer (*salaat*); charity (*Zakat*); fasting during the month of Ramadan (*som*); pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj).

***Gehinnom* (Hebrew):** Fiery hell.

***Gemilut hasadim* (Hebrew):** Acts of kindness.

**Gentile:** A non-Jew.

***Get* (Hebrew):** A Jewish divorce document, which recognizes a divorce as legal under Jewish law and enables a woman to remarry.

**Hadith (Arabic):** A collection of narrations about how the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) enacted the teachings of the Qur'an.

***Hafiz* (Arabic):** "Preserver of the Qur'an"; someone who has memorized the entire Qur'an.

**Hajj (Arabic):** The major Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca.

***Hakhnasat orhim* (Hebrew):** Hospitality to travelers.

**Halal (Arabic):** Muslim food laws.

**Hanukkah (Hebrew):** Literally, "dedication." Jewish holiday commemorating the victory of the Maccabees over the Seleucid army and the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem.

***Hesed* (Hebrew):** Kindness to others; keeping faith with others; solidarity with other human beings.

***Hijrah* (Arabic):** Muhammad's (PBUH) move from Mecca to Medina and the date that marks the start of the Muslim calendar.

***Iftar* (Arabic):** Traditional Muslim break-the-fast meal, held after sunset each evening during the month of Ramadan. The meal is a festive gathering, typically shared with family, friends, and neighbors.

***Ihram* (Arabic):** Simple garments that Muslims wear during the Hajj.

**Imam (Arabic):** Muslim prayer leader, often the spiritual and communal leader of a mosque or Muslim community.

***Imamah* (Arabic):** The continuing guidance of the Prophet's family, through the descendants of his daughter Fatimah and his son-in-law Ali (AS).

***Imitatio dei* (Latin):** The obligation to imitate God's own performance of mitzvot (Hebrew: good deeds or commandments), generally those that involve caring for others.

***Imra'a* (Arabic):** "Woman"; describes the unbelieving wives of Noah and Lot.

***Islah* (Arabic):** Social reform; sociopolitical transformation. The root of the term connotes soundness, reconciliation, improvement, and setting affairs right.

***Itikaf* (Arabic):** A state of seclusion, during which Muslims spend nearly all their waking hours in prayer and meditation. A devotional practice during Laylat ul-Qadr.

***Jummah* (Arabic):** "Friday," referring to the Muslim communal prayer that takes place on Friday afternoons.

***Ka'ba* (Arabic):** The symbolic House of God in Islamic tradition, located in Mecca, built by Abraham and Ishmael (AS).

**Kaddish (Hebrew):** The Jewish prayer of mourning.

**Kashrut (Hebrew):** Jewish food laws.

***Kavvanah* (Hebrew):** The intention of prayer; outpouring of the heart.

***Ketubah* (Hebrew):** Jewish marriage contract.

***Keva* (Hebrew):** The fixed aspect of times and words of prayer.

***Khatam* (Arabic):** A South Asian Muslim ceremony that marks a child's completing the recitation of the Qur'an from beginning to end. Literally, "completion."

***Khutbah* (Arabic):** A sermon given by a designated Muslim leader during the *jummah*, or Friday communal prayers for Muslims.

**Kol Nidre (Hebrew):** The prayer that begins the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur. It releases Jews from all unfulfilled vows, since in Jewish tradition, a vow made in God's name must be completed or sin incurred.

**Laylat ul-Qadr (Arabic):** "The Night of Glory" (or "Night of Decree"; "Night of Destiny"). One of the last nights of Ramadan, on which it is believed that the revelation of the Qur'an began.

**Levirate marriage:** A biblical Jewish tradition stating that, when a brother dies without a son, the wife of the deceased is obligated to marry his brother to carry on the family name. Although the practice is very rare in modern times, it is still practiced in certain ultra-Orthodox Jewish circles.

**Levite (Hebrew):** A member of the Hebrew tribe of Levi, which performed particular religious and political duties for the ancient Israelites.

***L'hitpalel* (Hebrew):** To pray.

***Lulav* (Hebrew):** A stalk of palm fronds, myrtle, and willow braches, shaken with an *etrog* during a Sukkot ritual.

***Ma'ariv* (Hebrew):** Traditional Jewish evening prayers.

**Maccabees:** The heroes of the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah.

***Maghrib* (Arabic):** Traditional Muslim evening prayers.

***Mahr* (Arabic):** The bridal gift. The same term is used in Hebrew and in Arabic, in Jewish and Muslim tradition.

***Masjid* (Arabic):** Literally, "place of prostration"; a fixed place of Islamic prayer such as a mosque.

**Matza (Hebrew):** Unleavened bread, traditionally eaten during the Jewish holiday of Passover.

***Mawlid/milad* (Arabic):** Muhammad's (PBUH) birthday; an opportunity for Muslims to honor their beloved prophet and reflect on his teachings.

**Mecca:** The holiest city in Islam; the birthplace of Muhammad (PBUH) and the site of the first revelation of the Qur'an.

**Medina:** The second holiest city in Islam, after Mecca. The city in which the early Muslim community (*ummah*) took shape and the site of Muhammad's (PBUH) death and burial.

**Megillah, or Megillat Esther (Hebrew):** The biblical scroll of Esther, which tells the story of the Jewish holiday of Purim.

**Menorah (Hebrew):** A candelabra with eight branches, used in celebrations of the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. A talmudic Hanukkah story tells of the menorah miraculously remaining lit for eight days, despite there being enough oil for only one day. Also called a *chanukiah*.

**Midrash (Hebrew):** Rabbinic explanation of, or story about, a biblical text.

***Minhah* (Hebrew):** Traditional Jewish afternoon prayers.

**Minyan (Hebrew):** A quorum of ten Jewish people (traditionally ten men) required for a Jewish prayer service.

**Mishnah (Hebrew):** An early-third-century compendium of Jewish law; the first document of rabbinic literature.

***Mishpat* (Hebrew):** Justice.

**Mitzvah (pl., mitzvot; Hebrew):** A commandment or good deed. The Torah contains 613 mitzvot.

**Modern Orthodox Judaism:** An attempt to maintain strict adherence to rabbinic law while engaging modernity.

**Mohel (Hebrew):** Someone qualified to perform a *brit milah*, or ritual circumcision.

***Mutawattir hadith* (Arabic):** Authenticated transmissions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

***Nabuwwah* (Arabic):** Prophethood, specifically that of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

***Namaz* (Arabic):** Formal prayer.

**Passover (Hebrew: Pesach):** The Jewish holiday that celebrates the Israelites' redemption from slavery in Egypt, as told in the biblical book of Exodus.

**PBUH:** Abbreviation for "peace be upon Him," used in the Islamic tradition when the name of Muhammad is mentioned.

**People of the Book:** A term used by Muslims to refer to Jews and Christians.

***Qawwali* (Arabic):** A form of devotional music that originated in South Asia in the fourteenth century. The signature piece in the repertoire takes an Arabic phrase—Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) declaration of Imam Ali as his

successor—and mixes it with local languages.

**Qur'an (Arabic):** The Muslim holy book.

**Rabbi (Hebrew):** The religious and spiritual leader of a Jewish community, who has received formal training in this role.

**Ramadan (Arabic):** The ninth month of the Islamic calendar, during which Muslims fast from dawn to dusk.

**Reconstructionist Judaism:** A denomination of Judaism that emphasizes it as a civilization rather than as a religion defined by legal strictures.

**Reform Judaism:** A modern European-American denomination of Judaism that does not accept the binding power of Jewish law on modern Jewry.

**Rosh Hashanah (Hebrew):** The Jewish new year holiday; literally, "head of the year."

***Sadaqa* (Arabic):** Charity and good deeds, including (but not limited to) monetary almsgiving. From the verb "to be sincere or truthful"; any act that reflects a sincere effort to make things better for others or for oneself.

***Salaat* (Arabic):** Muslim ritual prayer.

**Seder (Hebrew):** The Passover holiday ceremony (literally, "order"). The seder takes place in the home and symbolically reenacts the story of Passover through storytelling, rituals, and eating symbolic foods.

**Sephardi [Jews]:** Jews who trace their origins back to lands ruled by Muslims in the Middle Ages.

**Shabbat (Hebrew):** The Jewish Sabbath, celebrated from sundown on Friday until dark on Saturday night.

**Shab-e Mir'aj (Arabic):** The night when it is believed that Muhammad (PBUH) ascended to heaven to talk to God.

***Shaharit* (Hebrew):** Traditional Jewish morning prayers.

***Shahada* (Arabic):** The Islamic testimony of faith that recognizes God's Oneness and the finality of the chain of God's Prophets in the Messenger Muhammad (PBUH).

**Shavuot (Hebrew):** A Jewish holiday that falls fifty days after the beginning of Passover, commemorating both the giving of the Torah at Sinai and the dedication of the first fruits at the beginning of the harvest.

***Shema* (Hebrew):** A foundational Jewish prayer: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One."

**Shemini Atzeret (Hebrew):** "The eighth day of assembly," the eighth day of the Jewish holiday of Sukkot. Customs include reciting the memorial prayer for the dead, singing God's praises from the Psalms, and reciting the seasonal prayer for rain.

**Shiite/Shia (Arabic):** Minority branch of Islam that expects leadership to be direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

**Shiksa:** Yiddish (Germanic Jewish language with some Hebrew and Slavic vocabulary) derogatory slang for a non-Jewish woman.

**Shiva (Hebrew):** The Jewish mourning period, traditionally seven days.

**Shofar (Hebrew):** A ram's horn, blown on the High Holidays as a "wake-up call" to note that the season of repentance is at hand.

**Siddur (Hebrew):** Jewish prayerbook.

***Simhat bat* (Hebrew):** "Celebration of a daughter"; ritual ceremony welcoming a baby girl into the covenant of the Jewish people.

**Simhat Torah (Hebrew):** The second day of the Jewish holiday of Shemini Atzeret, celebrating the end and new beginning of the yearly cycle of the reading of the Torah.

***Suhoor* (Arabic):** The light predawn meal that Muslims eat before beginning their daily fast during the month of

Ramadan.

**Sukkah (pl., sukkot; Hebrew):** A booth, constructed for the holiday of Sukkot. It symbolizes the fragility of life and the importance of God's protection.

**Sukkot (Hebrew):** Jewish holiday celebrating the end of the harvest and God's blessing of sustenance.

***Sunnah* (Arabic):** Ways of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), as recorded in hadith.

**Sunni (Arabic):** Majority branch of Islam that selects leadership by merit.

***Surah* (Arabic):** Chapter of the Qur'an.

***Taba* (Arabic):** To seek forgiveness.

**Tallit (Hebrew):** Prayer shawl.

**Talmud (Hebrew):** A multivolume work of rabbinic thought and law compiled in sixth-century Iraq (Babylonia); often referred to as the Babylonian Talmud.

***Taqwa* (Arabic):** God-consciousness.

***Taraweeh* (Arabic):** Optional communal prayers that follow the daily nighttime prayers during the month of Ramadan.

***Tashlikh* (Hebrew):** "You will throw"; a Rosh Hashanah ritual during which Jews cast bread crumbs into flowing water to symbolize ridding one's sins and misdeeds.

***Tawhid* (Arabic):** The unicity of God.

***Teshuvah* (Hebrew):** Literally, "returning"; asking forgiveness for wrongs that one has committed.

**Torah (Hebrew):** The Jewish holy book, also called the Old Testament. Comprises the Pentateuch (five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy).

***Tzedek* (Hebrew):** Righteousness; justice.

***Tzedakah* (Hebrew):** "Righteousness"; Hebrew term for charity.

**Ultra-Orthodox [Jews]:** Jews who are hyper-observant of Jewish law and generally shun contact with the non-Jewish world.

***Waqf* (Arabic):** A type of endowment that can include land and money to build institutions such as schools, libraries, hospitals, mosques, and other institutions for public benefit.

***Wudu* (Arabic):** Muslim act of ritual purification performed prior to *salaat*, or prayer.

**Yamim Noraim:** "Days of Awe," a term for the holidays that begin the Jewish new year (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur).

**Yom Kippur (Hebrew):** The holiest day of the Jewish year, the day on which Jews stand in judgment before God and repent for their sins.

**Yom-e Ali (Arabic):** A celebration of the birth of Imam Ali. Functions in similar ways to the *mawlid* or *milad*.

***Zakat al-maal/ Zakat* (Arabic):** Charity based on assets. From the verb "to purify," "to grow," or "to develop." *Zakat* is a mandatory practice for Muslims and is one of the five pillars of Islam.

***Zakat ul-fitr* (Arabic):** A payment that is made before the Eid ul-Fitr prayer service, which marks the end of Ramadan, intended to help those in need to provide for their family Eid celebrations.

***Zawja* (Arabic):** Other part of a couple or pair, used to describe the wives of Adam and Muhammad (PBUH).

***Zohar (Hebrew):*** A 13th century collection of Jewish mystical texts.

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# Selected Bibliography for Further Reading


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