

## **Transformational Waves of Unity**

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November 18, 2012

Again Israel has been under attack. But not only Israel was under attack. Committed Jews understand that it is the Jewish People that was under attack. Israel is our homeland and the fate of Judaism and the Jewish People all over the globe is integrally tied up with the fate of the State of Israel and its inhabitants. We are all threatened.

Those spilling our blood are all Muslims. Just about all our enemies who wish to drive us into the sea are Muslims. Many of these Muslims preach death and terrorism in the name of Islam.

But as we defend ourselves against the murderous onslaught, we must always be very careful not to accept the terms that Hamas wishes to dictate. For them this is a religious war of Islam against Judaism. Islam certainly can provide ample justification for this conflict to be seen in religious terms. Hamas - and Hezbollah and bin Laden - and so many others have made that clear time and time again.

Judaism also can easily offer justification to paint the Israel - Arab conflict in metaphysical terms as the present installment in an eternal conflict between Jacob and Esau, or in halachic terms as a holy war for the Land of Israel. Radicals in our own camp constantly take up these themes and pitch our struggle in the Holy Land as an inevitable clash of religions.

But we must be willing to entertain the possibility that it may not be so. Even as our brethren in Israel are returning to normalcy after the barrage of terror that was directed at them by Hamas - perhaps especially at this time - we need to make a great effort to hold back from seeing Judaism and Islam as locked in a battle dictated by their very essence. We need not and we must not. For our own good and for the good of both of our religions, we must know that both Judaism and Islam may have it within them to live in harmony with each other.

The majority of Jews, especially American Jews, know that Judaism does not obligate us to be at war with our Muslim neighbors. May the same be true of Islam? Could it be that Islam is not necessarily the source of the evils being perpetrated in its name? Might there be another face of Islam, one in which there are strong foundations for peace and tolerance? In the context of these questions I offer the following tentative reflections.

Last Sunday afternoon I had one of the more important religious-moral experiences of my lifetime. I spent over 7 hours with two thousand plus Muslims (plus a smattering of Christians but no other Jews that I know about)... and very quickly I felt completely comfortable, although I have never been in such a situation in my life.

Since receiving the invitation to participate in the Waves of Unity event at the Dallas Convention Center, I had agonized over the invitation, conferring with many local

and national Jewish community leaders and devoting countless hours to research of the organizers and the speakers. I was apprehensive of giving legitimacy to anyone who might support terror in any way. I was queasy about being the only rabbi amidst a sea of hostile Muslims. I was afraid for my reputation in the Jewish community and even a bit for my safety at the event. It was a difficult decision ... and it turns out to have been without a doubt one of my best!

My role was to help open the event with a speech and a blessing, and to participate as a panel member in one of the many breakout sessions. I think I did well, and many people approached me to tell me how much they learned from my presentations. But I have little doubt that I was among those who benefited the most. What I got out of the event was far more than what I contributed to it.

I met so many people, Muslim scholars and preachers as well as just regular people who had come to learn and to listen. Everyone was gracious, open, and so appreciative of my presence. The people, mostly the women, were dressed so differently than what I am used to. Muslim dress usually invokes in me curiosity and a sense of strangeness. And perhaps the thought: "this is the dress of my enemy." But they were so normal and nice and open and human. Of course they are, but I just hadn't seen it before, my unconscious prejudices being so thick and pervasive. During the course of the afternoon I simply got used to the people, and I loved ever minute of the experience of fitting in with and bonding with people that I just would not have felt comfortable with in the past. And I began to feel a sense of inner renewal, even liberation, as I felt the boundaries - imaginary boundaries - melting away.

The speakers: so dynamic, so learned, so worldly, so open and friendly. And so American! And again and again in so many different contexts I heard them explaining Islamic jurisprudence and philosophy and life - to a 95% Muslim audience - in terms and in vocabulary so similar to Judaism. It completely blew me away. I was repeatedly impressed not just by the compassion of the religion, but by the intellectual depth and the legal and philosophical nuance that was expressed.

The proverbial light bulb flashed in my mind. I have really been fed so much misinformation by the media and by anti-Muslim speakers on the circuit. I (and the Jewish community) have accepted so much of it uncritically. Perhaps I have been brainwashed. This religion, at least as explicated by the many imams that spoke during the course of the event, contains within it much depth and wisdom, much texture and beauty. It may indeed have the capacity to embrace modernity and democracy.

I have many a time in the past said that although most Muslims are not terrorists, most terrorists are most certainly Muslims. And my thinking has always been that that says something, something bad, about the religion as a whole. But that may not necessarily be so. Judaism is much more than a religion; it is a people all of whose members are deeply bound together as one family. But Islam is different. It is a religion, and it is practiced in very diverse cultural, ethnic and political contexts, each of which mold it and adapt it. American Islam is not at all similar to and much of it is very much unconnected to the many radical and backward political movements that have used it as a justification for aggression and terror. What I experienced this day was so, so different from what I had thought, and the

impression upon me was so, so powerful. Words cannot fully convey what I underwent.

My horizons were so expanded, my stereotypes so completely exploded, my sense of appreciation for Islam so deepened. I feel that I became such a better person, that my humanity became so enhanced and my consciousness so greatly enlightened.

I didn't like everything I heard. Certainly there are beliefs that I cannot ascribe to and sound down right incredible. At one point I heard a diatribe of anger in the face of America's foreign wars against Islam. It was a reminder of the importance of our agreement from the outset that Israel – what they would call Palestine – not come up at all during the event. Had the subject been broached, I am sure that I would have heard much that I would deem unfair, distorted and vicious. But it certainly seems possible to understand that that's politics, not religion.

I also heard a denouncement of terrorism that was worded in such a fashion that it could have been taken in exactly the opposite fashion of how it was intended. I cringed at the thought of how the speaker could be lynched in the media and by the Jewish community. But I was there and I heard the context and I know what he meant. But all these are small, indeed tiny blemishes on a most powerful and meaningful day.

Yes we Jews still must be always very much on our guard, but we must also be open to the possibility that unnecessary walls of prejudice and fear have been erected. The Torah tells us to love the stranger because we know what it means and how it feels to be a stranger. Hate in the heart is an albatross around our collective necks that must be removed. We must be open to embrace – carefully - one more faith community with which we have so much in common in post-modern America.

If breaking out of the shackles of ignorance and intolerance is a religious obligation, and I believe that it is, then I underwent no less than a religious transformation.

I had over a thousand teachers that day. You have taught me well and I owe you such a debt of gratitude. May the organizers, the speakers and the participants in Waves of Unity go from strength to strength and may the world be transformed as I have been. God bless you.