

Putting Aside Differences, Jews and Muslims in Toronto:

A Look at Holy Blossom Synagogue's Efforts from 2020-2022

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Since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, Jews and Muslims around the world have preconceived notions about the “other.” Jews and Muslims in Western diasporas have felt enmity towards each other, based on differing attitudes toward the State of Israel. Divisive takes on Israel have, on occasion, led Jews and Muslims in Canada to have explosive interactions, for example, the commotion that took place on campus at York University regarding Israeli reservists. Yet throughout Canada and the U.S., Muslims and Jews have created interfaith initiatives and programming aimed at combatting prejudice and recognizing similarities.

Toronto’s Holy Blossom synagogue founded an interfaith committee around 1995, beginning its now two decades’ long engagement with the Muslim community. Its interest in conducting interfaith work is intrinsic to the nature of the synagogue. As a Reform synagogue, the efforts put forth are social justice oriented. The Reform movement, according to the American Union for Reform Judaism, has “embraced modernity, incorporating innovation into all facets of Jewish tradition, education and life.”¹ The Reform movement is committed to “social justice for all-women, immigrants, LGBTQ+, people from all faiths and backgrounds.”² Inclusivity and education are central to the ideology of Holy Blossom because it is a Reform synagogue. However, their work does not come without its own set of challenges. Holy Blossom Temple has been successful with their interfaith engagement with the Muslim community, but they have been unable to overcome one obstacle which is regarding the existence of Israel. Between 2020 and 2022 – during the COVID-19 pandemic - Holy Blossom was successful in

¹ “Organizations of the Reform Movement.” Union for Reform Judaism. Accessed February 14, 2023. <https://urj.org/who-we-are/organizations-reform-movement>.

² “Organizations of the Reform Movement.” Union for Reform Judaism. Accessed February 14, 2023. <https://urj.org/who-we-are/organizations-reform-movement>.

conducting two events with their Muslim partners in Toronto, but as expected, the resurgence of violence in Israel-Palestine put a halt to HBT's interfaith planning.

Background of Jewish-Muslim Interaction

In North America, significant Jewish settlement predates Muslim settlement considerably. Whereas Jewish migration to Canada picked up with significant numbers in the mid-19th century, most of the Muslim immigration occurred in the 21st century. Both religions identify the character Abraham as a central figure of faith. According to Atif Khalil from the University of Lethbridge, "the virtually identical concept of God lies at the heart of both faiths"³. As well in terms of legal religious issues, "both traditions are heavily orthopraxic, concerned with rules and proper conduct."⁴ These theological similarities have allowed for mutual interfaith collaboration between the two groups. This can be done by taking part in the others' religious rituals.

Tensions around Israel-Palestine again came to the forefront of Canadian Jewish and Muslim consciousness in the 21st century. Khalil states, that "Jews and Muslims are often unable to meet for interfaith exchanges without either party demanding of the other some form of politically oriented disclaimers, dissociation, or apology"⁵. Sentiments about Israel-Palestine has brought about biased attitudes. Jews and Muslims tend to see the other group as inherently

³ "Jewish-Muslim Relations, Globalization, and the Judeo-Islamic Legacy." pg.4

⁴ "ibid pg.6

⁵ "Jewish-Muslim Relations, Globalization, and the Judeo- Islamic Legacy." pg.2

violent⁶. According to Khalil, if issues about Israel and Palestine could be put aside, then “Jews and Muslims might be able to pause and appreciate just how much they have in common.”⁷

Jewish and Muslim experience can be paralleled when discussing the diasporic Jewish experience as a mechanism to understand the Muslim diasporic experience. Because both groups have similar dietary prohibitions and laws, they have faced similar issues abroad. Gilman’s *Multiculturalism and Jews* recounts several moments of similar experiences encountered by Jews and Muslims in the diaspora. For example, “in Switzerland, the prohibition against Kosher Jewish slaughter also covers the slaughter of meat by Muslims who follow the ritual practice. Along with this, both groups have faced the banning of “ostentatious religious clothing and ornaments in schools and public institutions.”⁸ These impact Jewish and Muslim men and women who observe those practices. In Canada, the advent of Bill 21 in Quebec, passed in 2019, has called for solidarity amongst visible Jews and Muslims who are no longer allowed to wear ostentatious religious coverings in certain spaces.

Holy Blossom synagogue with its interfaith work had set the intention to work with the Muslim community, alongside others. The interfaith committee played on the notion of group similarities when thinking of ways to engage Jews and Muslims. When putting aside the issues of Israel-Palestine, the groups were able to meet.

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⁶ “Jewish-Muslim Relations, Globalization, and the Judeo- Islamic Legacy.” pg.3

⁷ “Jewish-Muslim Relations, Globalization, and the Judeo- Islamic Legacy.” pg.3

⁸ Gilman, Sander. *Multiculturalism and the Jews*. Florence, KY, USA: Taylor and Francis, 2013. Pg.1

HBT (Holy Blossom Temple)'s interfaith work began in 1995, when it offered the first of its Sunday morning seminars and panels for discussions by representatives of faith groups, which it ran until 2003. The seminars showcased "the Christian attitude," "the Muslim perspective," and "the Jewish perspective" and the Temple's clergy led conversations among the three.⁹ These seminars aimed to "establish an atmosphere of trust and dialogue," and to "build a model of respect, education and relationship that would benefit all three faith traditions."¹⁰

The intentions for these seminars were set in 1996 by David Hart, a member of HBT's interfaith committee. Hart was a strong advocate for dialogue between Muslims and Jews specifically because of their commonalities. According to Hart, the first commonality was the shared history of Jews and Muslims in Spain. The Convivencia of Spain also was an example of previous Jewish-Muslim collaboration, that according to Hart, could be replicated again.

Hart also shared the sentiments of Islamic scholar Dr. Fati Osman, who stated that "Islam is experiencing its emancipation through life in the United States, and the Koran is being examined in terms of today's experiences". Hart related this emancipation to the Jewish experience of being emancipated from Europe 200 years ago. "We (Jews) should understand the turmoil and upheaval Muslims are currently undergoing. We should give them the benefit of our experience and wait patiently for dialogue to progress."¹¹ Hart parallels the Jewish communal life in Canada as a reference for how the Muslim community could learn to establish itself. For

⁹ "In The Faith of Our Neighbours: Christians, Muslims and Jews in Dialogue," Seminar Information Flyer, 1995. Add Holy Blossom Archives, Toronto [or something like that]

¹⁰ Interfaith dialogue program pamphlet, 2003. In INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE PROGRAM

¹¹ Holy Blossom Bulletin board clipping, 1996. In Dialogue between Muslims and Jews

Hart, the Muslim-Jewish conversations were not only important, but they were also easily achieved.

HBT's eagerness to engage in further Muslim-Jewish dialogue work expanded beyond its seminars and panels after its early successes in 1996. Perhaps there was a feeling that the shared experience in Spain and its triumphs point to what could be built between Jews and Muslims in Toronto. It was with this enthusiasm that Holy Blossom began to work with their Muslim partners in Toronto.

Intention

In early 2021, the head of the Interfaith Committee, Kalman Green, set the intentions of the interfaith committee. The focus of the committee was to work with its Muslim and Christian partners to "build bridges and develop relationships."¹² Within HBT's meeting minutes, Green was advised by other members of the committee to not undertake more than what was possible for the committee to complete. Rabbi Jordan Helfman added to Green's remarks that the committee should work to find what unites religious groups in Canada and Toronto, and within the committee to create subgroups and committees to reach their goals. Green then tasked the committee to create four events and asked each committee member to suggest events with particularly personal resonance. The committee settled on conducting an Interfaith Seder and recounting the history of Jewish-Christian dialogue in Canada.

Conducting an Interfaith Seder was of the most significance to the committee. The Jewish Seder commemorates the story of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible. According to the American Union of Reform Judaism, "the idea of enslavement, formed a permanent impression on our

¹² Holy Blossom Temple Interfaith Committee Meeting Minutes, Feb.16th 2021

(Jewish) collective consciousness”. Therefore this “has led us to be a people perennially concerned with world injustices and the disenfranchised”.¹³ Sheila Smolkin, a member of the interfaith committee and an attendee of the 2022 Interfaith Seder, shared that the ritual involved in the Seder was not only important to the Jewish people, but it centres around a story that has universal themes for all people, including the values of faith, liberty, justice, and community. According to Sheila Smolkin of Holy Blossom, “we thought inviting our interfaith partners to join us for this ritual would give us the opportunity to share the importance of this ritual and to expose them to a ritual that is important to us as Jews”.

Seders are often guided along by text called a Haggadah. These books – written in a variety of styles with ranging foci – explain the symbolic foods on the Seder plate and highlight the story of Exodus and meaningful morals. Holy Blossom began drafting a Haggadah focused on Jewish and Islamic shared values and morals for the use at the interfaith Seder. The Interfaith Haggadah included verses from the Quran and Hadith as well as the Torah and Talmud. After the Shehecheyanu, the opening blessing of the Seder to sanctify those gathered in appreciation for being alive and arriving at “this moment,” the Haggadah quoted the opening chapter of the Quran¹⁴. In the section titled, The Four Children, the Haggadah makes the second reference to Islamic teachings¹⁵:

¹³ Rabbi Debbie Stiel, and Rabbi Debbie Stiel serves Temple Beth Sholom in Topeka. “What to Expect at a Passover Seder.” Reform Judaism. Accessed February 14, 2023. <https://reformjudaism.org/jewish-holidays/passover/what-expect-passover-seder>.

¹⁴ Interfaith Seder Hosted by Holy Blossom Temple. Haggadah.

¹⁵ Interfaith Seder Hosted by Holy Blossom Temple. Haggadah.

All: What does the skeptical child ask?

How can I solve problems of such enormity? Encourage him by explaining that he need not solve the problems, but he must at least do something. An authentic hadith of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) says: “Whosoever of you sees an evil, let him change it with his hands, and if he is not able to do so, then let him change it with his tongue, and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart -- and that is the weakest of faith.

This Seder was performed in collaboration with the Imdadul Islamic Centre and HBT.

HBT asked the IIC’s Osman Khan to provide the Islamic content for the Haggadah. The Temple also considered the ways in which Muslims may not be able to participate in the Seder. As wine is used often during this Jewish ritual, and Muslims are forbidden to drink alcohol, the Interfaith Committee substituted grape juice, “fruit of the vine”, for wine. Prior to the evening of the Seder, Imdadul Islamic Centre participants were delivered copies of the Haggadah and the list of items they would need according to their dietary laws. The time of the Seder was set to finish before the Islamic evening prayer.

The planning of the Seder was done by Holy Blossom¹⁶. The Imdadul Islamic Centre were the guests at this ritual. Holy Blossom expected 30 guests collectively from their interfaith partners. With only one member coming from the Imdadul community, and most members being from Holy Blossom. It can be assumed that the attendee from the Muslim community was Osman Khan. Regardless, the Temple’s intentions were to showcase similar values between Jews and Muslims, and they were able to do so with their Interfaith Haggadah and its contents.

¹⁶ Holy Blossom Temple Interfaith Committee Meeting Minutes, 2021-2022

Another collaboration with the Muslim community was the Gifts of Light Concert hosted by HBT. The Gifts of Light Concert in 2021, involved several partners and donated the proceeds to the Anishinaabe Health Foundation¹⁷. Religious and cultural partners were asked to share their message of light, with musical performances in between. The Sayeda Khadija Centre was the Muslim partner involved in this concert. The concert had limited in person capacity because of Covid restrictions, however there was a livestream that was shared afterwards. Dr. Hamid Slimi, an Imam, did not attend the concert in person like the other Interfaith partners but did send a recording reciting a verse of the Quran and his message of light¹⁸.

Because Holy Blossom was the main planner for the Gifts of Light concert and the Interfaith Seder, their Muslim partners were meant to take a more passive planning role. Regardless, HBT's attendance at their events outweighed their Muslim counterparts heavily. That isn't to say that Imdadul Islamic Centre who HBT has worked with longer, hasn't reciprocated the effort. Four days after the Interfaith Seder, the Imdadul Islamic Centre invited Holy Blossom congregants to join them in breaking their fast, during Iftar. HBT encouraged their congregants to attend and noted how important it is to Imdadul when they attend their events. After the Iftar, HBT had pleasantries to say about their experience and the Imdadul Centre as their hosts.

Even in terms of controversial topics, HBT wanted to make their Muslim partners more comfortable rather than stating their opinion on the topic. For example, during the Iftar dinner,

¹⁷ Holy Blossom Temple Interfaith Committee Meeting Minutes, 2021-2022

¹⁸ holyblossomtemple. "Gifts of Light Re-Broadcast." YouTube. YouTube, January 10, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91eiK71pfZ4&t=1s>.

the topic of homosexuality came up. As a Reform synagogue, HBT advocates for the LGBTQ+ community. This did not resonate with the Imdadul Islamic Centre. Rather than finding fault with Imdadul, HBT gives them the benefit of the doubt. HBT encourages their members to approach these situations with active listening in order not to offend.

Holy Blossom's Enthusiasm

According to the Union of Reform Judaism in the United States, “effective interreligious relationships are vital so that diverse faith groups may live together in harmony and work cooperatively.”¹⁹ Combating prejudice and fighting oppression is central to the mission of reform Judaism. As well as devoting time and effort to create interfaith programming.

The Union of Reform Judaism echoes the perceived similarities sentiment. Their statement on Jewish-Muslim relations is as follows. Jews and Muslims have been “interconnected since the time of Abraham.”²⁰ Jews and Muslims share the commonalities of being “ancient monotheistic faiths”, having cultural similarities and the experience of being a minority religion in North America. Despite their resemblance, there is “profound ignorance between Jews and Muslims”²¹ and both parties are uneducated about the other.

¹⁹ “Jewish Views on Interreligious Cooperation.” Reform Judaism. Accessed February 14, 2023. <https://reformjudaism.org/jewish-views-interreligious-cooperation>.

²⁰ “Jewish Views on Interreligious Cooperation.” Reform Judaism. Accessed February 14, 2023. <https://reformjudaism.org/jewish-views-interreligious-cooperation>.

²¹ “Jewish Views on Interreligious Cooperation.” Reform Judaism. Accessed February 14, 2023. <https://reformjudaism.org/jewish-views-interreligious-cooperation>.

Due to the nature and values of Holy Blossom, they are more encouraging and excited for interfaith collaboration with the Muslim community in Toronto. It would be unfair to say that their Muslim partners don't feel the same, however conducting interfaith and educational/informative dialogue may not be a priority for them. However, they may still appreciate the effort put forth by Holy Blossom.

Israel-Palestine Consciousness in North America

The two events, the concert and the Interfaith Seder, were able to integrate multifaith values and teachings. However, the resurgence of violence in Israel-Palestine ceased any continuing work. The politics of the Middle East play an immense role in the consciousness of Jews and Muslims in the diaspora. In the 1960s, a facet of Canadian Jewry was the creation of Israel and its existence²². "Both the legacy of the Holocaust and the tie to Israel have become pillars of Jewish ethnic identification since the late 1960s. These pillars have become central in the affairs of the mainstream national organizations and in religious and educational institutions."²³ The creation and existence of Israel is a major point of contention for individuals on either side. This is a major topic of discussion on university campuses who have both Pro-Israel and Pro-Palestine student groups. For example, the skirmish that took place at York

²² Robinson, Ira. *Canada's Jews: In Time, Space and Spirit*. Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2013.

²³ Robinson, Ira. *Canada's Jews: In Time, Space and Spirit*. Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2013. pg.95

University's Vari Hall in 2019, between the Students Against Israeli Apartheid and a panel discussion given by Israeli Reservists.²⁴

This barrier is one that delegitimizes real interfaith dialogue and connection, or even stops individuals from being in the same room together. Even in the contemporary world, seen recently with the skirmish at Vari Hall, "religion has not only survived the onslaught of modernity, but emerged as a major player in identarian politics" (Khalil, 2). The rationale of interfaith dialogue is to combat "more inward turning of the major world religions whose adherents now work and live together- as neighbors, colleagues, teachers, students and business partners" (Khalil, 2).

The re-emergence of the Israel-Palestine tensions in 2020 led to Pro-Palestine protests around the world and in Toronto Canada. At the time, the Noor Cultural Centre was supposed to have a joint event with HBT. There was conflict over HBT's statement on Israel and Palestine at the time, so the Noor Cultural Centre suggested to postpone the event. This, however, was an instance where the matter was dealt with peacefully and with mutual respect. Kalman Green relayed the message to the HBT interfaith committee.

NoorCC and Holy Blossom Temple interfaith committees have decided to postpone their joint program scheduled for Wednesday May 19 (on intertwined histories of antisemitism and Islamophobia) while the ongoing violence and hostilities in Israel/Palestine continue.

Our mutual relations are very important to our respective communities, and we hope to be able to resume the series in time. In the meantime, we pray to be guided towards sincerely and meaningfully enacting the fundamental religious teaching we share-that all human lives have equal value, and none is more dispensable than or lesser than another.

²⁴ "Anti-Israel Protest at York University Turns Violent | Toronto Sun." Accessed February 14, 2023. <https://torontosun.com/news/local-news/anti-israel-protest-at-york-university-turns-violent>.

Conclusion on Interfaith Dialogue

HBT was able to have two semi-successful events with their Muslim partners in Toronto. The success and planning of the events is not the focus of this paper. But rather commenting on the phenomena of Jewish-Muslim interaction/dialogue and one of its substantial hurdles. Jews and Muslims are believed to have theological and group similarities and therefore trying to conduct events together has been a focus of Holy Blossom. Despite that, the Israel-Palestine debate was an expected barrier for the two groups.

While there was a substantial gap in HBT's interfaith programming, the last two years at HBT concentrated a lot of time and energy on their interfaith committee. The Interfaith committee conducted a lot of introspection about what they wanted to get out of this committee for themselves and their congregants. Therefore overall, since 1995 HBT kept the same keenness in working with the Muslim community and keeping the doors open for educational and informative dialogue. The work that HBT is doing is on-going and there is no final say as to whether all kinds of dialogue have been achieved. Future studies in this area could focus on programming about discussing Israel-Palestine amongst the two groups.

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