

FROM THE RABBI

This is a season for connections and programs that we put on hold since March 2020. One such return was the annual Rabbi Max Wall Lecture at St. Michael's College in early April. While folks could watch on Zoom, many OZ members and St. Mike's students gathered in person.

It was a joyous homecoming, made most special by the speaker, my dear friend, Imam Abdullah Antepli. Imam Antepli was here in 2017 with our mutual friend, Yossi Klein Halevi. It was heartwarming that the St. Michael's team (which includes our very own Nathaniel Lew and Sarah Klionsky) chose to bring Imam Antepli to our community for a second visit, this time as the featured speaker.

I met Imam Antepli in 2006 at the Hartford Seminary as a co-teacher of "Building Abrahamic Partnerships," created by our colleague and friend, Yehezkel Landau. Abdullah was our "course assistant" and student that first year. I cherished learning of Abdullah's experience of the Hajj, the sacred Muslim pilgrimage to the holy site in Mecca. The second year of the program, Abdullah joined our teaching team, then as an ordained Imam.

Now, on his second visit to our community, Imam Antepli came to teach us powerful lessons of courage, mutual understanding, religious wisdom, and spiritual depth, all wrapped up in deep mutual friendship between Jews and Muslims. Imam Antepli is Associate Professor at the Duke University Divinity School and founder of the Muslim Leadership Initiative at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.

I was pleased to have introduced Imam Antepli to my friend Imam Islam Hassan of the Islamic Society of Vermont, in a shared conversation on the podcast Imam Hassan and Rev. Ken White and I created. We had planned a three-day gathering of our communities together, which sadly had to be curtailed when Imam Antepli learned of a family medical emergency which required his quick return home. Both he and I are hoping he can return again.

Imam Antepli's talk was filled with powerful, challenging and uplifting lessons for us. A St. Michael's College article summed up the talk, reflecting on "unimaginable strides toward reconciliation between Jews and Christians in the 20th Century given such a hard history." Now, Imam Antepli commented, Jews and Muslims "are called similarly to bring the 'cosmic gift' of mutual understanding to 'make God smile' in the 21st Century."

The Imam compared Jewish-Christian relations to Muslim—Jewish history and said, "as challenging as Muslim—Jewish relations have been through history, Christian-Jewish relations were arguably even far more challenging and yet their reconciliation has been able to make major strides. He said too often we take this cosmic gift for granted, but it was no small thing."

Imam Antepli pointed out that that Islam "shares so many traditions and sensibilities with Judaism." Judaism and Islam use similar theological language, and both are religious systems based on *law* (for us, *Halacha* and for them, *Sharia*.)

My friend Abdullah has long amused and touched me as he calls himself as "recovering anti-Semite," and still, this time, his confession was more powerful than ever. He grew up in Turkey, where he was exposed to "sophisticated anti-Semitism of the most poison variety." He reflected, "I took the nearest exit and drove as fast as possible away from those views, though

it takes a lifelong effort to keep such early-ingrained feelings at bay.” He recalled a time when he was observing pious Jews praying at the Western Wall — a sight that would have made him physically ill during his anti-Semitic youth. “But when I read translations of the prayers they say, how similarly they are singing God’s praises in a way we Muslims try to do, I was filled with an incredible amount of shame and guilt — someone honoring God in beautiful ways and me feeling hatred,” the Imam said.

Visiting the Kotel in Jerusalem is no small matter. Imam Antepli visits Jerusalem often as the co-founder and co-leader of the “Muslim Leadership Initiative” at Jerusalem’s Hartman Institute, together with Yossi Klein Halevi. This extraordinary program brings American Muslim leaders to study and learn about Judaism. I have the pleasure of intersecting with them when I study at the Hartman Institute each July (*God willing returning in-person this summer—I am a graduate of the “Rabbinic Leadership Initiative.”*) Imam Antepli’s outreach efforts at Hartman, Duke University and internationally have been at great personal risk for him – he and his family have had to hide from death threats in the past. He commented, “We are living in a dark age given the loss of cultural diversity in the many Islamic nations where those communities are no longer present or tolerated....If we can work as hard as the forces trying to divide us and be as intentional as the people trying to make us enemies, then Jews and Muslims can make real progress toward reconciliation.”

Along with his efforts to build Muslim understanding of Jewish history and religion, with 20 centuries of longing to “return to Zion,” Imam Antepli urges us in the Jewish community to do our own “moral homework to understanding Palestinian suffering.” We can achieve an end to conflict by working vigorously for a “two-state” solution, Imam Antepli urged. He spoke with uplifting hope, saying, “I believe there is so much moral decency within Jews and Muslims,” adding that he believes in his heart that “we have the moral health to reject taking things out of context...The problem is not religion but the perversion of religion in certain hands of a minority of extremists.”

We are very fortunate to share warm relationships with many interfaith partners here in our area and through connections such as the Hartman Institute and others. How blessed we are to learn from such righteous, holy, wise leaders as my friend, Abdullah Antepli. Together we can help repair the world.

~ Rabbi Amy Small
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