

## Why we build interfaith community

*I shall bring you to My holy mountain and make you joyous in My house of prayer, for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people.*

Isaiah, quoted in the High Holy Day machzor

On a recent Saturday evening I attended an Ifthar break-the-fast dinner during the holiday of Ramadan, hosted by the Islamic community of San Ramon.

As I entered the space, I was welcomed by my fellow elected council members of the I4C (the interfaith Council of Contra Costa County). An active member of that Muslim community, Maram, who sits on the elected council, introduced the events of the evening. We were regaled with Muslim, Jewish and Christian speakers describing their personal experience of fasting when participating in their own traditions and the meaning it holds for them. A member of Temple Beth Abraham who has been active in interfaith work spoke of her decision to fast during Ramadan after fasting for one day, finding the experience so meaningful that she committed to fasting for the entire month.

She spoke of an increased awareness of the difficulty of refusing food during the days when it was offered, of serving food to family and friends and practicing the discipline of not sharing meals with them. She said she had gained an increased sensitivity to her impact on other people with her words and actions and on the environment, as well as the suffering of people she encountered such as the homeless and others who struggle with food insecurity. During Ramadan, as Muslims experience bodily sensations of hunger, they are encouraged to donate to organizations that provide food to homeless and low-income people.

At the Ifthar, members of that community described their experiences of fasting during Ramadan. A woman with diabetes described the sense of loss she felt at no longer being able to fast. She missed the profound spiritual insights that she previously had attained from fasting in the past.

To break the fast at sundown, dates and water were distributed to all who were present. The community then moved to their prayer space for a brief evening service. This was followed by a plentiful meal and conversations shared by all who were present. As members of a synagogue, we may wonder why pursuit of interfaith community building in our local area, matters. In this article I will discuss just a few reasons why I follow this very pursuit.

**1. Many of our own members are part of interfaith families**, including those who send children to our thriving preschool, and non-members who do the same. Interfaith families benefit from seeing their own experiences reflected in the public conversations of our leadership and members. Interfaith families may benefit from tools that can be used to talk across different religious customs and beliefs to increase cross-faith understanding. Historically, Jewish communities have not always known how to be welcoming of interfaith families without feeling that our own identity might be watered down, or even threatened. Now we are seeing that the ability for our community to be welcoming is essential. Finally, people who convert to Judaism carry their experiences of growing up in other faith traditions, whether observed, or not. They may not be completely cut off from their own roots, as early experiences may have been formative of some part of their current identity and values.

**2. We are learning that right relationship is a key aspect of our survival as a greater Jewish community into the 21st century.** When we develop good relationships with local faith groups and include awareness of them in our internal conversations, we learn about what matters to them, and how they benefit from learning about us. When issues come up, such as the recent protest by the Westboro Baptist church (a hate group) in Walnut Creek, we can develop a coordinated response, as we did, based on previously established relationships. Our safety is enhanced by these positive relationships. In Charlottesville, NC as hate groups marched and chanted anti-Semitic slogans, interfaith clergy counter-demonstrated and gathered at a local church to provide strength and support to the local synagogue and to each other.

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**3. It's the right things to do.** Local initiatives like the White Pony Express, which provides food and free clothing to homeless and low-income people, is an essential service in Contra Costa County. The Winter Nights program is sponsored by the Interfaith Council, which houses homeless families in rotating local houses of worship for two weeks at a time during the winter months. Programs like this are run by various faith communities coming together in common cause for Tikkun Olam, serving those in our community most in need. This kind of work stems directly from cherished moral values which are integral to our varied religious traditions.

**4. We have more in common than we might think.** I have been happy to have ongoing relationships with individuals I have met through interfaith work. I have become friends with some of them and learned that we share many of the same values and concerns, and that there is a desire to learn more, and a sense that we don't know enough about each other. I have been asked questions like: 'What is a cantor?' Or, 'Why wouldn't you eat dairy and meat in the same meal?' People of other faiths sometimes don't know the most basic information about Judaism, and unless they have someone to ask, they might never learn.

**5. We desperately need a counterpoint to extremism.** Hatred which uses religion as a reason to exert violence is a terrifying plague in modern times. No faith is exempt. I quote rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks: 'Murder in pursuit of power while invoking the name of God is sacrilege, whoever does it, whoever the victim, whatever the faith'.

When we dialogue across the lines of religion, we demonstrate that violence and senseless hatred of the other based on religion and religious identity is not what we are about, and it is not the way forward to a more peaceful world where all people can live together in safety. Again, rabbi Sacks: ... 'Today God is calling us, Jew, Christian and Muslim (NB: I would add Buddhist), to let go of hate and the preaching of hate, and live at last as brothers and sisters, true to our faith and a blessing to others regardless of their faith, honoring his name by honoring his image, humankind.'