Encounters beyond the Daled Amot

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Encounters outside the *daled amot* can be challenging. And the more religious one is, the higher the stakes. Still, the higher the stakes, the greater the potential returns, so for the most observant, interfaith encounters can be greatly enriching and enlightening. What happens when Orthodox Jews take part in serious conversation with religious leaders from other faiths? The following discussion will draw on years of experience in the world of interfaith encounters and, in particular, a program of the Center on Religion, Culture and Conflict at Drew University, where we invited young emerging leaders from religious communities around the world for an interfaith seminar. We will discuss some of the challenges faced, as well as benefits and lessons learned by our Jewish participants during these interfaith interactions, as outlined by the participants themselves, and in their own words.

During the summers of 2013 and 2016, more than 50 young leaders—Jews, Christians and Muslims from around the world—visited Drew University and the Center on Religion, Culture and Conflict (CRCC) to take part in a three-to-four-week program on interfaith engagement and peacebuilding.[1] Our goal with this ongoing program, the Drew Institute on Religion and Conflict Transformation, is to facilitate greater understanding among people of different faiths, namely, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, through dialogue, social interaction, and shared living. Our long-term goal is to build a generation of strong interfaith leaders and peacebuilders around the globe.

Our participants over the first two years have included Indonesians, Pakistanis, Nigerians, Egyptians, Israelis, Palestinians, and Ukrainians who lived on campus

for three to four weeks. Much of our time was spent in formal sessions where we discussed a wide array of subjects. We walked back and forth across campus together each day and shared virtually every meal. We visited each other's houses of worship: prominent cathedrals, mosques, and synagogues in New York City, including a visit with Rabbi Marc Angel at Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue. We even prayed together on a few occasions; or, at least, we prayed in each other's presence. Blessings over food, a virtually universal practice, were common at the Institute. We mourned together at each other's houses of worship just days after the terrorist attack on July 14, 2016 in Nice, France.

Jewish delegations to the institute have included Jews from Israel, Indonesia, and Ukraine. The Israelis were all Orthodox Jews from towns throughout Israel and the West Bank. One participant from the latter commented on the irony of coming from a situation where Jews and Muslims live as neighbors, yet are hostile toward one another. She explained that the relationships that do occur are usually of an employer-employee nature, and even when personal connections are created, opportunities to engage in religious matters are virtually non-existent. For this young woman, the Drew Institute presented her first serious exposure to people of different religions, and by the end, she described her experience as "three weeks of fascinating religious dialogue that were deep and fruitful."

Our formal sessions varied in length, format, and structure. In some cases, we were grouped by faith, in others by country, and many sessions were in plenary. Topics of the sessions ranged from how to do effective community organizing to tools for facilitating interfaith dialogue. We began by providing a basic introduction to Christianity, Judaism, and Islam and continued to move into increasingly complex exchanges about deeper theological and social/political questions.

Before we could do any of this, however, it was critical to build trust among the participants. With participants coming from regions where people of different faiths are often highly suspicious of one another, cultivating such an environment took time. The formal sessions pushed people to be honest and open, allowing them to build confidence in one another. There were the many interactions outside the classroom—over meals, in the dorms, on field trips, and in social events—that contributed to the building of trust. We quickly learned that even in places such as Nigeria and Israel-Palestine, where religious groups are generally segregated, it is rare that communities are completely homogenous. Hence, in

theory, inter-religious interactions could happen any time. Typically, however, they do not.

The rustic feel of Drew's campus (aka "the Forest") in the summer offered respite from the frequently tense and sometimes violent environments in which many of our participants normally live. There is no doubt that this setting contributed to an atmosphere more conducive to honest dialogue and fresher, clearer thinking. We had selected our invitees based on their open-minded attitudes and eagerness to meet "others." All signed statements pledging to come with an open mind and to be respectful at all times. We also took into account the importance of building trust gradually when designing the institute's curriculum. We took time to build rapport and relationships prior to moving into some of the deeper, richer, and riskier conversations.

In doing interfaith work, one should strive to maintain balance between what is often called a "safe space" and what leading conflict resolution expert Dan Shapiro, in his book *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable,*[2] calls "brave space." The latter term can be used to describe an environment where there is a level of trust, respect, and courage sufficient to allow exploration of areas that involve greater sensitivities. In truth, many interfaith interactions remain within the boundaries of the safe space, while the touchier, taboo subjects are generally avoided. In some cases, this may be for the best; if adequate precautions are not taken and without someone with at least some skills and experience in facilitating difficult conversations, *bold* can quickly turn to *reckless*. The brave space is where people feel more than safe; they feel protected and emboldened enough to venture into more sensitive areas. It means treating with dignity people with whom you disagree, often on the most fundamental questions about how the world works and the nature of God. It means feeling comfortable enough to be candid, yet without being confrontational. The brave space is riskier than the safe space, but it can yield much higher dividends. After all, what is the point of assembling such a fascinating group of people from around the world across the faith divide, just to play it safe. And thus we pushed on, venturing into uncharted territory.

What were some of those riskier conversations? And what was the benefit of having those conversations? In one session, a world-renowned Modern Orthodox rabbi associated with the settler movement addressed the group, asking the Muslim leaders why, if they abhor the violence and hatred of groups such as Daesh (aka, ISIS) and Al Qaeda, do they not do more to condemn and challenge the extremists that are claiming to act in the name of their faith. This led to a rather lively discussion, with participants responding that they, indeed, do regularly respond and condemn Islamic extremism as un-Islamic. They also

turned the question back to the rabbi about violence perpetrated by aggressive Jewish groups. Muslims and Christians posed complex theological questions directly to each other; for example, the question of Jesus's divinity. Some of these conversations were difficult, but the participants expressed their immense gratitude in having an opportunity to ask tough questions and share their honest views.

Over the three-to-four-week period, we engaged in different forms of interfaith dialogue. For the more formal dialogue sessions, we employed two closely related methods known as Textual Reasoning (TR) and Scriptural Reasoning (SR). Scriptural Reasoning is where religious people of different faiths meet to read and reflect on their scriptures together. Textual Reasoning is similar in technique, but in TR the conversation is between people of the same faith tradition; in other words, *intra*-faith dialogue. The idea is that participants engage in substantive exchanges about the texts without surrendering the particularity of their own tradition. Cambridge University's SR.org emphasizes this point, stating, "It is not about seeking agreement but rather exploring the texts and their possible interpretations across faith boundaries, and learning to 'disagree better'. The result is often a deeper understanding of others' and one's own scriptures, as well as the development of strong bonds across faith communities."[3]

One experience common to all of the Orthodox Jewish participants was that their sustained interactions with people of other faiths, whether in the formal sessions or informal conversations, moved them to reflect even more deeply on their own faith. In fact, it is often the case with people of all religions that encounters with the "other" push them to take a fresh look at their own faith. One of our participants, for example, said that seeing similarities between Judaism and Islam caused her to imagine "Jewish laws through a more universal lens." One Orthodox rabbi also emphasized the reflexive aspect of his inter-religious encounters, concluding that this is not "an outside issue, but rather, is a core Jewish issue" because it triggered thinking about his own conception of what religion is, what Judaism is, and what, ultimately, is truly unique about Judaism. This sentiment was echoed by another Orthodox rabbi who suggested that the greatest benefit of interacting with a broader religious world, outside of our *daled amot*, is the opportunity to view Judaism within a broader context. More specifically, he told me, "my understanding of various religious aspects—halakhot, mitzvot, beliefs, social-religious aspects, and religious motifs—were profoundly influenced by the inter-religious conversations. Thanks to the dialogue, what was always obvious became special, and amazing. This experience is both very intellectually interesting and religiously strengthening." One young woman said that she came to the institute with an "open heart to learn and understand." Though

apprehensive at first, she quickly arrived at a place where she actually felt much safer in her own faith. This would ultimately translate into a feeling of becoming wiser. In the end, interacting and exchanging ideas with people of other faiths actually strengthened her conviction in her own religious beliefs and practices.

At the same time that Orthodox Jews discovered a renewed love for their own unique beliefs and practices, they also came to see the many places where there are great similarities between religions. This was especially true with regard to affinities felt between Jewish and Muslim women. Several Orthodox Jewish women said that some of the most exciting and memorable conversations they had during the institute were with Muslim women on issues related to the status of women in their respective faith traditions. While the Jewish women had certainly heard about sexism in Muslim countries, direct and personal exchanges with women from some of those countries offered them a much better understanding of how the women themselves experience and perceive the religious restrictions on them. Even more eye-opening was their discovery that Muslim and Jewish women often deal with many of the same issues, discovering parallels in religious laws and practices that are restrictive of women. Questions regarding hair covering, modesty, marriage and divorce, and women's religious leadership were discussed at length. Our visits to each other’s houses of worship stimulated fascinating conversations about women’s participation in religious ceremonies. Attending Friday *jumma* prayer in a large Islamic center in New York, one Orthodox Jewish woman noted feeling the same sense of marginalization she often experienced in her own synagogue. Women were seated far from the center of activity, where they could neither see nor hear. Inspired by this common bond, they began to explore the complex ways in which observant women in both faiths struggle to negotiate between a deep love for their religion and frustration with sexism within the tradition. This raises questions about intersectionality, where various identities—religious, ethnic, national, gender—come into play at once. For while this dialogue between women challenged certain conventions and thus exposed points of tension within the faith, it also fostered a feeling of kinship between women, specifically the Muslim and Jewish women. “In this way,” asserted one Jewish woman, “maybe inter-faith work can be dangerous to one's own faith.”

The Drew Institute participants found SR and TR valuable for several reasons. To begin, these sessions helped them to expand their understanding of the other religions with which they had very little contact prior to the institute, even in situations where they were living virtually side-by-side. One participant felt that the SR/TR sessions elevated the overall intellectual atmosphere of the institute, stimulating scholarly discussions. Another found the SR/TR sessions inspiring,

shifting the conversation from what he described as “stagnant interpretations of sacred scripture toward reinterpretation, with contextual wisdom and contemporary minds.” As it turns out, SR is one of the tools employed at the institute that many participants are now implementing as they build interfaith dialogue programs back in their home countries. In truth, TR is what many of the Jews do every day: discuss, dissect, and debate the meaning of Jewish scripture together with other Jews. It is the experience of discussing their scripture with non-Jews, as well as the reading and discussion of non-Jewish texts, that makes SR so novel, and thus requires a great deal of courage and, well, *chutzpa*.

Along with all the wonderful parallels, many substantial differences were revealed, but our participants did not shy away from this difference. It is a common misconception with regard to interfaith dialogue that the goal is to simply identify and celebrate points of similarity. While there can certainly be great joy in the eureka moments of "we do virtually the same thing," this is ultimately not the point. Rather, finding these affinities can serve as a point of departure toward much deeper levels of engagement and exchange of ideas. For one young rabbi, the encounter not only strengthened his own conviction in Judaism, but it convinced him that certain differences were so significant that they rendered these three faiths incompatible, at least theologically. This young man built many meaningful relationships with people of different backgrounds and understood that virtually any differences could be bridged through friendship. Yet, during the deep immersion into the theological dimensions of the seminar, he discovered core differences between himself and his Christian and Muslim friends, differences that reflect entirely different ways of viewing the world.

In truth, the acknowledgement and articulation of differences can be much more interesting and inspiring. Take, for instance, the joy of learning a new language. The richness is not in the identification of cognates, but rather, in discovering the ways that differences in language reflect varying patterns of thought between different peoples and cultures. “What we can do together,” suggested one rabbi after attending the institute, “is listen to the perspective of the other, and that the very difference and strangeness may offer me something that I am lacking.”

Another valuable feature of inter-religious interchange is that in speaking face-to-face with practitioners of other faiths, we have the occasion to present our religion directly to the other. This often provides an opportunity to dispel basic misconceptions about one’s faith. During the sustained dialogue and intimate environment of the institute, Jewish participants took advantage of new openings to explicate and elaborate on some of the more complex and controversial ideas in Judaism. In a deep conversation with an Anglican bishop, for example, one

rabbi took time to articulate the dream of rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem, what it means to many Jews and what it means to him personally. According to the rabbi, his Anglican counterpart, “for the first time in his life, began to understand and even to empathize with our dream.” In another candid conversation, this time with an Egyptian Coptic Christian leader, he disclosed that many Jews do not appreciate the term “Old Testament.” He explained that this term implies the scriptures are outdated and irrelevant today, or worse, that “Old” reflects the attitudes of the people who hold those scriptures. It is important to note that this principle worked both ways; for example, one Muslim from Pakistan said, “During the three weeks, my interactions with Jews, Christians, and Muslims who had come from diverse backgrounds, cultures, faiths, and traditions have enlightened me [and] enabled me to understand the different perspectives of these communities with greater insight and also prepared me to counter the mutual stereotypes against each other’s religions.” Another Islamic scholar from Pakistan wanted to dispel misconceptions about Islam as a violent faith. In grappling with verses from the Koran that talk about war and killing, he turned to the rabbi to ask about tools the Oral Torah has for dealing with problematic passages.

Indeed, this last point leads to one of the most compelling reasons for Orthodox Jews to engage in interfaith dialogue: Jews have an obligation to contribute to collective world wisdom. In the words of one rabbi, “[the interfaith encounters] helped me back to one of our main roles as Jews —to be light to all nations, to be *Or l’Goyim*.” He explained that as an Israeli Modern Orthodox rabbi and leader facing the challenges associated with the rebuilding of Israeli society after thousands of years, he often feels pressure to focus solely on the inner Jewish-Israeli challenges, inside the *daled amot*. “You have neither time nor 'free-space' in your mind to deal with 'outside' issues.” During the institute the rabbi came to the sudden realization that this mitzvah, to be a light to all nations, is not about some abstract, Utopian dream, but rather, it is all about the here and now, in our reality today. “I started to think in my prayers about other nations, and to pray for many problems around the world with which I had suddenly become familiar. This is exactly what I consider going beyond the *daled amot*.”

As one participant put it, the modern and postmodern world present challenges for traditional orthodox societies. As such, it would seem paradoxical that interaction and exchange with highly religious people of other faiths could contribute to a *strengthening* of contemporary Judaism. However, we need only consider a few historical examples to see that this apparent paradox is not new. Great sages throughout Jewish history, most notably, Maimonides, were integrated to varying degrees into the surrounding non-Jewish world. They

influenced and were influenced by their surrounding world, producing vital contributions to Jewish thought.

There are many benefits, both secular and spiritual, to engaging in interfaith interactions. Inter-religious dialogue can serve to reduce hostilities among people of different backgrounds. As SR pioneer Prof. Peter Ochs[4] told the institute in 2013, the reading of scripture tends to warm people, because it brings us close to our spiritual hearth. One participant found that “interfaith work can foster cooperation toward common goals, and even cooperation to resolve common problems for all of us as human beings.” Christianity and Islam share Judaism’s concern with looking after the ill and impoverished, and activity around these values can provide powerful opportunities for interfaith service. The many productive conversations between our Israeli and Palestinian participants are a testament to this, and in fact, groups from every nation that joined the institute have already begun to incorporate their learning into constructive interfaith projects back home.

Of course, there are great spiritual rewards that result from encounters outside the *daled amot*. For one Orthodox rabbi, he found that this is a way to deepen one’s own faith commitment while simultaneously deepening engagement with members of other faiths. The interface with different religious leaders had a significant impact on his worldview not just as a person but also as an Orthodox rabbi.

“There is much that we share, and much that divides us,” declared one of our participants. The question is how do we learn from both our similarities and our differences.

[1] The Drew Institute on Religion and Conflict Transformation is funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Endeavor Foundation. The Institute is directed by Founding Director of the CRCC, Dean Chris Taylor and myself, current CRCC Director.

[2] Shapiro, Daniel, (2016) *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable: How to Resolve Your Most Emotionally Charged Conflicts.* Viking Press.

[3] www.scripturalreasoning .org.

[4] See Journal of Scriptural Reasoning http://jsr.shanti.virginia.edu/.