

Frenemies: Judaism and Islam

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I always used to regard Islam as a religion much closer to Judaism than Christianity was. Its passionate Orientalism resonated much more with my experience of Judaism—less impersonally theological, instead more behavioral and warm. The Muslim centrality of Shariah, is akin to our wider use of the term Torah, with its emphasis on behavior. Maimonides said that according to Jewish law one may take an oath by Allah. According to him the word Allah and our names for God were one and the same, something one could not say about the Trinity.

The Muslim veneration of Mohammad goes way beyond our respect for Moses, who was revered less as a quasi-miraculous person and more as the vehicle of transmitting the Torah. Maimonides also pointed out that Christianity accepted the same Old Testament as we did, even if it thought it had been superseded by the New. Islam, on the other hand, claims we had forged and distorted the original text. A rather difficult claim to take seriously, given the prior existence of our text long before Islam ever appeared on earth. But since when have theological assertions ever been subject to logic or history?

I have always had a bias towards Orientalism and its mood. But there were other aspects of Orientalism I did not like: its attitudes to minorities, its male chauvinism, its more autocratic, less progressive mentality, and the tendency to violence that Jihadism seemed to encourage (yes, I do know there are rival concepts). But many of those elements can be found in the West, too. As a result I always felt a far greater affinity to Islam and a much closer personal connection with those Muslims I encountered in my youth and my career in the rabbinate.

However, once one leaves the theoretical regions of religious interaction there is an altogether different reality. The elephant in the room of course, is Israel and the presumption that this is what has soured relations. But the fact is that Jews were not treated that well under Islam. Jewish communities were assaulted, forced to convert and often killed just as often as Muslim powers tolerated them as second-class citizens, dhimmis. It was worse under the Shia than the Sunnis (and, of course, much worse under much of Christianity). But even then it was often random and unpredictable. This was the state of affairs even before modern nationalism appeared on the scene.

Jews had always been migrating to the Land of Israel. It is arrant nonsense to link Jewish settlement in the Middle East to the Holocaust. The religious connection with the Land had always been powerful. Three times a day we have prayed for Zion for two thousand years. Just think of Yehuda HaLevi's famous poem written in medieval Spain, "My heart is in the east, and I am at the edge of the west." The Ottomans positively welcomed Jews escaping from Spain. But now two nationalisms have clashed in what has become a case of two families wanting to possess the same house, not being willing to share it,

and two religions each supporting their own (more or less).

I once used to try to avoid tension with Muslim friends by asserting that I was not an admirer of Zionism as a secular movement, that I was a Jew by religion. But the truth was that my religion's connection with the Land of Israel was so powerful, even essential, that I did indeed want us to have a space of our own, and if that meant defending it, so be it. Given that everything is now measured in terms of National Identity and if Serbs and Croats can have their own states regardless of reluctant movements of population, to deny this to Jews, given the record of doors closed against them, could only be explained in terms of anti-Semitism.

Still, to this day I try to avoid awkward subjects. I never really liked nationalism. It always struck me as bordering dangerously on jingoism. I toyed with the idea of a return to a variation of the millet system under the Ottomans, where each religion ran its own affairs under a centralized bureaucracy. There is no way I could see that working now in the Middle East, where even internal Muslim factions are murderously engaged against each other.

Everywhere in the Middle East, the religious voice is growing and increasing in power at the popular level. We really are in the midst of a Kulturkampf, a battle of religion against religion, sect against sect, and all of them against the secularists. Tom Friedman argued recently in the New York Times that the voices of secularists are rising in the Middle East. I hope so, but I am skeptical. A few swallows do not make a spring.

Here's the problem. Judaism is a priority for me. More so than for many Jews. If I care about the survival of Judaism, I will inevitably care about Jews, wherever they are. If I hear about Jews being attacked or oppressed, I do want to help them to respond. Just as when the Jews of Damascus were attacked and killed in 1840 (long before Zionism), or the Jews of Mashad were forcibly converted to Islam in 1839. The whole of the Jewish world rose to their defense. That is how I feel to this day.

Now if I care this way about other Jews, why should not Muslims feel the same way about other Muslims they see mistreated by Jews or Christians or anyone else? Cannot I maintain contact and friendship with people who have different priorities to me, so long as we respect each other's differences?

Once I thought that people with a certain kind of education would incline to think for themselves. But nowadays whole nations and communities are so infected with deep anti-Semitism that it is almost true to say that a Muslim anywhere in the world is likely to be preconditioned to dislike Jews. In the same way that there are Jews who believe every single Muslim wants to kill them. I wonder nowadays when I see people in Muslim dress whether I should assume they hate me. In Abu Dhabi airport last month I wondered if someone might want to stab me. Even in New York I often notice black looks at my kipa from Muslims. But then Charedi New Yorkers tell me they often get black looks from almost everyone.

So what are we to do? Try to maintain a friendship by never speaking about

the unspeakable? The fact is that everywhere one can find a distinction between the view of the masses, the prevailing orthodoxy, and the views of individuals. Arab Muslims are very different than Indian Muslims, who are different than Indonesians. Everywhere there is a majority that hates and discriminates, and a minority that cares and thinks for itself. Jews vary in their attitudes depending on religious affiliation, education, and degree of acculturation. Just because some, even many, of the "other" do hate or dislike us, should we allow that to deny ourselves the benefits of sharing common interests and the richness of other cultures with those willing to share?

The fact is that despite the whipped up frenzy of hatred that supporters of Hamas indulged in this past summer, there are so many examples of Jews still trying to build bridges with Muslims and plenty of examples of Muslims responding positively.

An editorial in the London Jewish News last week highlighted all the positive moves that are being made between Jews and Muslims in the UK. In Stamford Hill both religions combine forces on social issues. Similar green shoots can be found in New York. We must not let the hatemongers control the agenda, and neither must we fall back on a default position of antagonism.

These are the hardest times I can remember for interreligious relations, with many Christian groups too. Just as in the world of the sixties an understanding emerged to avoid theological issues that divided religions, so now I believe we can agree to avoid political ones if we wish to speak to each other. We can feel a person's pain without agreeing about the political circumstances, whether it is race, religion, or politics. Just because secular politicians seem incapable of civility, we who claim religious inspiration must not descend into that black hole. I am more convinced than ever that we must persevere. I hope this coming secular year will be a better one for peace and understanding. We are not all barbarians.