

Stories of Compassion and Collaboration are Told as Three Faiths Share Their Holy Days, Albany, NY

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By Melissa Hale-Spencer

Sharifa Din spoke in a soft voice as the circle of three dozen listeners leaned forward to hear her words.

She brought them back to a time six years ago that seemed like yesterday. "Right after September 11, we had to close our school for about a week," said Din, referring to the Annur School, a small Muslim school in Schenectady.

Other Muslim schools had received death threats, she said, as some in the circle nodded agreement.

"When we came back the first day, we were very nervous," Din said. The school's answering machine was filled with messages. "We kind of panicked," she recalled. "Were they going to be death threats?"

The first one was from a local church, saying, "We know you're going through a hard time. If you need men to guard your door, call us."

The next message was from a local synagogue. "We hope the children are safe," it said. "We know you're not part of this," it went on, referring to the terrorists' attacks.

All of the messages were like that, said Din. "It was amazing."

Din's story was greeted with warm applause from the circle of listeners.

The Interfaith Story Circle of the Tri-City Area met last Thursday night to mark the confluence of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian holy days as members of those faiths shared stories of compassion and collaboration among them.

The sacred Muslim month of Ramadan and the Jewish lunar month of Tishrei, which includes the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, coincide this year. They won't coincide again for another three decades. Also, Oct. 4 is the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi and the first Sunday of October is Worldwide Communion Sunday.

"Storytelling is really about sharing our narratives," says Audrey Seidman, who helped organize last Thursday night's session at The College of Saint Rose Hubbard Interfaith Sanctuary in Albany.

She was inspired by Rabbi Arthur Waskow's book, *The Tent of Abraham*. Waskow directs the Shalom Center in Philadelphia.

"Abraham opened his tent to all four sides as a sign of welcome," said Seidman this week.

She called the people in the story circle "extraordinarily loving and open." Seidman said, "I really like learning about the similarities in all faiths."

She cites Rabbi Waskow's example of the parallel stories of Abraham's family in the Jewish Torah and the Muslim Koran, with the important difference of which son was sacrificed.

"There are so many similarities within our differences," she said. "I have much to learn."

Seidman worked for a long time on the story she told last Thursday night. "As a Jewish woman, I wanted to tell of a collaboration between Jews and Muslims." She gleaned information from the Internet, piecing together a true story from various on-line sources — ranging from a church newsletter to a United States Peace Institute report. Then she made the story her own.

"I wrote it out on a legal pad, then transferred it to index cards...I bothered people and made them listen, again and again, until I finally got it fluid."

She plans to tell the story again on Yom Kippur.

Variety of views

One of the storytellers on Thursday night, referring to an interview he heard on National Public Radio, said that children hear the stories told by corporate America — how our wealth and possessions are measures of our success, or how we have to destroy others before they destroy us.

“It’s important that we talk about honesty, that we talk about sharing, that we talk about being at peace,” he said. “Our children need to hear these stories.”

A Jewish woman, a teacher who has lived in Israel, told a story from “many years ago” of a rabbi who was always late for services on Yom Kippur, a day of atonement and repentance from sin. Two lads from his shtetl were sent to spy on him and they discovered that, in the middle of the night, he was chopping wood, which he left anonymously, without pay, for a poor widow.

The rabbi showed up, as usual, at the very last minute for services. “It’s not heaven he ascends to,” said the storyteller. “It’s way above that.”

An older woman told a personal story of inclusion. Raised as a Catholic, she went back to visit the school and church she had attended as a child; she had read in the newspaper that it had been sold to a black congregation.

“They were very hospitable,” she said, describing her tour as “so nostalgic.”

“All these memories came back,” she said, telling, for example how she brought a tin dishpan to school and used it to slide down the shale hill there. She also said, “There was a lot of prejudice back then.”

“I was impressed with the happiness these people radiated,” she said. “It was just contagious. They invited me to their Bible study...I intend to go.”

Another woman told of how a Catholic priest had counseled at a Methodist camp in the Adirondacks where she was a naturalist. He dressed in shorts and a T-shirt and the campers had no idea he was a priest, she said. “They might have suspected something when he was telling dirty nun jokes,” she quipped.

He and the Methodist pastor now do a lot of things together, she said.

An elderly man recalled how, many years ago, his college roommate, Bernie, became immersed in his thesis on the Holocaust.

“He really got taken up in his studies,” he said.

After graduating, Bernie went into the military and was stationed in Germany. Before he left Europe, he visited Auschwitz, camping out “as close as possible” to the Nazi death camp.

“The last night he was there, he was sleeping when, at 4 a.m., a train came by and blew its whistle. When people in the camp heard the train, they knew their time was coming, to make room for new arrivals. Bernie woke up in a cold sweat.”

After being discharged, he came back to his hometown in the Hudson Valley, where a new synagogue was being built. “The building was desecrated...with swastikas and so forth.”

Bernie took out an ad with some Roman Catholics that said, “Never in our town can we allow this to happen.”

They helped clean up the synagogue so that it looked right by the time of its dedication.

“Divine fruit”

A petit woman, Audrey Seidman stood to tell the “real story” of a girl named Dalia who grew up in a stone house she loved in Israel. Her family of Bulgarian Jews had emigrated to Ramle in 1948 when she was just a baby. She especially loved the walled-in yard with the lemon tree.

In July of 1967, just after the Six-Day War had ended, Dalia was home on a break from college. A man named Bashir al-Khayri who was born in her house came to the door with two cousins. As they toured the house, she sensed they felt like they were in a sanctuary.

That day, said Seidman, “She lost her innocence in her love for Israel...She found there was a forced expulsion of the Arab people from that home.”

Dalia, in turn, went to visit Bashir and his family and was impressed with their hospitality although struck by how far apart they were politically. “Each looked through the lens of their own suffering,” said Seidman.

Bashir’s father came to visit Dalia’s house and felt the stone walls he had built in the 1930s. “Tears rolled down his cheeks,” said Seidman, as he looked at the lemon tree. He treasured the lemons he was given from that tree.

Bashir was convicted of a bombing and spent 15 years in jail.

Dalia inherited the house and wanted to make amends. She and her husband sought out Bashir and he said to use it to serve the Arab population of Ramle, particularly the children. In 1991, a man from a Christian family became the executive director of the programs run from Dalia Landau’s old house.

An olive tree was planted in the courtyard. “They prayed,” said Seidman, “that it would yield divine fruit of peace and justice.”

“An international ambassador”

Nancy Marie Payne told a true story, too, about children transcending differences to save an endangered bird.

The lesser kestrel, she said, lives in Spain and China and all the way down to South Africa. “This bird, like any bird, does not recognize political boundaries,” said Payne.

It also doesn’t recognize ethnic or religious differences, she said. “All humans are dangerous.”

Payne told the story of two men who wanted to save the bird — Nader Al-Khateeb, the founder and president of a Palestinian environmental protection group, and Dan Alon, who directs an ornithological group in Jerusalem.

They came from different worlds, warring worlds. Dan, as a soldier in the Israeli army, had been stoned. Some of Nader’s family had been detained by Israeli soldiers.

The two men came to their first meeting filled with fears and apprehension, yet they were able to develop a working relationship for the preservation of this bird. Their plan was to have children build birdhouses.

Together they raised over \$40,000 for the project but the hard part was yet to come: “They had to work with the bureaucracy,” said Payne.

The Israeli government would not send children to any place not deemed secure. The Palestinian parents were wary.

It was decided the children would meet in the desert, where the kestrels feed, away from the influences of the city and their established niches.

An old monastery was found in a secure area and a dozen Jewish children and a dozen Palestinian children were taken there. “On the bus, the children wouldn’t look at each other or talk to each other,” said Payne. On arrival, they refused to play the planned games with each other.

“They won’t interact; they won’t hold hands,” she said. “It was looking like it would be a dismal failure. Then a bird flies by.”

In Arabic, someone yells, "Kestrel!"

Then, in Hebrew, someone yells, "Kestrel!"

Conversation takes place in English:

"You can borrow my binoculars."

"Hey, there's another bird!"

"By the end of the day," said Payne, "a little Jewish girl says to a little Arab girl, 'I have nine cats...They sleep with me at night.'

"They were talking. It was a beginning...due to a bird, an international ambassador...."

"My honor comes from God"

Dr. Mussarat Chaudhry took the group back in time to the year 637. With careful attention to detail, she told the story of Omar the Great's visit to Jerusalem, highlighted with descriptions of her own impressions of the places she had visited.

After a long siege, Omar the Great "wanted to go meet the people of Jerusalem as they had wanted," said Chaudhry. (Omar the Great is credited with uniting the Arabs as the Commander of the Faithful, replacing the anarchy of nomadic life in the desert.)

As his horse suffered on the long journey, he left it and walked on. Omar and his servant took turns riding a camel. For a grand entrance to the city, Omar's generals wanted him to wear new garments and ride upon a Turk-ish horse.

"He said, 'No. My honor comes from God and my faith.' He entered Jerusalem in humility. They were expecting a royally dressed armed conqueror," said Chaudhry. "They addressed the man on the camel as Omar...Omar the Great was walking and his servant was sitting on the camel."

He told the people no one would be harmed and was offered the keys of the city and the holy sepulcher.

When it was time for prayer, the bishop offered Omar to pray within the church but Omar went outside. (It is said he did not want his people to appropriate the church when he was no longer there to protect their rights.) At the site where he prayed, there is now a mosque, which Chaudhry visited two years ago.

"A message for me"

Kate Dudding, who was raised a Roman Catholic, said she was always proud of being a quarter Irish. She grew up in an area of Connecticut where she was in the minority. Every day, in school, she recalled, "You stuck out with your silence" as the Protestant children recited the Lord's Prayer.

Dudding learned that her grandparents came to America at the time of the Irish potato famine. She did research that told her the starvation wasn't because of lack of food. "I found out it was the wealthy Protestant landowners who could get a better price in England, so the poor Roman Catholics were left to die in the ditches...I was beginning to take it personally," said Dudding.

Last October, she visited Ireland for the first time. She has always loved old churches and was shocked and up-set to learn some of the churches she saw in Ireland weren't Catholic churches. She ended up in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin and, despite her misgivings, went in "with my chip on my shoulder."

Once inside, she observed a hole in a church door and learned it was made in about 1300 when two warring lords fought outside the church. One took sanctuary inside and, when he realized battling wasn't worth it, hacked a hole in the door to shake hands with the other lord and reconcile.

Dudding also took in a display on Jonathan Swift who had been the dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral. "He fought for the Irish Catholics with his pen," she said.

This led her to consider, "Maybe I should rethink my animosity."

As she stopped to contemplate, she read the Biblical verse painstakingly sewn into the needlepoint kneeler before her: "Be not overcome by evil. Overcome evil with good."

"I think this is a message for me," she thought. "I should just consider this a place of worship,' and that's how I left St. Patrick's Cathedral."

"A holy place"

A bearded man told a story that was spare in detail but deep in allegorical meaning.

Two brothers shared a field, he said. One was married with many children; the other was a bachelor.

They worked very hard and split their produce evenly.

One day, the married brother thought it was not fair. His brother had no children to care for him in old age. So he put an extra bag of grain in his brother's barn.

At the same time, the other brother, too, decided it was not fair. His brother had so many more mouths to feed, so he put an extra bag of grain into his brother's barn.

As the brothers continued to do this, they would be surprised every morning as they found they had the same amount of grain as before.

One day, they passed each other on the road, each carrying a sack of grain for the other. God looked down from heaven and said, "This is a holy place...the place where two people meet in love."

The Temple of Solomon was built on that place.