



## A Jew and a Muslim Go Upstate...

I WAS GETTING READY TO HEAD UP TO MY ROOM ON the last night of a retreat for emerging Jewish and Muslim religious leaders, when I stumbled upon an argument between two of my favorite people at the gathering – a Jewish woman and a Muslim man. It went something like this:

Woman: “My people were kicked out but it’s always been our land. And now we’ve just returned to our homeland.”

Man: “European Jews? It isn’t their homeland. It’s the land of the Palestinians.”

Woman: “I can’t believe you said that. We’re this tiny country...”

Man: “Yeah, and the fact that you’re so tiny and yet so powerful is proof of how you people control everything.”

I thought for sure they’d lost their minds – three days in the stiflingly hot, clean air of the Hudson River Valley in upstate New York had obviously melted the politically correct masks they’d worn so well and here they were saying what they really felt. Here they were finally acknowledging the elephant in the room. It was more like elephant wrestling.

Not once in the three days we’d spent comparing and contrasting the Torah’s and Koran’s rendition of the Joseph saga – the theme of our retreat – had either one of them exhibited any telltale signs.

My face obviously gave me away. They burst out laughing. “We’re rehearsing for the ‘Difficult Conversations’ session tomorrow morning,” the man explained.

In the skit’s final version, the Jewish Woman and the Muslim Man – they are stand-ins now, I know – are sitting next to each other on a plane and learn of their respective backgrounds when a flight attendant arrives with a kosher and a halal meal.

The elephants are truly in the mud now.

Muslim Man: (when the woman mistakenly takes his halal meal) “Just like a Jew, taking what isn’t yours.”

Jewish Woman: (when the man says something she doesn’t like) “Just like an Arab, ignorant and uneducated.”

OUR GROUP, 20 PARTICIPANTS AND FOUR SCHOLARS, laughed with a mix of horror and relief. We’ve all heard such ugliness. Seeing it so starkly aired out loosened us up to see what we were up against and how to fight it.

I’ve never understood why they always put the Christians between us Muslims and Jews at interfaith groups. Christian friends: Please understand. It’s not that I don’t want to “dialogue” with you. It’s just easy to lose focus when there are three sensibilities waiting to be offended and who has bigger elephants waiting to wrestle in the mud than Jews and Muslims?

And surely that “Judeo-Christian” term should be “Judeo-Muslim” in recognition of everything we have in common, from

dietary laws of the observant to marriage laws of the conservative.

So I salute Rabbis Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer and Melissa Heller of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College for bringing us together. It was brave and necessary to bring just Jews and Muslims together, especially those of us here in the U.S., where our respective communities are minorities whose relationship is too often determined by a conflict most members of our respective communities have never experienced in person.

We tread a fine line. Isn’t the conflict hostage enough already to the religious zealotry of Jews and Muslims who have often marginalized Christians and turned the conflict into one over whose side God is on?

But it’s also foolish to ignore religion. Especially when some of us are trying to have that “difficult conversation” – e.g. the harsh things our respective religious texts at times say about people outside of our faith and how easily such harshness seeps into and stains attitudes over the conflict.

Starting that “difficult conversation” with the “other side” can nudge us into talking to our “own side” about the things that hurt the most. For me, women’s issues hit every bone.

I joke that if I were Jewish I would be Reconstructionist or maybe Reform – a liberal denomination that ordains women. I was one of 50 women and 50 men who prayed behind American Muslim scholar Amina Wadud in the first public mixed gender

prayer in New York in 2005. Several other women have since led men and women in prayer but we’re still far from ordaining women.

So it gave me hope to learn that about 150 years ago or so, Jewish women began writing their own commentaries and interpretations of the Torah and that the first woman rabbi was ordained in the U.S. in the 1970s.

Several Muslim women have interpreted various parts of the Koran during the past two decades and Laleh Bakhtiar became the first Muslim woman to translate the Koran into English in 2007.

Although it wasn’t as painful as the Jewish Woman vs. Muslim Man skit, I had my own difficult conversation at the (off the record) retreat with a Muslim man I promised to call Omar. Here’s a snippet of a rehearsal, but very real:

Omar: (hearing that Mona supported the rights of gay and lesbian Muslims to identify as such and to lead active sexual lives) “Where in the framework of Islamic jurisprudence does it allow that?”

Mona: “I’m outside the framework. Where are women in that framework? It’s all been written by men.”

Omar: “Oh, so you’re way out there.”

And it is in the vulnerability of embracing being way out there or inside the framework, despite the judgment, that the conversation really begins.

