

A Sign of Division (A)

The day had finally arrived. After months of preparations, Janet Penn and a group of teenagers from Interfaith Action, a youth interfaith group, were busy cooking, making signs, moving tables, and readying Temple Israel for a special event. In October of 2007, the Jewish high holidays and the Muslim holy month of Ramadan coincided; it would not happen again for more than 30 years. The teens from Sharon, Massachusetts envisioned an interfaith event they called “Sharing Sacred Seasons.” It would bring together Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Christians, and neighbors of other traditions in celebration. Some four hundred people were expected to attend, and the temple was buzzing with excitement.

The teens from Interfaith Action had planned the whole event: they would begin with Indian dancing to celebrate the Hindu festival of Navratri and continue with an educational program featuring youth speakers. The event would culminate with an *Iftar* fast breaking in the *sukkah*. The meal would be South Asian; it had taken some time to find kosher basmati rice, but like many obstacles, this had been overcome. Such details mattered, Penn explained, in an event that was meant to build trust. As the executive director of Interfaith Action, Penn observed that in Greater Boston and beyond, Jewish-Muslim relations had suffered in recent years. She and the teens viewed Sharing Sacred Seasons as a symbol of hope and possibility. Yet, as they made their final preparations, Penn saw something she feared would derail all of their plans.

As guests entered the synagogue, they would be greeted by a large sign, poised on an easel, which read: “We Support Israel.” It occupied a central position in the entryway, and, as Penn knew well, a central place in the identity of her Conservative Jewish community. For many, “Israel is absolutely essential to the survival of the Jewish people and therefore for their own survival.” Many had lost relatives in the Holocaust and felt that this wasn’t merely a matter of politics; it was deeply personal. Yet, over the years of her own interfaith involvements, Penn had become aware of another, competing narrative: for many Muslims, Israel was seen as a symbol of oppression. She feared that the sign would be viewed as “an unbelievable insult: ‘You bring us into your home, and then you’re slapping this into our face?’” She added, “For Muslims now, in this country, they are dealing with incredible discrimination on an ongoing basis. So there’s fear, there’s anger.”

As a member of Temple Israel, Penn had walked by the sign a thousand times. But that night, standing in the entryway, she recognized that the sign represented everything that divided the Muslim and Jewish communities. In keeping with the philosophy of the youth-led program, she gathered a group of teens to ask their opinion: “Would this sign be a problem?” Their answer was a resounding “Yes.”

Sharon’s Religious Diversity

Sharon, Massachusetts is a quiet New England town of 18,000, which is home to eight churches, seven synagogues, the Islamic Center of New England and its Islamic School, and a growing Hindu community. Yet Sharon’s religious diversity is relatively new: until the early 1990s, the town was known for its predominantly Jewish population, including large Orthodox and Conservative communities. When the neighboring town of Milton, Massachusetts opposed the development of a mosque there, the Muslim community came to Sharon. Here, they were welcomed by local clergy, who printed their endorsement in the local newspaper: “Sharon Welcomes Islamic Center.”

Rabbi Barry Starr of Temple Beth Israel commented: “Very often the Bible reminds the Jews, ‘In Egypt you were strangers, or aliens...’ and therefore, when you have your own land, you can’t treat anybody as an alien because you know what it was like. So, in a sense, in America, we’re all aliens.” Rabbi Starr continued, “You can use an American version of that: ‘You have been aliens in America, how can you treat anyone else with less than absolute respect, because you know what it was like when you weren’t treated with respect.’” He continued, “But unfortunately, you forget quickly. As the so-called Pilgrims did when they came here and did not extend religious freedom— for the very reason they came here, they then excluded others from their communities.”

When the Islamic Center of New England broke ground in 1992, this celebration was shared by Father Robert Bullock from Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church, Rabbi Barry Starr, and Imam Talal Eid of the Islamic Center, among many others. In the years that followed, the clergy council remained active in interfaith work; indeed, Penn recalls that the late Father Bullock once described Sharon as a “living laboratory” for small town interfaith relations.

Penn and Interfaith Action

Inspired by the growing diversity of Sharon, in 1999, the Anti-Defamation League identified the town as the site for an interfaith youth group. Janet Penn, a silver-haired mother of two grown daughters, was selected to coordinate the effort. She spent her own youth as secular, but searching; she came to be active in the Conservative Jewish tradition as an adult. Penn’s parents were first-generation Americans and not particularly observant Jews: she grew up eating pork, and holidays were more an opportunity for family gatherings than religious observance. But she did have an awareness that her family could not join certain clubs because they were Jewish. Although she had no background in interfaith relations, she held an MBA and an MSW and had extensive experience in non-profit management. “I was immediately hooked.” Penn found that interfaith work resonated particularly with her values and her faith: “It goes back to the very basis in the Torah, Abraham and Sarah, of offering hospitality to the stranger in the tent.”

In 2004, Penn established Interfaith Action, Inc. as an independent entity and grew the organization to more than 50 student members. Now known by the teens simply as “Interfaith,” the program provides extensive training in compassionate listening and facilitating dialogue. With the motto of “reflection, connection, action,” the youth plan their own interfaith events, often participating as speakers or facilitators. For Penn, programs and events are important, but, she noted, “The question is what’s going to make this sustainable? And for the youth, I think it’s about giving them the skills, and the opportunity, and the mentorship so that they can go off and do it themselves, and own it.”

In recent years, Penn had begun to develop a program that would build “a sustainable culture of pluralism” in the town of Sharon. While the clergy council and other civic partners were enthusiastic, she often found the work with adults in the community to be challenging. Penn felt that Israel/Palestine had become the “elephant in the room” in interfaith relations: it was often unspoken, but its divisive presence was felt amongst many Jews and Muslims. Penn explained that with “competing narratives,” neither group could really hear the other. Rarely, but painfully, the anger came to the surface; on more than one occasion, she had been the recipient. She was becoming weary and often felt like she was walking on eggshells.

Echoes and Local Woes

Penn noticed that conflicts happening elsewhere often seemed to echo in the Sharon community. In addition to the ongoing Middle East conflict, a protracted controversy over the Islamic Center of Boston Cultural Center had polarized parts of the local Muslim and Jewish communities. And then, in November of 2006, Sharon was shaken by the arrest and detention of the town's imam. When Homeland Security took Imam Muhammad Masood and his son into custody, many were in shock: he was a well-respected religious leader, active in interfaith relations. While the investigation later cleared Imam Masood and his son of any links to terror, it was revealed that his brother was affiliated with a terrorist group in Pakistan; further, the Imam had violated the terms of his work permit by staying past the established dates and would now face deportation.

Throughout the crisis, clergy from Sharon rallied around Imam Masood, his family, and the Muslim community. Many in the Muslim community were first-generation Americans, still acclimating to their new context. Some had struggled with bias and backlash in a post-9/11 America and now were afraid of "guilt by association." Temple Israel created a fund for the Imam's family, and both Rabbi Starr and Janet Penn were among those in Sharon who attended hearings and offered letters of support.

Yet, Penn observed that for many in Sharon, the sense of fear and distrust grew. She knew many Muslims (and other community members) who saw the investigation as a frightening abuse of power and a pattern of raising suspicion. This, it seemed, only increased the sense of displacement for a relatively new immigrant community. For some in the Jewish community, the arrest brought into question their safety: any link to terror was threatening, and disturbing. Some in the Jewish community questioned Temple Israel's involvement and marginalized Penn for her efforts. Penn felt that her work was becoming more difficult, and also more critical; the need for healing and bridge-building was acute.

Reflection and An Awkward Position

As Penn stood in the entryway and looked at the sign, she reflected on the dedication and hard work that had led up to the event. She thought of the students – representing all of the town's faiths – who had been meeting every week, throughout summer vacation and into the fall, to plan Sharing Sacred Seasons. They had been trained through Interfaith Action to listen to another's view, to facilitate dialogue, and, now, to work collaboratively and creatively to bring the community together. They were concerned about the sign, as well as the success of the event.

She thought of Tanweer Zaidi, the Interfaith Coordinator at the Islamic Center, and how eager he was to encourage participation from a sometimes-reticent Muslim community. Zaidi ensured that the Iftar at the synagogue was the only communal option that evening: the mosque would be closed, and those who wanted to celebrate as a community would do so at Temple Israel. It was a bold decision, Penn felt, one that demonstrated his commitment, and perhaps, the frailty of relations among the diverse communities of Sharon.

Penn felt uncomfortable approaching Rabbi Starr about the sign. After all, Interfaith Action was a guest at Temple Israel. Rabbi Starr had generously offered the facilities of the synagogue at no charge. After talking with the teens, she knew she had to raise the question but shuddered to think that she would have to place the Rabbi in an awkward position. How could she ask him to remove the sign, given the community's dedication to Israel? Yet, how could she invite people to observe their holiday at another house of worship and greet them with a sign they might read as hostile? Penn saw Rabbi Starr approaching down the hallway and, with some hesitation, asked if she could have a few words with him.