Why Do Jews Need to Learn About Islam?*

REUVEN FIRESTONE

Islam is a complex religious civilization that remains largely unknown to Jews, despite the fact that the future of the Jewish people has become profoundly affected by developments in the Muslim world. For our own personal edification and understanding, therefore, for responsible decision-making within the Jewish community and for a world of greater understanding and compassion, writing on Islam with the particular interests of Jews in mind is an important undertaking.

There are aspects of Islam that will be of particular interest to Jews, and some that would be of benefit for Jews to understand even if they may not be of obvi-

* From *Introduction to Islam for Jews* by Reuven Firestone. Copyright © 2008. Reprinted with permission of The Jewish Publication Society. *Reuven Firestone is Professor of Medieval Jewish and Islamic Studies at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles. He is the author of* Jews, Christians, Muslims in Dialogue *(White Cloud Press, 2007),* Introduction to Islam for Jews *(The Jewish Publication Society, 2006),* Children of Abraham: An Introduction to Judaism for Muslims *(Ktav, 2001),* Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam *(Oxford University Press, 1999) and* Journeys in Holy Lands *(State University of New York Press, 1990). He is the former Director of HUC-JIR's Edgar F. Magnin School of Graduate Studies and the Jerome Louchheim School of Undergraduate Jewish Studies at the University of Southern California. He received a Center for Arabic Study Abroad (CASA) III research fellowship for study at the American University of Cairo, funded by the Fulbright Binational Committee in Egypt and the U.S. Department of Education. He was the recipient an NEH fellowship for independent research, and was a fellow of the Center for Advanced Jewish Studies at the University of Pennsylvania and a Yad Hanadiv Research Fellow at the Hebrew University.*

ous interest. One of my favorite points of contact between the two is the languages of Hebrew and Arabic, which often show their similarities in relation to religious issues. I am fascinated by the ways that Islam and Judaism have so many parallels, yet are separate religious systems.

As any sensitive reader knows, an author can never dissociate himself or herself from what he or she has written. Because of this truth, it is appropriate to reveal something about myself for the sake of full disclosure.

I am a liberally observant Jew, trained both as a rabbi and an academic. I lived for some six or seven years in Israel and have raised my children in Jewish day-schools in the U.S. and Israel. In addition to scholarly works on Islam and its relationship with Judaism and Christianity and pre-Islamic indigenous Arabian culture, I have written an introduction to Judaism for Muslims.

I grew up in a household that was deeply Jewish but that respected the wisdom and arts of those who lived outside our own particular religious and cultural framework. Despite sensitivity to the universal value of humanity that I learned from my family, growing up in America naturally instilled within me a number of vague prejudices that were simply imbedded in Jewish or American culture. As a result, when I first traveled to Israel as a naïve American Jewish teenager in 1970, I had a vague, unarticulated expectation that the Jewish Israelis would be heroic and upright while the Arabs would be dishonest and deceitful. This evaluation was hazy and indistinct, and I had not thought about it in any kind of conscious way. In fact, it was only some years later that I understood how these prejudices affected my general outlook. I would certainly not define myself as a racist, but like virtually everyone in my generation, I had absorbed vague judgments about self and other that infused my general thinking about the world around me.

Sympathetic but Realistic

But soon after arriving in Israel, I was surprised to find some quite unheroic Israelis and some quite upright Arabs. I found myself living in the Muslim Quarter within the aged Ottoman walls of the "Old City" of Jerusalem, where I remained for a few months exploring its alleys and warrens. I also ventured out into the newer sections of the city both in the east and west as well as the villages in its vicinity. I became particularly close to two young Muslim Arab cousins who had each recently married, and I was privileged to spend quality time with them and their extended families.

This was during a very special period in Israel. The Palestinians who had come under Israeli control were relieved to find that the Israelis did not engage in a campaign of rape and pillage as they had feared during the 1967 War. They were happy when many of their villages were hooked into the electric grid for the first time, and they enjoyed the fruit of that early period when Israelis swarmed into the territories and spent money freely, thus buoying the economic status of many Palestinian families. There was a general feeling at this time among both Israelis and Palestinians that the situation was temporary, so the two sides encouraged engagement at a variety of levels. I felt welcomed as a Jew in the homes of many Arabs, and I took full advantage of that welcome in order to learn something of the culture, the language, the music, and the religious worldview of my new friends. That golden age soon passed. The political situation became increasingly tense and violent over the years, and misunderstandings and cultural misreadings sometimes caused hurt between my friends and me. But our relationship remained strong and we remain close to this day.

That first visit in 1970 was not spent entirely among Arabs. I also lived on a border kibbutz for a few months and found a deep personal affinity with the struggles and dreams of Zionism. My experience among Jews deepened my sense of connection with my collective past and aspirations for a common future when Jews would live in peace in the state of Israel. I subsequently returned to Israel many times to study and work and visit, as many American Jews do. But I always spent time with my Arab friends, and I always kept very closely in touch with their developments. It was that profound experience in 1970 that forever changed my life. I found myself continually being drawn back to the relationship between Jews and Arabs and between Judaism and Islam. I found that the most rewarding area of study for me in college and beyond was Judaism, then Islam, and then the study of religion in general. And I found that the most meaningful area of activism for me would be in improving relations between Jews and Muslims. I not only returned to Israel to study and live, but also to other parts of the Middle East. Most recently I took a sabbatical in Cairo with my family, where my children attended an Egyptian school. Having lived in Israel and having attended American Jewish day-schools and Israeli schools, it was a moving and most positive experience for them to live among and attend school with Arabs, most of them Muslim.

Because of my experiences, my general approach to Islam is sympathetic, but also, I hope realistic. I feel no need to be polemical, because I do not feel threatened

or fearful of Islam. I have learned that Islam, like Judaism and Christianity (and I would suppose all religions), allows for certain expressions and behaviors that I would consider terribly problematic, and others that I consider transcendent and even sublime. I do not believe that religion is the cause of the world's problems, but I do believe that it can be part of the solution. Religion has proven to be a very effective means of rallying large numbers of people to engage in extraordinary behaviors, sometimes tremendously inspiring and sometimes terribly malevolent. While religion is not the cause or the sole solution to the world's problems, it can make them worse, and it can alleviate them.

I just mentioned that my general approach to Islam is sympathetic. That may strike the reader as odd, since one would generally expect a writer to claim an objective approach that is neither sympathetic nor condemning. In the study of religion, however, I question whether a purely objective approach is possible. Religion is so powerful, its images and ideas so potent, and its engagement so energetic, that it is probably impossible to remain neutral. One finds oneself attracted or even deeply moved by certain aspects and indifferent or perhaps even repulsed by others. The result is that the observer cannot help but form an opinion at various times, despite the intent to withhold judgment.

I consider it my responsibility, therefore, to convey my general attitude toward Islam, and that general attitude is indeed sympathetic. This is only partly based on my studies. It is true that the more I understand it, the more appreciative I become. But my approach is also based on my understanding of Jewish values. I take the famous dictum of Rabbi Hillel and apply it not only to human individuals but also to human collectives: "Do not judge your fellow until you have been in his place." As I come to understand the complexity of issues that drives my fellow to act the way he does, I can appreciate his behavior even if I do not always agree with it. In fact, I may be sympathetic even when I disapprove of his behavior. This is my approach also to larger collectives, in this case to Muslims and to the religious system of Islam.

One of the reasons that religionists tend to think negatively of other religions is that they employ different methods for judging their own religion than they use to judge the religion of the other. Jews and Judaism have often been victimized by this problem over the ages as the ignorant or enemies try to prove that Judaism is a primitive or even evil religion. The simplest way this false-comparison is made is to compare the "best" of one religion with the "worst" of another. One can do

this with a variety of topics, but one particularly relevant topic today is war and peace. If one compares the peaceful verses of the Torah with the militant verses of the Qur'an, one will evaluate the two quite differently than if one compares the militant verses of the Torah with the peaceful verses of the Qur'an.

The Jewish reader will certainly compare Islam with Judaism. This is natural, even inevitable, and I do not consider it inherently problematic. In fact, I have found comparing the two to be a greatly enjoyable enterprise. But it is important to compare fairly and not to compare in order to score points. This requires, among other things, comparing apples with apples. For liberal, Westernized Jews, for example, it is neither accurate nor fair to compare traditional Islam with non-traditional forms of Judaism. There is a range of positions in Islam on most issues, just as there is a range of positions in Judaism. Keep in mind that Islam did not experience the European Enlightenment and Christian Reformation in the same way as did the peoples living in Europe, including the Jews. In order to engage in an honest assessment, one must be willing to apply the same methodology to judge the religion of the other as one applies to one's own religious tradition.

Distinct Religious Civilizations

Certainly, Jews can, and should, read general introductions to Islam. But there are questions and issues that are unique to the history and practice of Jews and Judaism that these general books on Islam do not address. If we look closely at Judaism and Islam, we see many parallels in practice, theology, and religious outlook. We may also note commonalities in the language, history, and culture of the two religions. In these, Judaism and Islam may be more similar to one another, interestingly enough, than either is to Christianity. But there are very important differences as well, some quite clear and some more subtle, that distinguish between these two distinct religious civilizations. It is fascinating to learn the complex ways in which we are both so similar and so different from one another.

Today, as the twenty-first century unfolds before us, there is a wide gap between impressions and understanding of Islam, between media representation and informed knowledge. Jews, as never before, have a pressing need to understand the history, theology and practice of Muslims and Islam.

In learning and reading about Islam, Jews need not take up a specifically Jewish analysis. In other words, Islam need not be subject to appraisal based on Jewish values or Jewish political interests or needs other than the fact that it treats issues

that are of interest to Jews. There is no attempt here at moral evaluation. This is a non-judgmental approach to the study of an extremely complex phenomenon.

For the past few centuries, most Jews have lived among and under the rule of Christians (although earlier, during most of the Middle Ages, most Jews lived under the rule of Muslims). Jews entered modernity through the Christian world, and all of the great Jewish achievements and calamities of modernity were influenced one way or another by the profound underlying relationship between Jews and Christians that had been developing for centuries. Although the ambivalences that have marked this foundational relationship continue to a greater or lesser extent today and will undoubtedly influence the future, it has become clear that the religious civilization that is having the greatest impact on Jews in the twenty-first century is Islam, both in the Middle East and in the West.

The conflict between Israel and its neighbors is at its core one of competing nationalisms, but religion has become increasingly identified with it. Islam has taken a much greater role in Palestinian political and social movements. The Middle East in general as well as the entire Muslim world has experienced a similar growth in the influence of Islamic perspectives in government, social movements, and even science. As the Muslim population and the impact of Islam have increased in the West, they have had a growing influence on Jews' sense of identity and security. Yet Jews know precious little about Islam. Responsible decision-making is impossible without understanding. For the sake of the future of the Jewish people and the future of the world as a whole, it is important to develop a firm, sober, realistic understanding of Islam and how Islam affects the outlooks and behaviors of Muslims as they act in the world.

Having said that, it is critically important to understand that Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, is an extraordinary complex and multi-faceted religion. It cannot be reduced to simple slogans, despite the attempts by some of its enemies and some of its self-appointed spokespeople to do so. So much of what we think we know about Islam is only a very small part of the whole picture (and it is not even necessarily accurate). What comes to mind is the famous story of the blind men and the elephant, a parable that came to the West through the great Muslim thinker, Jalal al Din Al-Rumi. Unable to see the elephant, they can only feel a part of it, and depending upon where they touch, they believe the elephant to be like a water spout (from the trunk), a fan (from the ear), a pillar (from the leg), and a throne (from feeling the back). No single part alone provides enough to form an accurate understand-

ing of the elephant, yet each is a critical component without which one could not make sense of the animal. Even with the whole picture of the elephant, we cannot predict its behavior, but we can have a better sense of understanding for its form, and also a greater sensitivity and compassion for its needs and desires.