

Teaching Judaism in Indonesia: Some Reflections

BY REBECCA T. ALPERT

Before Arthur Waskow began the process of bringing the liturgical calendar into conversation with politics, I never gave any thought whatsoever to the story of the exile of Hagar that we read every Rosh Hashanah. In recent years, however, that story has become a poignant reminder for me, for us, of the enmity that existed at the very beginning between the Muslim and Jewish traditions.

Now when we read the story, it makes me uneasy to think that Hagar and Ishmael were sent off to the desert, and perplexed about having as my ancestors the “winners” of the contest for Abraham’s lineage. And I struggle with Sarah’s cruelty toward Hagar, and puzzle over what — if any — positive values I can glean from the encounter, beyond the warning about this rift.

New Perspectives

At least that was the perspective I brought to Yogyakarta (not Jakarta; Yogya is a city of 3 million in the eastern part of the island of Java) in Indonesia this past summer, where I taught “Introduction to Judaism” at the state-

run Gadjah Mada University. The participants were thirty master’s level students in a comparative religion program. All but four were Muslim (the non-Muslims were Christian and Hindu); all but seven were men.

What I learned from their perspective was that the story in Genesis 21 was indeed the beginning of the heritage of Abraham, but they, the ancestors of Hagar and Ishmael, were equally convinced that they were the true heirs of Abraham. From their perspective, they were the lucky winners of the contest for Abraham’s lineage, and they felt sorry for the people of Israel, who believed the misguided story in the Torah. That story cannot, after all, reflect the truth, since it contradicts the story as it is told in their sacred scripture, the Qur’an. (Who, after all, was Abraham’s firstborn, and therefore legitimate heir, they would ask; certainly not Isaac.)

Living Upside Down

That disjuncture was emblematic of my experience, which had the impact of stripping away many of my assump-

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tions. How could it not, when I was literally living upside down; it was, after all, night for me when it was daytime back home.

And when I looked to the summer sky, I saw the North Star and Big Dipper, not part of my own world's sky except, of course, in winter. And when I explained that Jews pray facing Jerusalem (as Muslims do toward Mecca), I realized that Tevye's seat "by the eastern wall" was nothing if not relative, since prayers in Indonesia are said not looking east, but west.

While fascinating for anyone traveling to Asia for the first time, these disorientations are nothing in comparison to the one I experienced as I began, with the help of my students, to see Judaism through Muslim eyes.

Islam in Indonesia

Islam in Indonesia is not the same as Islam in America, and not the same as Islam in the Middle East. Of course, that should not surprise us: Judaism in Asia, North America and the Middle East also differs. But we do tend to make the "other" into something monolithic, a very dangerous thing to do.

So what is Islam like in Indonesia? The Muslims I met were genuinely interested in learning about other religions in general, and Judaism in particular. Indonesia is not an Islamic state; it recognizes five official religions: Muslim, Protestant Christian, Roman Catholic, Buddhist and Hindu, although Muslims are the vast majority. There seemed to be little interest in,

and active dislike of, groups like Laskar Jihad (which do exist there), who wish to make Indonesia into an Islamic state.

Women indeed wear some form of head covering (at least all of my students did, and probably about 25 percent of the women I saw in the street did, too), but they also ride motorcycles and are committed to working toward gender equity. They are quite firm in their assertion that Mohammed favored women's equality and that later texts just misinterpreted his teachings, something I have heard only from the strongest of Muslim feminists I know in the United States.

Opening Communication

The first democratically elected president of Indonesia, known as Gus Dur (who was himself a Muslim cleric), supported links with Israel. Although Gus Dur was ousted by the current ruling party, his students and followers were some of the people I got to know and meet, and they were passionately interested in dialogue and learning more about Judaism. Some of them took my course so they could teach about Judaism at their own high schools and universities; others were working on translations of books by authors like Louis Jacobs and A.J. Heschel.

Did they represent the majority of Indonesians? The concept of a majority in that context is itself laughable. Indonesia is comprised of 1,700 islands and many millions of individuals; it is the largest majority Muslim country in the world, and it would be folly to draw

conclusions based on my limited evidence.

But I also cannot discount the experience I had. Several of my students were deeply interested in Jewish-Muslim dialogue and in building understanding, because the world they live in is full of ignorance and misunderstanding when it comes to Jews and Judaism. So they invited me to give speeches and have informal conversations at several Muslim universities in Yogya and in the neighboring city, Solo.

I was welcomed warmly, although the conversations were also at times painful and emotionally draining. And though I promised myself I would avoid political conversations about Israel, it was obvious from the first day that this was not going to be possible, since the information they had about Jews was, in fact, almost exclusively about Israel.

Frightening Stereotypes

My students and the other faculty and students I met shared notions about Jews that were positively frightening. The following quotations, from a paper by one of my students, describing the stereotypes that Indonesians believe about Jews, are typical:

Jews, by definition, are stubborn, tricky, egoistic, troublesome, but also smart and therefore dangerous. In connection with these stereotypes, a common accepted opinion about the Jews is another assumption that they are very powerful internationally in poli-

tics, thanks to their skillful lobbying, especially over the rulers of such superpower actors as USA and certain European countries; in business, thanks to their sophisticated and massive network of banking system, media and entertainment . . . They are always in agreement with whatever policy is made by the Israeli government . . . moreover, the Jews are suspected to have long-run sophisticated plan to destroy Muslim community and any Islamic manifestation through its international conspiracy spread all over the world . . .¹

Jews, in other words, run the world in support of Israel. And because Judaism is not a missionizing religion, my students understood it to be “exclusivist,” closed and unwelcoming of outsiders. They interpreted my emphasis on peoplehood and community as evidence in support of this belief. They also did not believe that Jews are the pure monotheists we claim to be, (Munjit described it as “an Abrahamic tradition gone astray”) since the Qur’an says that Jews believed that Ezra was the son of God.

Changing Perceptions

Over the course of six weeks, I was able to get my students to understand that the Judaism they were learning about from their environment was not Judaism; that only some Jews at the time of Mohammed believed Ezra was the son of God; that Jews have power

disproportionate to our numbers, but not to the extent they imagine; that not being a missionary religion does not make us exclusivist, just small; and that our tragic history can explain a lot of the passion we feel about the State of Israel.

I also was able to use the similarities in our traditions — the roots in Abraham, the nature of the revelation at the core of both religions, their similar emphasis on legal tradition and linguistic cognates of Hebrew and Arabic terminology — to enable students to feel more connected to Judaism.

They were very pleased to learn about the interplay between Jewish and Muslim mystics, philosophers and legalists in the Middle Ages, and about the general decency with which Jews were treated when we lived in Muslim societies.

While I contributed much to their education, I learned more from my students, which, as the Talmud suggests, is often the case. At our last session when they told me how much they had learned and how much they appreciated our experience together, I reflected back to them that I had received thirty times what I was able to give.

New Perspectives

What I also gained from teaching them was a new perspective about Judaism in the United States. I never realized the extent to which Christianity has defined Judaism in the world today. Ashkenazic Jews, whose Judaism was nourished in Christian soil, make up 80 percent of the 15 million Jews

in the world, and have a defining effect on Jewish life and culture. (I thought, for the first time, how different Jewish history might have been if we'd stayed in the Southern Hemisphere.)

And there is also no underestimating how important it is that Jesus was a Jew, a fact I saw more clearly when confronted with the realization that Mohammed was not. Despite the deep similarities between Islam and Judaism, that is a profound difference.

I also learned that it was acceptable to admit that I was critical of the policies of the government of Israel. More than acceptable, actually, it lent my Jewishness credibility, because I was not just touting the party line. I wasn't sure that I would be able to be open in discussing politics. But I found that it worked and was appreciated, and that it opened doors to conversation. It also left my students room to be critical of Islam as well.

Lasting Challenges

It is not easy to prove that Jews don't run the world, and I would appreciate any and all help in figuring out how to do that. My best answer was when someone asked me if Americans believe that all Muslims are terrorists. I responded that about as many Americans believe that as there are Indonesians who believe that Jews run the world; both are unfounded stereotypes.

While I spent much of my time trying to convince my students that Jews are not to blame for the problems we have experienced (exile, genocide), I

also had to acknowledge to myself (and we as a Jewish community need to think about) how little attention we pay to others, how high we build the wall surrounding the Jewish community, how carefully we police its borders, and how that contributes to the sense that people have (even in Indonesia) that Jews care only about other Jews.

My students were astonished to learn about any universalist tendencies in our tradition. Yet there are many, and we do not let others know enough about them, or about us. This isolation and internal focus is not good for us, and we might think about ways to create opportunities, like the one I experienced, to “get the word out” that Jews are interested in making connections to the outside world and helping others to learn about us.

Needing Community

I also had the lesson reinforced that it is almost impossible to be a Jew without a Jewish community. I bonded deeply with the one Jewish woman who was in Yogya on a year-long Fulbright scholarship to study student democratic movements there. We had much else in common, but the Jewish connection was crucial. Luckily for me, Jessica lived out some of her interest in the subject by going to meet with the twenty or so Jews of Surabaya, the only Jewish community left in Indonesia.

She came to my class and presented her findings about the group, and showed the class images of the people and of the synagogue there. It was one

of the most important sessions we had, since Jews stopped being abstract “others” for my students and became real Indonesians who lived in their world, and worried, as they did, about governmental repression.

When Jess showed slides depicting posters with anti-Israel propaganda, and spoke about the fears of Laskar Jihad and a fundamentalist takeover, the class laughed nervously. She and I were stunned, since we ourselves experienced a sense of fear when we saw posters from this movement that included the words, “Israel and America: Axis of Evil.”

It was fascinating to see how uncomfortable our fears made my students, and how much they wanted to disallow what a threat that group is and should seem to us. Afterward, many of them talked to me about that tense moment in class. One student’s response was the most poignant: “What are we to do when we are caught between the current military regime and those who want an Islamic state?” What choice is that, exactly?

Reaffirmations

Before I went, many people told me I was crazy to make the trip. I am glad I did not listen. This experience opened my eyes to worlds I did not know existed. And it reinforced for me some of my most deeply held beliefs: about the importance of teaching Judaism to non-Jews — and of being honest about your own interpretation of Judaism when you do so. And about challenging the insularity of the Jewish com-

munity — demanding of us that we stay open and ready to listen to and learn from those whom we too often discount and ignore.

Maybe that is the lesson imbedded in the story of Sarah and Hagar. Per-

haps, if they'd been able to listen to each other, the story would have had a different ending.

1. As quoted in a student paper by Achmad Munjid, by permission of the author.