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Putting (Inter)Faith into Practice: Reflections of a Jewish Scholar in Residence at a Canadian Lutheran Seminary

Daniel Maoz¹

A French expression, “*démontrer, c’est montrer*” (to demonstrate is to show), for me captures the spirit of interconnectivity within interfaith dialogue. Sitting down in a room with people of differing faiths and conversing about common topics, even about our divergent faiths, does not in itself constitute interfaith dialogue; it is merely a dialogue of people with differing faiths. Interfaith dialogue requires something more, something different. And to transmit what interfaith dialogue constitutes requires more than analysis of concurrent conversations and events involving interreligious adherents. Definitions may help clarify understanding of interfaith exchange, but only description of lived experience will demonstrate what one seeks to show. In academic terms, connotation rather than denotation is required. I approach the topic of “my neighbour’s faith” through autobiography interspersed with chronicle, drawing on life experiences and lessons to demonstrate how my sensitivities and sensibilities towards interfaith have naturally led to the position I now hold as Jewish Scholar in Residence and Professor of Hebrew Scriptures at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary in Wilfrid Laurier University.

I should like to emphasize from the beginning that the experiences and Jewish representations contained here are my own, and while they are not unique to me, neither are they a standard representation of Jews and Judaisms today. Perhaps better said, Jews and Judaisms are nonmonolithic. It is not possible to say that Judaism is this or that; rather, Judaisms cover a wide range of thought and expression. Jewish midrash characterizes Torah as having seventy faces: *שבעים פנים לתורה*.² This characterization renders a question that begins “What does Judaism teach about ...” uninformed. Judaism teaches many different things about just about anything one could imagine. This said, I can assure the reader that what is expressed here does represent *a* Jewish perspective, my own, and it is shared by several – perhaps even many – Jews, although not all Jews.

Interfaith Beginnings

From the perspective of interconnectivity and interreligious learning and collaboration, I am fortunate to have been raised by a G-dfearing Jewish mother and a gentle-spirited atheist father, who both – no matter their own beliefs or denials of belief – were respectful of others’ religious positions. Besides there being few options anywhere near our home in rural Ontario, this is perhaps why the United Church of Canada (UCC) became the ground for religious education for my older sister and me. The emphasis was, as I remember, “love your neighbour as yourself” and “do to others what you would have others do to you.” Everything else, if there was anything else, was commentary. At my mother’s insistence, my sister was required to attend Sunday school until she was twelve years old; an extra year was my lot, which I mildly protested, albeit perhaps not in so many words. In that context,

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² Bamidbar Rabbah 13.15.

we gained further reinforcement of interreligious collaboration by joining the youth choir, organized according to height and voice part rather than faith principles. As well, Cubs and Boy Scouts provided extracurricular meetings and activities where we were taught how to associate within a greater society – a world that we as country bumpkins were not yet even aware existed. Every week we chanted the mantra “We’ll do our best to do our duty to G-d and the Queen” and ended our meeting with “Good night, good scouting, and go straight home.” More secular than religious, certain “sacred” tenets were nonetheless imprinted on us at these gatherings and undertakings, values reinforced in principle afterwards at home.

It was in the rural school system that I learned interfaith response to community issues and concerns as we began our day reciting the Lord’s Prayer. In a single room that in any given year housed no more than two dozen students of all ages and learning levels, the class was exposed to cultural diversity from both historical and sociological (then called Social Studies) perspectives. Many of the same faces from my UCC and Boy Scout settings gathered in this room, unready to integrate religion with life at this young age. We were, it later became clear, a hodgepodge of socially and culturally diverse backgrounds whose only common denominator was the fortune or misfortune of somehow growing up poor in rural Canada. But as we lived with others who shared in our poverty and rarely if ever came in contact with those whose fortunes differed, we were oblivious to anything but what was common among us, which produced a homogenization of sorts and a temporary blindness to cultural and social differences. It was years later, for example, that I realized that some of my classmates had African-American roots or were ancestors who came from Asia.

In fact, it wasn’t until we moved into a small city and I attended a partial year of upper-level elementary school that I even heard pejorative language ascribed to people seen as different. Even then, I remember being confused by such epithets, thinking instead that anyone can make the claim that others are different, because that is how the world is made up. No one subsection of it can claim “normality,” only perhaps majority in the immediate context. In secondary school, I was similarly oblivious to racial and social distinctions, largely because I tended to keep to myself or associate with likeminded friends who thought that it was better to discuss ideas than things or people.

The rude awakening for me was in learning that I was among those marginalized and given pejorative treatment, for being what one elementary school classmate called “a dirty Jew.” Later, in high school, I was mystified when classmates threw pennies on the floor in my path – manna from heaven, or cigarette money, as I interpreted it – while my close non-Jewish friends took major offence. Because at the time I didn’t know of my mother’s Jewish background, I accepted these slurs as metaphors. I wasn’t much bothered by them because my experience with Jews was nonexistent in elementary school and limited to one friend in secondary school, and my exposure to cultural and social Judaism was completely lacking. However, when on more than one occasion one or another of my friends took exception to this sort of treatment and verbally or physically engaged with those perpetrating the slights. I felt an obligation to calm my friends and downplay the importance of such events.

Awakening

My recollection of the birth of my personal awareness and development of interspirituality can be traced to the secondary school study hall where I spent many an unscheduled hour as a result of misbehaving in my scheduled classes. Frequently I found myself serendipitously sitting next to Alison, a newfound friend who was the daughter of the

Chief of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation, an Ojibwe First Nation along the St. Clair River just south of the delta to Lake Huron. Alison and I got along famously, perhaps in part because we shared in being marginalized socially but deeply loved within a family context. Alison also thought outside the box and saw the world differently than anyone I had as yet encountered. Water and sky were big to her, and land and wind were part of her spirit. I couldn't get enough of what she offered in new perspective from our whispered conversations that I managed to arrange as part of my regular ejections from classes. With land viewed as what grounds us psychologically, sky as what opens us up creatively, wind as what calls us to explore, and water as what returns us to balance, my world – and my sensitivities – could no longer be the same.

Living in what was then known as Canada's chemical valley, I began to see the chemical plants differently. Instead of being prospective employers, they became agents of de-sensitivity that polluted air, water, and land with no apparent plan to restore what they defiled. I also came into touch with what I had known from my early days in the country: the earth was not property; rather, we were stewards responsible for its well-being. Long before the country in which I lived thoughtlessly and selfishly embraced the status of throwaway society, Alison reminded my inner being of the role in life and among life that I was born to play.

From that point in my life I regarded Indigenous people as my brothers and sisters, all of us who possess no land (no matter what a mortgage contract indicates) and who share natural elements that the earth makes available to all. Any spirituality related to religion that I have since engaged in or adopted with emendation has sprung forth from this truth, which would at least partially explain why, in my first year of university, I built a lean-to on the Niagara Escarpment and lived in it for Fall and Winter terms while attending classes and "renting" a dorm room on campus. Early influenced by Emerson's transcendentalism and Thoreau's concept of castles in the air that only required us to add the foundations to them, I could never get my head around Hegel's idea that nature was opposite to spirit (thanks again to Alison). If anything, it always seemed to me that spirit was grounded in the earth (no pun intended) and flowed forth from a proper concept of land. To deny spirit while dominating nature seemed at best unnatural, generating incoherent thought, and at worst fundamentally flawed, establishing a basis for justifying neglect or abuse of nature. For me, interspirituality foundationally addresses nature, just as, reciprocally, nature speaks to interspirituality.

Seeing Others, Recognizing Ourselves

My awakening to the organic nature of humanity encouraged me to encounter people as who they are ontologically. Never in my lifetime has Canadian society presented more opportunity than right now to embrace differences that have until now divided us. I make this overarching statement because socially we are daily reminded of life choices and gender expressions that prior generations never dealt with, causing the older generation to have to begin to deal with what is rather than what they have been taught to believe should be. In my youth, I was a social boundary pusher, whether by choice of language or dress or habit. And now I find myself not an outsider but rather in accord with those who seek to normalize what has until now been considered marginal. I have watched Canadian society evolve within a generation from being uncomfortable with and expressively rejectionist towards

the unfamiliar and unwanted to being tolerant of those very same things and then to accepting them without objection or complaint.

But it is in the younger generation that lasting benefits will accrue, because they are the generation that has been born into the changed world that initially posed discomfort and distress for their parents. While tolerance of others is not a desired end goal, it may well be a necessary stepping stone between rejection and acceptance, with perseverance being the effective catalyst for change. Persistence and nonabrasive communication has the potential of turning “no” into “not yet.” Sexual orientation is far from being the only area of evolutionary thought that current Canadian society is working through, but it is a useful metaphor to help us appreciate the patterns that embracing difference can follow as we encounter faiths held by those around us. We are no longer unfamiliar with the necessary stages that will lead us from rejection and distrust to acceptance and trust relating to religious expressions and communities that are not our own.

A direct benefit of welcoming the other is the window it opens to integrating experiences with people formerly unfamiliar to us – a broadening of our horizons. As well, permitting ourselves to become familiar with another’s sacred texts can broaden our appreciation for what we share in common: values such as the importance of submission to G-d, adherence to community, and dependence on others to smooth our own rough edges. It may well be that blind spots we overlook in our own belief system become clear to us first as we identify them in another form of faith, and then as we begin to notice the same perceived gaps or flaws in our own tradition. When this occurs, we find the opportunity to acknowledge our less-than-complete understanding of our own beliefs and practices that in turn opens up a more generous acceptance of another’s perspectives that we have come to better understand. Conversations begin to take place and we realize that so much of what was unfamiliar to us about the other person’s looks and beliefs and habits actually served to mask the greater overlap of things we share through our common humanity. Joys, disappointments, fears, hopes, goals, and myriad other shared feelings open us up to the other as we begin to see ourselves in them.

Case in Point

In the summer of 2013, I enrolled in a workshop at Huron University College in the University of Western Ontario in London on the topic of Scriptural Reasoning, and I earned level I and II certificates under the direction of Dr. Peter Ochs, co-founder of this unique and effective means of interfaith learning as applied to the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Level II certification authorized me to establish Scriptural Reasoning (SR) study groups, which a colleague and I did thereafter. One was modelled closely on that which Ochs and David F. Ford created: going by the name of Abrahamic Faiths Text Discussion Group, it involves three Muslims, three Christians, and three Jews. The other, a modification of SR involving four Christians and four Jews, identifies as a Christian-Jewish Text Discussion Group. In their fifth year, both text discussion groups continue in evolved forms. Generally speaking, they meet on a monthly basis, and comprise largely the same individuals who have participated from the beginning.

We have experienced a deepening trust and friendship that far exceeds the respectful collegiality that we signed on with in late 2013 and early 2014. In the area of trust, we are open to considering difficulties others see in our own religious traditions, as well as welcoming to honest and sometimes critical evaluation of each other’s faith tradition – all within the context of respectful self-vulnerability. Not only do we invite conversations about topics we would not have

been comfortable addressing in the early months (perhaps even for the first two years), but we also share in confidence and trust our own questions about our own and other belief systems. Even after five years, however, there remain topics we are not ready as yet to take on fully. Sensitivity to each other turns this knowledge into wise patience rather than insensitive impatience. We have learned to wait on each other in love.

The Dylan Connection

An area of my professional life that has taught me how to find common ethical stances in order to work together with those of other faith traditions came to me as something of a surprise. I was invited by my academic dean to teach a course on Jewish ethics at Wilfrid Laurier's Lutheran seminary and proposed the idea of merging my hobby of studying the life and lyrics of Bob Dylan with traditional Jewish views on ethics. Enlisting local rabbis Moshe Goldman and Nevo Zuckerman to promote the course, I have been pleasantly surprised that, for the past four years running, more than half the students enrolled in it are Jewish. Combined with the variety of non-Jewish students also registered, every class becomes simultaneously an exercise in analysis of the lyrics and writings of Dylan, now recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature; an academic formation in the unique expression of ethics from Jewish tradition (that of self-betterment); and a starting point for comparing and contrasting essential elements of religious ethical principles in an interfaith setting.

I have offered this course at both undergraduate and graduate levels, and the dialogical engagement is comparable: students quickly find the classroom a safe place to explore their personal ethical questions, to question systemic ethical principles, and to challenge societal ethical anomalies that disturb their inner sense of what is right and proper. Very early each term I am astonished at how vulnerable each student becomes in sharing personal information about their life, reinforcing one of the goals I set out to accomplish: what is discussed in Jewish ethics class stays in Jewish ethics class. When I have asked students how they came to be so open about their ethical inner life, a common response is that they feel safe and have come to realize the importance of ethics combined with the unique opportunity to work through some personal issues. A similar, although not as pronounced, experience takes place in another course I teach entitled *Abrahamic Faiths: History and Beliefs*, where I ordinarily have Jews, Christians, and Muslims enrolled and dialogically engaged in openness and in support.

The Point

I believe that global interreligious harmony will not happen quickly or easily, if it happens at all, but in smaller settings interreligious harmony is both noble and achievable. When my family first moved to Waterloo Region in the summer of 2000, I became an executive member of the Waterloo Region Holocaust Education Committee. I remember the very first meetings because we were tasked with organizing a series of presentations and workshops for Holocaust Education Week that introduced local secondary students to seminar speakers who were Holocaust survivors. In preparing the brochure, we engaged in one of the most fruitful and meaningful discussions I have ever been privileged to be part of – distinguishing between tolerance and acceptance of the other. I will never forget how we unanimously arrived at a title for the brochure that included the words “respect and acceptance,” because we wholeheartedly understood that to tolerate an idea or – even worse – to tolerate *a person* was to set our sights far too low, thus giving permission for an outcome that fell short of respect and acceptance. If we set out with high expectations and attain them

at a local level, in a small way we have made a contribution to global repair in a world that is desperately broken.

The Hebrew prophet Zechariah captured the spirit of interfaith harmony with the words, “Do not despise the day of small beginnings.”³ In the Talmud Rabbi Tarfon, who lived just after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (70 CE), is reported to have said: “It is not binding upon us to finish the task; neither are we at liberty to abandon it.”⁴ In spite of the myriad challenges and roadblocks on the way to peace in our world, I am encouraged that having a spirit of peace and a mind of resolve to put interfaith into practice will only lead to favourable results.

³ Zechariah 4.10.

⁴ Pirkei Avot 2.21.