

A Sign of Division (B)

Janet Penn approached Rabbi Starr and said that, in consultation with the teens of Interfaith Action, she wanted to speak about a matter of some concern. As they walked over to the front entryway of Temple Israel, Penn explained that she and the teens were worried about how the “We Support Israel” sign might be read by their guests. Rabbi Starr looked at the sign and said simply: “Let’s take it down.”

Janet noticed, with some relief, that Rabbi Starr had barely hesitated in his response. He later explained: “It seems to me that when you invite someone into your home, you give them an opportunity to feel welcome.” He described the principle of *hachnasat orchim*, a Hebrew phrase which Rabbi Starr translated as “welcoming the guest, or stranger.” For the Muslim community of Sharon to come to a synagogue for a religious observance was unprecedented. He recognized the fear and division between the two communities, and saw the Sharing Sacred Seasons event as an important step. The sign, he thought, might shift the focus to politics: “I wanted everybody’s mind focused on spirituality.”

Rabbi Starr agreed with Janet that the issue of Israel/Palestine was the elephant in the room, noting that an Arab-Israeli problem had somehow become a Muslim-Jewish problem. “It really needn’t be that, on either side. But the rhetoric, on both sides, makes it difficult.” Moreover, he felt, the Sharon community wasn’t ready to engage in a dialogue. “It has to be safe. You can’t talk about this in a situation that isn’t safe. Because everybody knows that it’s going to be fraught with a lot of emotion, and nobody wants to wear that emotion on their sleeve. I think we’re all afraid of it. When I’m talking about Israel, I get very emotional. I can get angry. And I think everybody’s afraid of that, because then the human discourse breaks down.”

As Rabbi Starr spoke about safety, he recognized the similarities between this situation and the advice he offers to married couples. He explained that, in a relationship, it isn’t a matter of subsuming your person, and becoming a chameleon to suit the needs of the moment: that can destroy self-identity and self-esteem. Rather, he notes, “You have to create the safe environment in which real communication will take place -- real listening and real hearing will take place -- and that doesn’t happen the day you get married. It sometimes never happens at all, but it certainly takes years of work to create that environment.”

Rabbi Starr continued: “We’re committed to Israel. We know that. And every Muslim who came here knew that. But for a religious moment in their lives, it was not necessary to rub it in their face.” He recalled that a local hospital, Caritas Norwood, has a statue of Jesus in every room; however, patients of other faiths may request that the statue be removed. Rabbi Starr noted: “I know that the hospital is committed to its work with Jesus, and what it does for healing the world, and all of that, but there is respect for the individual patient.”

Senior Researcher Ellie Pierce prepared this Pluralism Project case as the basis for class discussion and education. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective leadership.

In a diverse community, Rabbi Starr noted, it is important to address the challenges of pluralism. “One of our classic Rabbinic ideas expresses this very well. There was an argument between two ancient rabbis about matters internal to the Jewish community. And indeed, the suggestion was made by someone in the community that ‘You know, people who follow those two rabbis’ positions shouldn’t even marry each other.’ And the answer that our tradition gives is: ‘Both views are the views of a living God.’ ... Which doesn’t mean both are correct. You can choose one; you have to choose one.” He continued, “That we all are part of a society in which we place our faiths in a living, moving, motivating God, is what our view of pluralism is— my view of pluralism is. That it can happen between Jews and Christians and Muslims is part of my personal credo.”

Looking back, Rabbi Starr and Penn agreed that what was most critical in this decision was the involvement of the teens in the discussion. “[Penn] presented it to these young people as a learning experience for them, to feel what it would be like, and to decide for themselves what they wanted to do in this situation.” Penn was relieved by Rabbi Starr’s openness to the concerns raised by the teens. She felt that, too often, in the American Jewish community, there is no space for debate and discussion when it comes to the topic of Israel.

Rabbi Starr strongly cautioned, however, from taking this specific situation too far. He recalled that when the Muslim community was invited to the synagogue a few months later for a film, he did not take the sign down. “It was not a spiritual event.” He explained, “It is our home, and we’re going to support Israel, and we do, and very strongly.” He underscored that the sign itself said nothing offensive: “I see a sign in support of Israel as a kind of neutral statement of my own commitment. But, it’s read elsewhere in a very different way.”

Mike, one of the teenagers from Interfaith Action, recalled the discussion about the sign, but couldn’t remember what decision was ultimately made. What he did remember was the culminating event of Sharing Sacred Seasons: on a warm October evening just after sunset, when Muslims of Sharon gathered in prayer next to a *sukkah*. Then, Muslims and Jews, Christians and Hindus, and neighbors of other faiths, entered the fragile structure to share a traditional *Iftar* meal. “It is a powerful image that sticks with me, a powerful idea.” He continued, “There were four hundred people there, many of whom had never participated in an interfaith dialogue. It starts the ball rolling. While it is not going to create world peace, or get everybody to love each other, it is a step, and it is important.”