

Moses's Lessons in Interfaith Dialogue

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In the first week of 2025, the Washington Theological Consortium hosted a weeklong interfaith dialogue program at the United Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia. Third-year JTS rabbinical student and Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue program manager Claire Davidson Bruder participated in this program, alongside other Jewish, Christian, and Muslim seminary students. The following d'var Torah is a collaboration between Claire and Sherouk Ahmed, a chaplaincy student at Bayan, an Islamic graduate school in partnership with the Chicago Theological Seminary.

In Parshat Va'era, God reveals Himself to Moses and appoints Moses as His prophet. This exchange is a turning point in the story of the Exodus: God has heard the Israelites crying out from slavery and remembered the covenant He made with them. It is Moses who will be His messenger to Pharaoh, Moses who will demand that Pharaoh let God's people go. Because Moses is nervous about his ability to be a convincing leader in the face of such odds, especially given his speech impediment, God instructs him to bring his brother Aaron. They will use magic to prove the pair's connection to God: Aaron is to throw his staff down in front of Pharaoh, and his staff will become a serpent. Even though it works and the staff does in fact become a serpent, Pharaoh remains a non-believer. He summons his magicians, and they are able to perform the same feat. Aaron's serpents—God's serpents, really—prove to be stronger, and they devour those created by the

Egyptians. Yet Pharaoh still refuses to recognize God's power.

In the Quranic telling of this story, Pharaoh's magicians are convinced by Aaron's¹ staff-serpent eating their own, understanding this means that God is on Moses and Aaron's side (Surat Taha [20:70]). Pharaoh immediately threatens them with violent amputation and crucifixion if they follow the God of the Israelites. Pharaoh is alarmed; he assumes that Moses and Aaron have come to dispossess him of his kingdom and accuses Moses of having been the magicians' leader all along. And he does so despite knowing his accusation could not possibly be true: he had made a deal with the magicians to grant them special status should they triumph over Moses and Aaron (Surat Ash-Shu'ara [26:4142]). But that's the thing about false narratives—they don't have to be true at all to be damaging.

Like Moses approaching Pharaoh, Jews and Muslims are constantly being asked to prove themselves in today's world. Harmful stereotypes about the two groups abound: Jews are greedy, Muslims are terrorists; Jews control the media, Muslims oppress women. And neither group is free from the threat of violence. Visibly religious Muslims and Jews are attacked on the street, even in "tolerant" cities like New York; our houses of worship are targeted both by threats and by real physical violence; American politicians and others in power denigrate us to the media. Yet we continue to stand strong with dignity and constantly advocate for

¹ In the Quranic version, it is Moses who asks God to send Aaron with him, because of his speech impediment.

ourselves and our religious needs in the face of false accusations and assumptions about us.

As part of the Quranic version of the story, we are privy to God's guidance to Moses and Aaron. He tells the pair: "Go forth . . . and never falter in remembering Me" (Surat Taha 20:42). Relinquishing our religion, beliefs, or convictions will not protect us. God tells Moses and Aaron to confront Pharaoh, but also to "speak to him mildly" when doing so (Surat Taha 20:43–44). God cautions Moses and Aaron not to panic, but to stand strong in their faith and be dignified. It is not fair or reasonable that Jews and Muslims have to continually prove their worth and importance and yet, it is our reality. And we must find ways to contend with that reality in order to keep ourselves and our communities safe.

One of the most meaningful and powerful ways that we have found to manage that painful reality is through interfaith connection and dialogue. At the Washington Theological Consortium's Abrahamic Dialogue program, we were able to connect with each other and with other Jews, Muslims, and Christians. We had the privilege of attending each others' houses of worship, spending Jummah together at a mosque and Shabbat morning at a shul. At the mosque, we visited with the imams and had the opportunity to learn about historical and contemporary challenges facing their community. So too at the shul we connected with community leaders to discuss that week's parashah, the Joseph story, and its role in both of our traditions. The two of us even received an aliyah together at the synagogue, an honor of a lifetime for both of us.

Our week of connection was not always easy. Any time different groups get together, there are sore points. As one of our professors put it, there is no such thing as interfaith dialogue conducted on an even playing field: there are always power imbalances, and we have to be aware of how they impact us. Furthermore, there are countless other challenges when it comes to interfaith dialogue: How do people conduct dialogue with those whom their religion preaches are damned? How do LGBTQ people interact with those who do not believe their marriages are legitimate? How do we put aside centuries, or in some cases

millennia, of pain and intercommunal violence in order to build trust? The reality is that we *must* face these hard questions if we want to build any sort of meaningful connection.

Since October 7, 2023, fostering these connections has become increasingly difficult. The heightened political tensions between Jewish and Muslim communities around the world were evident within our group of twenty-odd participants. Some had lost loved ones in Gaza, others had lost loved ones in Israel or knew individuals taken hostage. The challenge is not just political tension, but also real, deep emotion and heartbreak over our personal and communal losses. What we learned, though, throughout the week is that trying to avoid these conversations would do nothing but strain our communication. It was only by having the hard conversations, those that make all of us uncomfortable, that we could forge meaningful relationships. It was only when everyone could be fully authentic that we could support one another.

We must recognize that Jews and Muslims, though our beliefs, rituals, and some of our politics may differ, are faced with increasing bigotry in our society. Like Moses, we are constantly asked to prove ourselves to an unfriendly audience. And so we should take our lessons from Moses too. We should show up in the world as our authentic selves, remain dignified, and most importantly, rely on each other. In a time like this, when it is harder every day to be a Jew or a Muslim in America, we must rely on one another as siblings, just as Moses relies on Aaron, to get through. We must take our challenges, the things that could divide us and allow them to make our relationships stronger.