

9/11 Brought Them Together. They've Been Preaching Love Ever Since by Sarah van Gelder

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A rabbi, a minister, and an imam walk into a bar. No, really. Since 9/11, three religious leaders in Seattle have been meeting for sometimes “vigorous” discussions, lecturing together, and even doing joint spiritual teaching. Rabbi Ted Falcon is founder of Bet Alef Meditative Synagogue, Reverend Don Mackenzie is minister and head of staff at the University Congregational United Church of Christ, and Jamal Rahman is a Muslim Sufi minister at the Interfaith Community Church. And that time they walked into a bar? It was to discuss a book they co-authored, *Getting to the Heart of Interfaith: The Eye-opening, Hope-filled Friendship of a Pastor, a Rabbi and a Sheikh*. The three are now known as the Interfaith Amigos.

Sarah van Gelder: How did the three of you start working together?

Rabbi Ted Falcon: When 9/11 occurred, I called Jamal, and the two of us did a Shabbat service together. Since then, we’ve taken part in each other’s services, and it has become natural to work together.

When one awakens spiritually, there is an awakening to inclusivity. You start to perceive that each authentic spiritual path is an avenue to a shared universal. To deepen means to explore that territory together along with the ethic that naturally flows from it.

Sarah: Had you done those exchanges before 9/11?

Brother Jamal Rahman: Not much. After 9/11, as a Muslim, I felt a strong need for such a community.

Ted: A lot of attention at that time was focused on the perpetrators of 9/11 as representative of Islam, and we wanted to counteract that. We needed to put public faces on mutual understanding between our faiths.

Jamal: Brother Don joined us a year later.

Ted: Right. He has a remarkable sensitivity and directness. The three of us complement each other in an interesting way. Don is far more linear than either of us. And we need that; Jamal and I are much more apt to ramble, but we’re also more spontaneous. Part of what we taught Don was to talk without notes.

Reverend Don Mackenzie: I’m very much a student of my colleagues when it comes to spirituality and mysticism, and I am learning to catch up because it is the spiritual

substance that carries religion forward.

Ted: I think spirituality holds the key to the deep healing that is required in our world. My experience with Jamal and Don is a continuing deepening of my appreciation not only of their traditions, but of my own.

Jamal: I find that by listening to Brother Ted and Brother Don, and by learning from them, my roots in Islam are growing deeper. I'm becoming a more authentic, more complete Muslim. Interfaith is not about conversion, it's about completion. I'm becoming a more complete Muslim, a more complete human being. And that's a great joy.

Sarah: The three of you went to the Middle East together. What was that experience like?

Jamal: When Brother Ted invited me to go to Israel with this 44-member group, I was particularly keen to visit the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. That is where the Prophet Muhammad ascended seven levels of heaven after his astonishing night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem. Why didn't the Prophet ascend to heaven from Mecca itself? Why did he have to go all the way to Jerusalem and then ascend seven levels of heaven? One reason, Muslim sages say, is that for heaven to come to Earth, the house of Ishmael and the house of Isaac must be united. And I witnessed that need very clearly on this trip.

The next major site for me was the Holocaust memorial. There I realized—in a very stark way—that when, as the Quran says, one's ego is untamed, one can stoop to the basest behavior. The memorial shows with heart-breaking clarity what we humans are capable of if we don't do the essential work of transforming the ego.

The third powerful site for me was the concrete wall that seals off the West Bank from Israel, in effect isolating the Palestinian town of Bethlehem from all the surrounding communities. What a difference from the Wailing Wall, which exudes piety and devotion! This political wall screams of pain and injustice.

Ted: I have a deep love for Israel. I grew up with the Middle East prominent in my life. I have long been a supporter of a Jewish state and a Palestinian state. I can be extremely critical of Israeli positions, but sometimes I find myself having to defend them, when the criticism comes from a place of wanting to abolish the state of Israel, rather than wanting to find ways of establishing peace.

On this trip, I was particularly concerned about what it would be like for Jamal. There were no other Muslims who were interested in going on the trip. Jamal was profiled at the airport when he arrived in Israel; he was pulled out of line and questioned.

Jamal: I showed the passport officer a flyer of the three of us doing an interfaith, inter-spiritual program, and she kept saying, "A Rabbi, a Muslim, a Christian pastor? This is good, very, very good." She took it upon herself to guide me through all the procedures, escort me to a supervisor, wait with me in line, and her constant mantra was "Don't worry, I'll take care of you. This is good, very good."

Ted: Two images were important to me during our trip. Many churches are built on places where a great teaching of Jesus occurred. But, the church buildings actually hide the place where something happened. And it came to me that all our faiths do that. There's something in the institution itself that inhibits the original, spiritual purpose for which that faith was founded.

The other image happened on the last afternoon of our tour at the Sea of Galilee. After our teachings, we each invited participants to experience a ritual from our faith tradition. Jamal was doing the Muslim ablutions before worship, Don was doing either a baptism or a blessing, and I was doing a symbolic Mikvah, which is a ritual bath. We were all using the same water, the water of the Galilee, and I was aware that some of the same water molecules were there when Jesus was there, and when Abraham was there.

As we all shared the same water, it seemed symbolic of the nourishment, the universal presence, the spirit that cuts across the separations in which deep healing can be found.

There's the possibility within all the world's great religions of drawing on the spiritual substance of the faith rather than the often-dominating shell of the faith.

Don: That was just an incredible moment. In the Christian tradition, that spot is a place of forgiveness, which is a very powerful theme for me as a Christian pastor. Being a Christian in Israel was a complicated experience because I am heir to two things that are causes of the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis. One is the Christian repudiation of Judaism—the 2,000-year history of anti-Semitism. The other is the Western humiliation of Arabs, coming to a peak with the Treaty of Versailles, which broke up the Ottoman Empire. Those are both causes of the issues we face today, and I am related to both as an American Christian and as a pastor.

For me, this was a journey of understanding the imprisonments of the mistakes we make and the liberation that forgiveness can bring if we can just find a way to get at it. I am enormously reassured that the spiritual deepening that I'm experiencing has within it the possibility of lifting that up so healing can begin.

Ted: We were able to meet with both Jews and Muslims who are on the same track. But walking into Bethlehem, we encountered the concrete wall and felt the gloominess, tension, sadness ... a kind of unrootedness, ungroundedness.

Jamal: Hopelessness. There's an Arabic saying that when a man has hope, he has everything. When there is no hope, he has nothing.

I got that feeling of hopelessness in Bethlehem. At a heart level, I began to understand that to Muslims, Israel's occupation is a symbol of their hopelessness. But when an Israeli or a Jew looks at Israel, he sees that it's just a small sliver of land—

Ted: —just 260 miles long and 60 miles across at its widest, 6 miles wide at its narrowest. It is 1/640th the size of the Arab countries surrounding it, and from an Israeli point of view, from a Jewish point of view, it is under constant threat of annihilation. Yet from an Arab consciousness, Israel is bigger than the Arab countries.

Jamal: Absolutely.

Ted: From that consciousness, Israel is more powerful than the countries around it. And I get it, but even as I say it to you, there is a part of my mind going, "How can you see it that way?"

I get it. What is seen is not only Israel but the United States, technological power, military power, economic power, educational power.

When I was in the ninth grade and experienced my first anti-Semitic battle, the thing that

used to bother me the most wasn't the kid who hit me. It was my friends who stood and watched and didn't know what to do. There is in the Jewish psyche a sense that we could each be on our own, and if we don't have a place to go, we could all be gone, whether that's true or not.

Jamal: It isn't.

Ted: It's not like that, it's what's in our consciousness.

Jamal: And from the Muslim perspective, it's not Israel, it's America. America and Israel are one. It's almost like Israel does not exist in the Middle East. Israel lives, breathes, and gets its sustenance in North America.

Sarah: There have been times when religious leaders have taken stances against injustice, as you three have, but other times religious leaders have condoned atrocities and even perpetrated them. This seems to be true across faith traditions. Can you help us understand why this happens?

Don: I think there's the possibility within all the world's great religions of drawing on the spiritual substance of the faith rather than the often-dominating shell of the faith. That is what permits a person like Gandhi, or Martin Luther King Jr., or Nelson Mandela, to say things that can lift the human spirit rather than suppress it. These are things that point to the absolute center of the struggle for human and civil rights for everybody.

Every time there's a crisis, we can each fall either way. We can either step up to the possibilities for redemption in those moments—and our traditions all support that in different ways—or our egos can be seduced into thinking we deserve to be right, and that means that someone else is going to be suppressed or repressed. That's why we keep coming back to the ego, what Muslims call nafs. We are always trying to be on the lookout for that, and should we ever get into a really grisly argument, somebody will have to ring a bell and say, "Whoa, our egos are at work here!"

There already is peace and healing, and it's a matter of becoming available to know it.

Sarah: Has that happened? Have you guys ever—

(Laughter)

Ted: Not so far, no, no.

Don: We've had some really good—

Jamal: —vigorous discussions.

Ted: There have been times. Jamal helps me to remember to be flexible. But every tradition can be used to support pretty much any position. Many people think that it's Scripture that's doing it rather than people using the Scripture. I think there's something about awakening to the universal dimension that allows one, of whatever tradition, deeper access to what people were trying to express.

Jamal: Rumi says, The bee and the wasp drink from the same flower, but one produces nectar and one produces a sting. When we are in positions of power, are we working to tame our nafs? If we are not, we cannot have what Islamic teachers call "spaciousness

within oneself.” The heart becomes clenched and closed.

Sarah: You are all three from traditions that trace back to Abraham. So this is sort of a cousin’s quest, right?

Jamal: A dysfunctional family ... yes?

Don: We do all look to Abraham as an important spiritual ancestor, but we get there in importantly different ways.

Ted: The Arabs are descendants of Ishmael and the Jews are descendants of Isaac, the two sons of Abraham.

A new insight for me is that the Jewish tradition is characterized by the teaching of oneness, the Christian tradition is characterized by the teaching of love, and the Muslim tradition is characterized by the teaching of compassion. We normally think that the message is meant for others, but it occurred to me that the very message that Jews need to hear is oneness, and Christians need to hear love, and Muslims need to hear compassion. We are not very good about getting our own message.

Sarah: What is your source of hope?

Don: My hope comes from the conviction that God intends healing for all of creation. It just can’t be that if God loves this world, anything will be spared from healing. When I think of the Middle East as a paradigm of despair, I think of the moment when Nelson Mandela was released from prison. Who would have guessed? Surely there is a power greater than mine—thanks be to God—at work in this world that will have the ultimate healing influence. The only question is, how can we be instruments of that power?

Jamal: Gandhi always made three points. First, it is the sacred duty of every individual to have an appreciative understanding of other faiths. Second, we must have the courage to acknowledge that every religion has truths and untruths. And third, if an extremist commits an act of violence, let us not criticize that person’s religion. Better, point out to this person the insights and verses of beauty from his or her own tradition. This is the way to peace. This is the way we three are modeling, and that gives me a lot of hope.

Ted: Peace is not something we get to and healing is not something we get to. There already is peace and healing, and it’s a matter of becoming available to know it.

The Hebrew word shalom essentially means wholeness and completeness. To the extent we allow ourselves to be whole, we connect with the integrity of our being and we appreciate the integrity of all beings. That wholeness breeds peace and healing.

There probably is no concept that is repeated more often in Jewish tradition than the prayer for peace. One change, which I think is crucial, is that it is no longer legitimate for any group to pray for peace for themselves without at the same time praying for peace for everyone. It’s no longer possible to imagine that there can be peace for any single group without peace for everyone.

It comes down to appreciating the oneness that absolutely interconnects all of us.