

About three years ago, my friend Janine Evans moved to South Africa. I remarked at the time that just about no one was moving TO South Africa. Everyone was leaving, worried by scarily random violence. But Janine was not so easily moved. She, husband Yazeed and sons Ishmael, Siraj and Amir felt that the best place in the world for them to move forward with their lives was South Africa. They relocated to Cape Town and haven't looked back.

Janine converted to Islam when she met South African-born Yazeed. She described herself as part of Open Islam, which believes that adherence to Muslim principles does not prevent someone from being a part of contemporary society. She authored several books designed to educate Australians about Muslims, their traditions and beliefs. She was passionately involved in multifaith endeavours. She even had a regular monthly radio slot on Amanda Blair's show on 5AA for community members to ring up and ask questions about Islam.

And then she left. She shared with me her frustrations as her eldest son, a gifted cricketer, was repeatedly passed over for league teams in favour of someone "who would fit in better." Over several years, she came to the conclusion that she and especially her children would never be accepted fully as Australians. They would always be seen first and foremost as Muslims. In South Africa, despite its acute problems, she experienced total and complete acceptance in a nation committed to being multicultural and multifaith. She packed up the household, said farewell to her mother and sisters, and off she went.

I can't even begin to imagine what Janine would have to say about our current political climate. On the one hand, government officials have repeatedly stated that terrorism is not tied to any one religion. On the other hand, Muslims around Australia have stories to share about how they feel themselves to be the focus of intense scrutiny and suspicion

since the rise of the so-called Islamic State. They certainly would have good reason to feel targeted following raids last Wednesday which turned up a frightening, but very small-scale terrorism plot. Not long after, a senior member of the Australian National Imams Council (ANIC) was searched for more than two hours at Sydney Airport, missing his flight to Saudi Arabia for the annual pilgrimage. He did not get to travel with the group of pilgrims that he was charged to lead, and as of last Friday had not yet been able to find a substitute flight. "ANIC is aware of a number of similar cases where innocent travelers have been unnecessarily inconvenienced and penalized financially, having to foot the bill for all additional costs," read the statement on its website.

I landed on the ANIC website by searching under the terms "Islam" and "Australia." At the bottom of my search window, Google helpfully provided frequent searches using these terms. This is the complete, unedited list: anti-Islam Australia; Islam Australia news; stop Islam in Australia; stand against Islam; against Islam Australia; no Muslims Australia; Islam Australia statistics; Australia Muslims out.

I had a conversation with a Muslim friend who shared with me that she and her friends are afraid to be out at night in Adelaide for fear of being attacked. Even the daytime has become scarier: when she walked out of the Adelaide train station a few days ago, a group of young men started shouting curses in her direction. What must it be like to be an observant Muslim woman whose faith and identity are so visible to all? When I asked her if I could identify her in this sermon, she requested that I use a pseudonym. The administrator of the Facebook page Islamaphobia Register reports that in the last week, women in hijabs have been physically assaulted, nearly run down by cars, and chased away from a playground. On his blog "Wake up Tiger," Richard Sauerma shared his experience a few days ago of seeing an elderly Muslim man taunted by a

crowd of teenagers. When the teens cleared off, the man burst into tears. He unbuttoned his jacket to reveal a t-shirt underneath, imprinted with the words “Proud to be an Australian.”

There are good reasons to be concerned about how Muslims are treated in Australia. First of all is the fact that we as a community know from our history exactly what it is like to be treated as the suspicious outsider. In the early part of the 20th century, Jews bent over backwards to convince their Christian neighbours that Judaism was merely a religious identity, and not in anyway indicative of national aspirations. Reform Judaism removed any reference to the hope of a return to Zion from its prayerbook. They did not want anyone to accuse them of dual loyalties. It was only with the publication of *Mishkan T'filah* in 2007 that Israel was returned to its place of honour in our prayers. We especially know the frustration that comes when others know so little about our religious tradition. Just think of all the major programs that get scheduled on Yom Kippur!

If Australians know little about Judaism, they often think they know a lot about Islam. They know that Islam is the faith practiced by terrorists around the world. They know a little something about Sharia law and are fearful that Australian Muslims are eager to have it implemented here. I was gobsmacked in a conversation with a very earnest Christian a few months ago when she told me that the praying community was aware of a Muslim conspiracy to take over Australia. Many Australians would no doubt be surprised to learn that Islam is built on the pillars of faith, prayer, giving charity and fasting once a year through the month of Ramadan. They are inclined to judge Muslims entirely on the actions of their most radical, most abhorrent members. What would it be like if we Jews were viewed through the lens of our most extreme adherents or worst texts? We read the book of

Deuteronomy each year but tend not to spend a lot of time on those passages where God orders the Israelites to kill each and every inhabitant of Canaan. We also try to distance ourselves from contemporary Jews who argue that the mitzvah of holding onto the land in the West Bank is so important to uphold that any other mitzvah can be broken if needed. Surely that is not the Judaism we want to be associated with. And so too for Muslims. A number of Muslim leaders have begged that newspapers to stop referring to the terrorists in Iraq and Syria as the Islamic State, a name they find deeply offensive. If we as Jews want Australia to stand with us when we are misunderstood, I believe it is our duty to do the same for others, especially when their lives are so personally affected.

There are also reasons of self-interest to welcome Muslims more fully in our land. Members of the Muslim community have raised the alarm that alienated young men are being radicalised and are even going overseas to fight and die. Every parent's nightmare. I have been very lucky in recent months to become friends with a young woman named Manal Younus. In 1998, Manal came to Australia from war-torn Eritrea at the age of three. She is now most of the way through a degree in international relations. In her spare time, she is the assistant director of Welcome to Australia, which seeks to shift the conversation on asylum seeker issues.

Manal is also a gifted poet. In a single manic day following the raids of last week, she wrote and made a videorecording of her poem "Call him a terrorist." It is a tough and confronting commentary. Here is an excerpt:

Call him a terrorist one more time.

Do it.

Tell him that you hate him.

Show him your contempt.

Remind him that he is not welcome here

That no matter what he does he is not one of you

And he never will be.

Confirm everything some bearded, self-proclaimed caliph has tried to tell him you are

Insult his religion like they told him you would

Contribute to the brainwashing of those you call 'his' people.

If we treat Muslims with suspicion, vilify them, insult them, then they may well conclude that this will never truly be their land--that perhaps the so-called caliphs really are right. It is our worst nightmare too.

You are probably wondering just about now why this is an appropriate sermon for Rosh Hashanah. How exactly does it relate to the story of the binding of Isaac--a tale by the way, which is also found in the Qur'an, but involving Abraham's older son Ishmael! You may remember from last year that I shared that the binding of Isaac is actually the Torah reading assigned to the second day of Rosh Hashanah. The first day's reading tells of the miraculous birth of Isaac when Sarah is 90, which is why the chosen haftarah for the day focuses on the nearly-as-miraculous birth of Samuel. The story is a joyous one, but only for eight verses. And then Sarah looks around one day and realises that her son Isaac has a rival--his older half-brother Ishmael. At Sarah's order, Ishmael and his mother Hagar are sent out into the desert with too little water to survive for long. Luckily, an angel arrives on the scene just in time, and the day is saved. The angel promises that Ishmael will grow to become a great nation and so he does. He is seen as the ancestor of the Arab peoples--our

great rivals, and our brothers. Abraham is the spiritual ancestor of both Jews and Muslims, and his stories are told in both the Torah and the Qur'an. Recent events have driven us apart, but we have so much in common and so much to share. At this time in history, I believe it is especially important for us to reach across to the Muslim community and let them know that they are welcome here.

In late August, I signed on to a statement in support of the Australian Muslim community. That statement, which has now been signed by 2200 people from every conceivable background, voices solidarity with Australian Muslims and confirms our conviction that Muslims are valued members of this great multicultural society. I wish I could tell you that lots of other rabbis joined with me to sign on. But in fact only five others signed the statement, and only two from non-Orthodox congregations. These last months, in all honesty, have been disastrous for the ties that bind Jews and Muslims together. When I signed on to the statement and showed up at the Adelaide launch, I did so with the harsh knowledge that, in almost every case, Muslims see the issue of Israel utterly differently to me. I do not anticipate that that will change any time soon. The state of affairs does not make me happy, but if that is the way it is to be, does that free me to wash my hands of the Muslim community and how its treated in a nation far from the conflict?

What's more, if there is to be peace in the Middle East, that mythical, hypothetical, increasingly distant dream, Jews will have to find a way to make peace with Muslims and visa versa. We will need to dig deep back to that shared past, put aside the pain of recent years, and find a way to get along. Because a peace of two peoples who live in a constant state of mistrust and hatred is no peace at all.

In late July, when things were really bad, I found a song by Tom Paxton which I sang out a number of times at services. The lyrics are

deceptively simple: “Peace, peace will, peace will come and let it begin with me.” In this year when so much seems beyond our control, we can each make a difference. Let peace begin with us, and let us hope and pray that it spreads to all the corners of the world where it is so desperately needed. Shana tovah!