



## Inter-faith Relations Part 3: Judaism and Islam

What does our tradition tell us about relations with Islam?

The outside world often views Jews and Muslims as diametrically opposed, due to the political situation in Israel. However, they are often surprised that a number of Jewish sources speak positively about Islam. In addition, at certain points, Jews and Muslims have lived peacefully alongside each other, notably during the Middle Ages in Andalucía, Spain. In the broad sweep of history, the Sephardi communities of Asia, Africa and the Middle East escaped the endemic persecution of sister Jewish communities in Christian Europe. Having said that, the balance of history does not lean in only one direction. In addition to historic tragedies, such as the Syrian blood libel of 1840, since Israel's creation there has been a significant backlash against Jewish communities in Arab and Muslim lands, with many harassed and forced to leave.

Links between Judaism and Islam are noticeable Islam has its own holy book, the Koran, but also accepts the Hebrew Bible. It reveres Avraham or 'Ibrahim', and traces its lineage through his son, Ishmael, born to the maidservant Hagar. In Parashat Vayeira, G-d promises Abraham to turn Ishmael's descendants into a nation, even though the young boy and his mother are sent away from Avraham's household at Sarah's request (Bereishit 16).

Islam is a religion with a rich history and a body of detailed religious law, or Sharia. There are strict dietary laws, Hallal, and an obligation to pray five times a day. There are also ethics and teachings, such as modest dress for women and obligations to give charity to the needy ("zakat"). One of our greatest scholars, the Rambam (Maimonides d. 1204), famously described Islam as "pure monotheism." Though born in Spain, he lived most of his life in Egypt and therefore was accustomed to Islamic societies. He advanced the view that Jews and Muslims could pray together, and if necessary, Jews could do so in a mosque. Some accounts claim that later in his life, the Rambam would voluntarily go to mosques to pray. However, many scholars, such as the Tzitz Eliezer (Rabbi Eliezer Yehuda Waldenberg d.2006) disagree with the Rambam's lenient view about entering a mosque.

Nowadays, some Jewish-Muslim relations are entangled with politics. Despite an abundance of mutual suspicion and antipathy in some quarters (fed by a rich diet of anti-Semitism across the Arab world), there are some initiatives which break through the impasse. For example, Rabbi Michael Melchior, a figure of stature in Israel and Chief Rabbi of Norway, attended a large Saudi Inter-Faith Initiative last November, along with other leading Jewish figures.

In drawing attention to some of the similarities, we are not seeking to conflate two distinct religions and heritages. There are certain real differences, not least that whilst Islam seeks converts, Judaism does not proselytise. There are also some significant philosophical differences, such as over the role of the Messiah. In demographic terms, our numbers are small, whereas there are over a billion Muslims in the world and 57 Islamic states. In an age of conflict, where Jews and Muslims are seen at loggerheads, it may help to remember that history and halacha have something positive to say about Jewish-Muslim relations.

by Zaki Cooper, Trustee of the Council of Christians and Jews

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