

## Ramadan Message

from Rabbi David Rosen

The similarity of Islam and Judaism not only in their shared ethical-monotheistic faith, but also in the form and structure of religious practice never ceases to impress me. Among the numerous things we share in this regard is a lunar religious calendar. However Judaism synchronizes its lunar cycle with the solar cycle by adding a month to the Hebrew calendar approximately every three years. This of course means that the coincidence of events in the two calendars changes in the course of years. This year the Muslim holy month of Ramadan coincides with the Hebrew Festival of Rosh HaShanah (the New Year) and subsequently Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement - a twenty five hour fast of no food and drink, dedicated to prayer and repentance.) They are however preceded by a whole month of preparation – the Hebrew month of Elul which is also meant to be dedicated to repentance, prayer and charity (alms giving) in preparation for the aforementioned days and in some Jewish communities they already rise even earlier than usual for daily morning prayers in order to add penitential prayers for Divine forgiveness (other Jewish communities begin saying these special prayers only in the last week of the month.)

Muslims will already find these similarities with Ramadan to be striking, but I would like to point to the remarkable religious moral concepts at the root of these calendar events that reflect our shared root values. Not only do they express our shared perception of human frailty, vulnerability and failure; but above all they reflect our faith in the Omnipotent Omnipresent Creator and Guide of the Universe *who is All Merciful and Compassionate* (Ha-Rahaman in Hebrew – identical to El Rahman in Arabic) and who accordingly is always willing to give us another chance to show that we can live human lives of faithfulness, mercy and charity, in accordance with His Will. In this regard it is notable that our Traditions discourage us from pointing the finger at others, even if we perceive others failures as playing a role in our own. We fast and pray and especially seek to do charitable deeds, precisely because our Traditions teach us that if we want to improve our world (as we are called to) then we must improve ourselves first and foremost. Accordingly, the focus of our religious practice and devotion, especially at this time of the year, is on introspection, self-critique and improvement.

Jews and Muslims have had periods of a glorious past heritage of mutual respect, cooperation and creativity – especially in the early centuries of Muslim rule in the Iberian peninsula. Tragically in recent times, the inspiration of this past history as well as our shared religious values and teachings, have been overshadowed by political tensions and hostilities. However if we are to recover and redevelop all that is positive between us, we must not allow such external influences to dominate us. If we care about this, then we must ask ourselves, what am *I* doing to improve the situation in *my* relations with the members of the other community – and I am afraid that none of us may feel complacent in this regard.

Ilhamdulillah, there are many important initiatives taking place in your part of the world and many other parts of the world – even in the Land which is Holy to Muslims, Christians and Jews. Perhaps the most notable recent international initiatives in Muslim-Jewish relations have been to the two world congresses of Imams and Rabbis for Peace that have taken place in the last year and a half, the second one a few months ago in Seville, Spain, under the patronage of the Kings of Spain and Morocco. This was attended by well over one hundred Muslim and Jewish religious figures from around the world, but particularly from the Middle East. Among the international organizations working on healing this divide and the

broader so-called "Muslim-West" relationship (not a very good term, because there are many Christians and Jews who are more part of the Muslim world culturally than they are part of the western world; and there are many Muslims who are no less part of the western world than they are Muslim) are the largest international interfaith organization, Religions For Peace, that is holding its world assembly in Kyoto next week; and the World Economic Forum's C-100 – a committee of one hundred persons from the fields of politics, business, religion, media, academia and civil society (fifty from each "side") committed to advancing Muslim-West relations. And in the US, among the positive initiatives that have taken place and which do not get enough media coverage (because by definition, sensationalism that promotes media sales and ratings, is negative), I am especially proud of what professional and lay leaders of my organization, the American Jewish Committee, have been able to do to build bridges of understanding and respect, notwithstanding political divides. ( The latter are of course very real and I do not suggest that they should be ignored. However if we can learn to know and respect one another – which of course is a Quranic imperative, "litaarafu" – then we will be able to deal with these in a productive, or at least not a destructive, manner.) Even here in Jerusalem where my home is, we have some seventy organizations involved in interfaith relations ( including initiatives in which Jews and Muslims study our religious texts together)promoting dialog and working on social and civic issues together to lay the ground for a more respectful , peaceful and happy future for all our peoples.

I do not want to sound naïve or pollyanish. I know that there is much suffering and profound differences to overcome. But if instead of cursing the darkness we can light candles of illumination; and instead of pointing the finger at others, we take steps to do whatever we as individuals can do to improve and deepen our relationships; not only do I believe that we can do a great deal to change things, but I believe that only then are we really true to the most noble values of our respective Religions that are reflected in the holy month of Ramadan and the coming period in the Hebrew calendar as well.

Allow me to wish all our Muslim brothers and sisters a Ramadan kareem wemubarak.

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