SACRED SOUNDS

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A Wonder by the Sea

By Cantor Sharon Citrin

Have you ever experienced a truly magical moment?

Last year, I had the privilege of leading a group of ten Jewish and Muslim women in a model Passover Seder. The coming together of Jewish and Muslim women eating, socializing, laughing, learning, and participating in traditional Jewish rituals is, in itself, extraordinary. What was even more amazing was the level of trust, empathy, and understanding that seemed to connect and unite us in the most marvelous ways. If ever there is a time for signs and wonders, Passover surely is it!

I came upon this honor through the Jewish-Muslim Women's Dialogue, which is an initiative of the Anti-Defamation League's Connecticut regional office. Although I wasn't officially part of the group, I wanted to be; or at least be a fly on the wall at their gatherings. When the idea for a Passover Seder came up, I knew I had my chance!

The setting, itself, was magical. It took place at the shoreline home of the co-host which sits right on the edge of the ocean- the most perfect setting for telling the story of Passover!

My responsibility was humbling. As Jews, we participate in the Passover Seder every year, generation to generation. But now, the door was being opened to people who had never experienced this before, people who had never even heard of matzah! How could I make the Seder accessible and meaningful for everyone around the table? Not only was this a first for everyone around the table, it was likely the first Jewish-Muslim women's Seder ever, anywhere!

How can I begin to describe the sentiments that were felt that night? I can only share excerpts from some of the touching emails that were sent by the women who attended:

"It was a wonderful experience, filled with love, generosity, and laughter."
"I loved how much symbolism there was within the Seder, and I think the messages of hope and strength were so powerful, especially in a time when it seems that there is a different tragedy every day."
"This is my first time in a Seder and I am amazed at how many similarities we have between our faiths."
"I was elevated to another place throughout the service from your gorgeous voice as well as the very thoughtful creative and meaningful choices you made for the Seder."

The Muslim women were eager learners, asking many questions and taking pictures of their place settings and the beautifully adorned Seder table. They delighted in similarities between the Hebrew and Arabic languages and parallels in stories from our faiths. They heard familiar intonations in the music. The readings I selected resonated with the women's values, beliefs, and personal journeys. They shared recipes and sources for kosher and halal meat.

We pondered two "oops" moments with humor and sensitivity: the *charoset* was made with wine, which Muslims don't drink, and someone had brought a noodle casserole that found its way to the Seder table. Fortunately, the Seder took place after the Passover holiday, but it provided a wonderful "teaching" moment.

After one of Muslim women found the Afikomen, we settled down to dessert, some concluding readings, and a spirited singing of "Miriam's Song" accompanied by tambourines. The Seder ended on a high note with a spontaneous middle-eastern ululation, the high-pitched women's trill that signifies great approval, joy, celebration, honor and praise. It was a thrilling end to such a marvelous night.

We couldn't help but feel that we were writing our own story of Passover and witnessing the miracle of peace, friendship and understanding, at least in this small circle around the Seder table. If there is any hope of changing hearts and minds in this fractured world, then perhaps this model for developing interpersonal relations is the key. The purpose of the group, said the Seder's Muslim co-host, is "Don't let your primary source be the media. There will be hope for humanity if we take the time to get to know each other."

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In This Issue

- A Wonder by the Sea
- New Ideas for an Old Tradition
- The Miracles in Front of Us
- Support the CA
- The Special Music of Passover
- Keeping the Seder Fresh
- Ask a Cantor … Anything!

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