

**"Building Bridges, Not Walls"**  
**Carleton College 2016 Reunion**  
**Interfaith Service of Remembrance and Celebration**  
**Skinner Memorial Chapel - June 19, 2016**  
**Rabbi Mark S. Diamond, '76**

***The Written Word – Micah 4:1-5:***

"In the days to come,  
The Mount of the Lord's House shall stand  
Firm above the mountains;  
And it shall tower above the hills.  
The peoples shall gaze on it with joy,

And the many nations shall go and shall say:  
"Come, let us go up to the Mount of the Lord,  
To the House of the God of Jacob;  
That He may instruct us in His ways,  
And that we may walk in His paths."  
For instruction shall come forth from Zion,  
The word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

Thus He will judge among the many peoples,  
And arbitrate for the multitude of nations, however distant;  
And they shall beat their swords into plowshares  
And their spears into pruning hooks.  
Nation shall not take up sword against nation;  
They shall never again know war;

But every man shall sit under his grapevine or fig tree  
With no one to disturb him.  
For it was the Lord of Hosts who spoke.

Though all the peoples walk, each in the names of its gods,  
We will walk in the name of the Lord our God  
Forever and ever."

***The Spoken Word:***

*Hinay mah tov u'mah na'im, shevet achim gam yachad.*  
Behold how good and pleasant it is for brothers and sisters  
to come together in harmony and peace. (Psalm 133:1)

Let me begin by wishing everyone a Happy Reunion weekend, and a Happy Father's Day to the dads in our midst. Happiness is one of the themes of our Scriptural

selection from the Book of Micah. The prophet dreams of a world filled with peoples and nations living in peace, happiness and harmony. Micah envisions pilgrims from across the globe joyfully flocking to God's Temple on the mount to learn Torah and to receive Divine justice. In a remarkable display of inclusivism, he foresees the day when all peoples will continue to worship their own gods as they transform weapons of war into tools of sustenance.

I think of Micah often as I consider the state of our world today. Micah was with me last month when I traveled to Israel with a group of students from Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles., where I teach classes in interreligious studies. These students were enrolled in an engaged learning course on faith and literature, with instruction provided by a professor of English, a Catholic priest, and yours truly.

The curriculum included classes on Israeli prose and poetry, visits to Christian, Jewish and Muslim historic sites, and presentations by educators, faith leaders, journalists, artists and others. We enjoyed several fun tourist experiences—floating in the Dead Sea, kayaking down the Jordan River, and riding camels in the Negev Desert. Students were amused that I shared a camel ride with my friend Fr. Alexei Smith, leading to good-natured jokes that opened with the classic line, "A rabbi, a priest and a camel walk into a bar together..."

The theme of the seminar was encountering the other, and the students soon learned that the other wasn't always eager to encounter us. One morning in Jerusalem, we toured the Temple mount, where heavily armed security, video surveillance cameras and eavesdropping guards are a stark contrast to Micah's serene vision. A guard from the Palestinian Waqf approached the group and berated our guide for referring to the area as the Temple mount. This is Al-Aqsa, he said, and you have offended us by saying there was a temple here. There never was a Jewish presence on this site, he concluded.

At that moment, I pictured Micah weeping in solidarity alongside us. And I imagined the prophet crying when two of my Jewish students reported an encounter with a shopkeeper in the Jewish quarter of Jerusalem's Old City. When they explained to her that they were part of a multi-faith, multi-cultural cohort from a Jesuit university, she berated them for traveling with such a diverse group. They should only visit Israel with their fellow Jews, she said, and not waste their time learning about other religious faiths.

Distressing as these episodes were for seminar participants, they were important teaching moments. Our students witnessed firsthand the diverse and often conflicting narratives of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Baha'is, Druze, and others. By the end of the trip, they understood and appreciated the mantra we recited from day one in response to most every question: "It's complicated."

One need not travel to the Middle East to experience the challenges and opportunities of interfaith encounter. My wife and I live in Los Angeles, one of the most diverse global cities in the world; a colorful tapestry of communities of faith, ethnicity, language and national origin. 135 different languages are spoken in homes in the L.A. metropolitan area; 1/3 of the population is foreign-born and 1/5 was born in another state; 90 different faith traditions are practiced in homes and houses of worship in greater Los Angeles.

Angelenos have a special stake in the struggle to build bridges of hope and understanding. We appreciate Eboo Patel's message that "the theology of the bridge, the practice of the bridge, the faith formation of the bridge is going to be key not only to civic life in the 21st century but to maintaining faith identity." ("Acts of Faith: Interfaith Leadership in a Time of Religious Crisis," *Virginia Seminary Journal*, Fall 2009, 40). We listen with grave concern when political candidates pledge to erect higher walls and implement more restrictive policies designed to ostracize and exclude others. We witness with alarm the extreme polarization of our society--the fear-mongering, name-calling and xenophobic rhetoric.

One of the ongoing assignments for students in my LMU course is to research and write about interfaith relations in the media. With the rising tide of religious extremism across the globe, and the divisive election campaigns in this country, there is no dearth of stories about interfaith relations. Indeed, as I tell students, "God, Allah, Jesus, Moses and Mohammed are having a banner year." Sadly, the majority of media reports are negative ones—ISIS terrorists killing Christians, Yazidis and Hindus; politicians stoking firestorms of homophobia and Islamophobia; purveyors of hate fomenting virulent anti-Semitism throughout Europe; Jewish yeshiva students in Jerusalem spitting on Christian priests; the list goes on and on. In his recent book Not in God's Name, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks surveys the sorry state of religious violence in the world today and writes:

"To invoke God to justify violence against the innocent is not an act of sanctity but of sacrilege. It is a kind of blasphemy. It is to take God's name in vain...When religion turns men into murderers, God weeps."

(Not in God's Name, 2015, 3, 5)

Set against this backdrop of hateful words and deeds, it is all the more critical to lift up narratives of light and hope. One of the highlights of our Israel trip was a tour of Save a Child's Heart, an inspiring project that brings critically ill children from developing countries to suburban Tel Aviv for lifesaving cardiac surgery. The doctors and other medical and support staff are all volunteers—Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs--and the young patients come from Palestine, Syria, Romania, Kenya, Tanzania, and fifty other countries around the world. During our group's visit to Wolfson Medical Center, Save a Child's Heart reached a milestone—a 4-year-old boy from Gambia was the 4000th child saved by the medical team. My fellow travelers and I left the hospital and children's home with a sense of the miracles that can and

do happen when people build bridges of care and healing. Save a Child's Heart gives renewed meaning to the Talmudic and Qur'anic injunction, "One who saves a single life saves an entire world." (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5; Qur'an surat l-maida 5:32)

In my own community, we celebrate interfaith and intercultural bridges of friendship and fellowship. This year marks the 51st anniversary of Nostra Aetate, the historic Second Vatican Council proclamation on the Catholic church's relations with other faiths. The past half century has seen dramatic progress in interfaith relations in general, and Catholic-Jewish relations in particular. In Los Angeles, the bonds shared by our respective communities are strong and enduring, marked by clergy dialogues, educational programs on Judaism and Israel in Catholic high schools, joint interfaith missions to the Vatican and the Holy Land, an exhibition of Christian and Jewish art at the Cathedral of our Lady of the Angels, and much more. Lest we take these bridge-building projects for granted, we need only recall the tragic history of persecution, death and destruction that largely marked Christian-Jewish relations for two millennia. Nostra Aetate launched a revolution in interfaith relationships, and we are its fortunate heirs.

Nostra Aetate left an indelible imprint on Los Angeles, and Tel Aviv, and Northfield, Minnesota. Standing here in Skinner Memorial Chapel, I think back to my years at Carleton with its warm, nurturing environment (o.k., it wasn't that warm in the winter). I fondly recall members of the faculty—Jonathan Woocher, William Woehrlin, Ian Barbour, Bardwell Smith, Richard Crouter, among others—who shaped and refined my budding interest in Jewish studies and religious studies. I remember college chaplain David Maitland, of blessed memory, offering to put a mezuzah at the front entrance of this chapel as a symbol of multifaith engagement.

I recall college administrators who welcomed our radical notion of a Jewish-life house off campus, and the pride we take in its enduring presence forty-three years later. I smile when I remember the day the dean of housing slammed on the brakes of his car and grilled me about that weird ramshackle booth we had erected next door to Berg House in violation of every local building code. I calmly explained, "It's a sukkah; don't worry. It will come down in eight days when the holiday is over!"

Carleton College was and is an incubator of timeless ideals—lifelong learning, critical thinking and problem solving, global citizenship, freedom of inquiry and expression, civil discourse, and tolerance and respect for diverse backgrounds and views. We do well to preach, teach and live these values in a world torn by violence, hatred and fear of the other. We do well to heed the wisdom of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who taught nearly 50 years ago:

"We have inherited a large house, a great world house in which we have to live together — black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu — a family...who, because we can never again live apart, must learn

somehow to live with each other in peace.....Together we must learn to live as brothers or together we will be forced to perish as fools.”

(Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?, 1967, 167)

How do we learn to live together as brothers and sisters? We need to offer multiple opportunities for people, especially young people, to learn about the beliefs and practices of others. My late parents taught me that nice people don't discuss two topics—politics and religion. So, of course, I became a rabbi, and what do I speak about every day? Politics and religion! Putting aside the former, I firmly believe we would be a healthier society if we engaged more often in religious and interreligious discourse and experience. My faith and your faith are strengthened, not diminished, by the different faith of others.

We must also recognize that since religious extremism is a global crisis, voices of religious inclusion and pluralism can and must be part of the solution. We need to devote serious financial and human resources to strengthen religious freedom. We must educate a generation of religious leaders who embrace global diversity, who wrestle with the difficult texts of their respective faith traditions, and who renounce the preaching and teaching of hatred. We need to affirm the simple yet profound truths set forth by Rabbi Sacks:

“No soul was ever saved by hate. No truth was ever proved by violence. No redemption was ever brought by holy war. No religion ever won the admiration of the world by its capacity to inflict suffering on its enemies.”  
(Not in God's Name, 265)

In a deeply fractured world, *Nostra Aetate* demonstrates that we can transcend the hate and prejudice of the past. Redemption will not come through violence, extremism or war. Redemption will come when we recognize that each of us is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God.

To love God is to act with love, kindness and compassion towards God's children. To love God is to build bridges of peace, empathy and understanding. In another oft-quoted passage, the prophet Micah exhorts us:

"You have been told what is good  
and what the Eternal One requires of you:  
To do justice;  
To love mercy;  
And to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

This is what our alma mater taught us. This is what our faith traditions expect of us. This is what our fellowmen and women deserve from us. We are all children of God. We are all created in the image of God. Let's work together to polish our tarnished image. Amen.