



Seymour Padnos, right, sits next to his brother, Stuart Padnos, and waves to the crowd during the Tulip Time Volksparade in 2003 in Holland. The Padnos brothers were the grand marshals of the parade that year. Seymour Padnos, a proponent of interfaith initiatives, died last week. *MLive.com files*

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Search for broader understanding



Douglas Kindschi *Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

Last week, a great friend of the Interfaith Institute and of Grand Valley State University died at age 99. Seymour Padnos and his wife, Esther, had been generous to the university and to the institute, and became personal friends as well. During my 28 years as a dean, I had many opportunities to engage with them regarding the new science building, which bears their names, as well as the Padnos College of Engineering and Computing. I always knew of Seymour's deep Jewish faith, and then as the founding director for the Kaufman Interfaith Institute, I became more aware of his commitment to interfaith understanding as well. He supported Sylvia Kaufman's early efforts in the 1980s to establish a Jewish-Christian dialogue in Muskegon, and continued both in attendance and support as the institute took shape the past decade.

Seymour was always kind, gentle and more interested in what I was doing than in talking about himself. But as I got to know him better, I learned of his bringing the professor of the Old Testament from the University of Chicago Divinity School to lecture at Hope College on Jewish-Christian relations. It was the same professor with whom I had studied in the 1960s and who arranged for my wife and me to be invited to a Jewish home in south Chicago to celebrate Passover. It was my first significant interfaith experience and had a profound effect that has influenced me to this day.

I will always be grateful to that professor and to Seymour Padnos for the many ways they both enriched my life and understanding.

COMPLEXITIES OF THE MIDEAST

Another Jewish figure who has recently been important to my understanding is the senior fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, Yossi Klein Halevi. He is a reporter, columnist and author of a number of books reflecting his own journey of understanding. His father was a Holocaust survivor who was very instrumental in his own early development as he responded with anger about what had happened to the Jews. But then he realized that he was living in what was perhaps the most fortunate generation for Jews in all of history. He was not in physical danger, enjoyed freedom living in America and Jews had returned to their homeland and established a state. It was the exact opposite of his father, who probably lived in what was the least fortunate generation to be Jewish with the systematic killing of millions of his people during the Holocaust. Young Halevi had no need to be angry, but sought to live fully and not as a victim.

He emigrated from Brooklyn to Jerusalem in 1983 at age 27. After living in Israel for nearly 20 years, he set forth on a search to better understand the practices, beliefs and devotion of the Christians and Muslims who lived in Israel and the West Bank. His book, "At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew's Search for God with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land," chronicles that journey and the insights he gained as he joined the prayers and practices in monasteries and mosques.

In 2013, his efforts to create meaningful dialogue led Halevi and Abdullah Antepli, an imam and founding director of Duke University's Center for Muslim Life, to

If you go

What: Online book group discussing "Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor"

When: 2 p.m. Wednesdays, beginning July 22

Where: Information and signup at bit.ly/Kaufman-Book

establish the Muslim Leadership Initiative at the Shalom Hartman Institute. Each year, the group brings Muslim leaders from North America to Israel to talk with rabbis and Jewish leaders about Judaism and Israel. In 2016, Antepli and the president of the Shalom Hartman Institute, Donniel Hartman, came to the Kaufman Institute for a presentation called, "Can We Find Common Ground between Israel and Palestine?"

Halevi's latest book is "Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor." He seeks to open a public conversation with his "neighbors" on the other side of the division wall for both sides to better understand each other's narratives and hopes for the future. In a recent video, he explains, "One of the great dangers of our time is the breakdown in our ability to argue passionately and respectfully with those with whom we disagree." This, he describes, is the situation in the Middle East as he seeks a "new approach to the dysfunctional discourse" currently dominating the efforts.

In his book, he seeks to explain the Jewish people, their identity and history, and why they return to their home. He recognized that this is also the home to the Palestinian people. It is not an issue of right vs. wrong, but right vs. right, as both parties seek their legitimate goals. Both peoples belong deeply to the land, he asserts. It is a balance between empathy and faithfulness to one's own story. Halevi sees himself living in the most dangerous part of the world, "but not as victims anymore." The challenge is to avoid being 100% sure of your own position, for it is in that little space of doubt where one can grow in understanding of the other.

Halevi had his book translated into Arabic and made available free for download. He encouraged Palestinian and Arab responses, which he published in the second edition. While he was tempted to respond himself, he chose to let the readers have the last word. It is his goal to open up a new conversation of honestly seeking to hear the stories of the other and seeking to understand them. It might be a goal for all of us in the polarized environment that seems to have captured much of our discourse these days.

The Kaufman Institute is beginning an online discussion group next week on Halevi's book. For further information, go to our website at InterfaithUnderstanding.org.

In these days of conflict and competing narratives, let us keep open that space to listen and perhaps learn from someone who sees the world through different eyes. It is an opportunity to learn and perhaps take a step toward peace.

interfaith@evsu.edu