

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# We can celebrate and learn from each other's holidays



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Spring marks the beginning of a series of religious holidays, or holy days. For Christians, the week began with Palm Sunday on April 14, followed by Maundy Thursday commemorating Jesus' celebrating the Passover meal with his disciples, also known as the Last Supper. The Jewish eight-day celebration of Pesach, or Passover, begins Friday evening with the traditional Seder meal.

An Interfaith Seder was sponsored last week by Temple Emanuel in Grand Rapids. It was led by Rabbi Michael Schadick, and also by two Protestant pastors, a Catholic priest and a Muslim imam. It is appropriate that we come together from our various religious traditions to commemorate this story of freedom. The recitation of the Haggadah is a liturgy passing on to each generation an account of deliverance. The core narrative of Passover and the Seder meal is the story of the Hebrew people escaping from slavery in Egypt.

For this year's Interfaith Seder, a recently written, more inclusive Haggadah was used. It built on the story of the Exodus but added quotes from contemporary sources as well as from Christian, Muslim and Hindu texts. The Torah refers to welcoming the stranger 36 times, and, as participants, we certainly were welcomed into this traditional Jewish celebration.

The welcome began with a warning from President John F. Kennedy: "This nation ... will not be fully free until all its citizens are free." The introduction continued, "While we rejoice over the liberation of the ancient Israelites, we remember that many others are still not free. ... We give voice to those around the world and within our community who are excluded, oppressed or enslaved. We are all part of one human family, all connected, and all responsible for one another."

The next order of the Seder was the lighting of the candles with a quote from Martin Luther King Jr., "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."

With the rehearsing of the Exodus story, we were reminded of Nelson Mandela's efforts to maintain hope during years of imprisonment. He said, "Part of being optimistic is keeping one's heart pointed toward the sun, one's feet moving forward. There were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair."

The importance of the Exodus story also had a profound impact on the African-American experience in maintaining hope during the long period of slavery. At one point in the evening, we joined together singing the spiritual, "Go Down, Moses."

The blessing for the meal was given by the imam, who quoted from the Qur'an words in Arabic often used by Muslims before a meal, which he translated, "In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful do we eat."

At the end of the meal we read a further challenge in the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, "Even after the Lord had delivered the Israelites from Egypt, they had to travel through the desert. We must be ready. ... Let us be united, let us be filled with hope, let us be those who respect one another."

This new version of the Haggadah was an inspiration to all who attended as we joined with our Jewish brothers and sisters in this celebration of freedom. We felt included in the ancient story of moving from slavery to freedom, and we remind ourselves of the many common elements of our own stories of God's faithfulness.

The next day, I attended an event at the Muslim Unity Center in Bloomfield Hills, just outside Detroit. It was a gathering of Jews, Christians and Muslims around the topic "Faith Over Fear." The training program brought faith leaders together to work on effective strategies for advocating against anti-Muslim bigotry. The significant increase in anti-Semitic and Islamophobic violence in the past two years is alarming. It is directed against other religious groups as well, including Sikhs and African-American Christians.

While at the Muslim Unity Center, the imam invited us to observe their prayers at the appointed time. Again, I was struck by their discipline of prayer five times each day and the ritual of prostrating in prayers as an act of submitting to God. While not participating in the prayers directly, I could participate in my own way and learn from the devotion expressed in this tradition.

For Christians, this week also tells the important story of moving from death to life that culminates in the celebration of Easter. For those of the Baha'i faith, the coming week begins the Festival of Ridvan, celebrating the announcement of their founder, Baha'u'llah.

As our various religious traditions enter this period of "Holy Days," we can choose to ignore those who are different, or even find ways to argue about the differences. But we also have the choice of seeking ways to relate with one another, learn from one another and affirm the basic messages of hope and peace.

Another common theme in our various religious traditions is the command to love God and love our neighbor. The first rabbi I met when coming to Grand Rapids more than 40 years ago was Rabbi Phillip Sigal, who served Congregation Ahavas Israel. He was committed to his Jewish faith and also conversant with Christian Scriptures, having received his doctorate in New Testament from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Prior to Rabbi Sigal's untimely death, he was quoted as saying, "When this world has love, then we finally will indeed have Passover and Easter. There will be redemption!"

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