

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

## Moving from enemy to friend, three perspectives



**Douglas Kindschi** director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute, GVSU

"I have to take charge of my own life and make my own decisions.... I can choose to respond with hatred and violence, or with grace and love."

So writes Aziz Abu Sarah in the recent book, "Strangers, Neighbors, Friends: Muslim-Christian-Jewish Reflections on Compassion and Peace." The book features three authors from these traditions writing short reflections (3 to 5 pages each) on how they have come to engaging the stranger in ways that develop friendships.

The book was organized by Kelly James Clark, Senior Research Fellow at the Kaufman Interfaith Institute, and includes reflections from Rabbi Nancy Fuchs Kreimer and Aziz, a Muslim, as well as Kelly's own as a Christian. We are pleased that all three authors will be in Grand Rapids on Oct. 6, as a part of their national book tour.

Aziz is a Palestinian living in Jerusalem. He describes how as an 8-year old he witnessed his 18-year-old brother being taken out of their home to prison for having thrown rocks at Israeli military jeeps. Following eight months in prison, he was released, but died shortly thereafter from internal bleeding and failure of his liver and spleen caused by torture he had received. Aziz then describes the rage and hatred that consumed him as he vowed to avenge his brother's death.

His family was forced to move out of their home into a "small, stuffy, two-bedroom rental apartment ... which housed me, my parents, my three brothers, two sisters-in-law, and four nieces and nephews." He goes on, "The dismal life of a Palestinian boy — displaced, disenfranchised and distressed — is fertile ground for the radicalization of justifiably angry young men." His parents, however, urged him to seek "the higher and more beautiful path, the path of forgiveness." They also reminded him that the Quran encourages believers to be forgiving and to "control their rage and pardon other people." (Quran 3:134)

At the time, Aziz was not ready to accept this admonition. But as he continued his education, he encountered an Israeli teacher who respected him, as well as fellow students whom he found to be "nice people." He describes his change of heart and realized, as he writes, "I would have to rethink my beliefs and ideology. I had been full of rage and anger for years.... I have to take charge of my own life and make my own decisions."

He went on to learn more about those he had previously hated, and even visited Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem. As he learns to forgive and expand his vision, he attends an evangelical Bible college in Jerusalem to learn more about Christianity. His journey to forgiveness began, he writes, "with my willingness to step out of my comfort zone and into an uncomfortable zone. ... I wanted to be the kind of person who forgives. ... I chose grace and love."

Each of the three authors writes 16 short reflections, and Rabbi Nancy Fuchs Kreimer, in one of her chapters, describes a time some 40 years ago while traveling in Germany. A small group of Jews and Christians were there speaking to Germans about post-Holocaust theology. She and a Hasidic rabbi were staying in a Christian home in a small German village on a Friday as their Sabbath approached. How would they celebrate in this small community with no Jewish community, and in

### IF YOU GO

**What:** "Strangers, Neighbors, Friends" Book tour

**When:** 7 p.m. Oct. 6

**Where:** Eberhard Center, GVSU, 301 W. Fulton St., Grand Rapids

**Information and free registration:**  
[InterfaithUnderstanding.org](http://InterfaithUnderstanding.org)

a country that had been responsible for the near destruction of her people?

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, referred to by Nancy as Reb Zalman, knew just what to do. He asked the young daughter of the family to go to the bakery and buy two loaves of braided egg bread, common in Germany and traditional for the Sabbath ritual. Upon her return with the bread, and as sunset approached, he placed his hands on the young girl's beautiful blond head, and in Hebrew — and then translating into German — gave her the traditional blessing, "May God bless you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah."

Rabbi Nancy then explains the Hebrew word "hesed," found 248 times in the Bible, usually translated as mercy, kindness, love and most often loving-kindness. Reb Zalman showed hesed to this young girl who had helped him bring in the Sabbath. She continues, "Reb Zalman did not deny the differences between cultures.... In fact, Reb Zalman relished religious differences, drawing an analog to organs of the body, each with a different function. We would not want the entire body to be a liver; we need a heart, lungs and skin. Difference should be celebrated because, like the body's organs, they combine to create a more vital world."

Reb Zalman's quest was to "meet life's challenges with as much integrity and grace as we can" and he approached it with hesed, loving-kindness. In the 1950s, shortly after his ordination as a Hasidic rabbi, he attended a class with an African American theologian, the Rev. Howard Thurman, to explore Christianity. He then went on to study and pray with Sufi mystics, Trappist monks, the Dalai Lama and many other compassionate and wise people with hesed.

Kelly James Clark, the coordinator and originator of the project, and writer of the Christian reflections, writes in one of his chapters about what he has learned from his Jewish and Muslim friends.

He shares his experience during his first trip to Turkey, of being invited into the home of a Muslim family. The genuine hospitality and desire to share their food and culture with nine strangers was, he found, later repeated many times in other Muslim-majority countries, from Indonesia to Iran. He also learned to appreciate the Muslim act of prayer and Muslims prostrating themselves as a frequent reminder that there is one God, and they themselves are not God. He writes, "Just about everyone — from fundamentalist Christian to devout atheist — could profit from bowing down five times a day to remind themselves that they are not God. We all need to be constantly decentered, constantly reminded that we are not the center of the universe."

It is a distinct privilege for our community to meet these three authors and hear more of their stories about how we can turn strangers into friends, as we become more open to new experiences in our life journey. Plan to join us!

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Aziz Abu Sarah