



What can American Jews and Muslims learn from one another?

JEWIS AND Muslims have been living together – or side by side – in North America for the last several decades, and increasingly more so in recent years. Even though they come from different cultures and countries, the process of assimilating into American life has created new opportunities for coexistence and mutual understand-



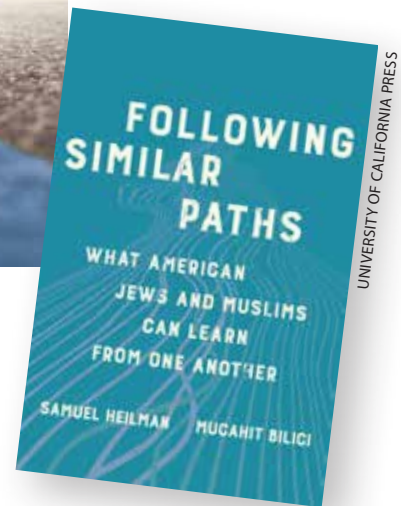
ing. While the conventional wisdom these days is that these are radically divergent communities – perhaps even enemies lately, due mostly to the impact of the current Israel-Hamas war – a new book argues that they are more similar than different, and it is useful to understand why this is so. In fact, the authors of this book argue that both communities have a lot to learn from one another.

The book, *Following Similar Paths: What American Jews and Muslims Can Learn from One Another*, (University of California Press, 2024) is a collaboration of two professors of sociology: Professor Samuel Heilman and Professor Mucahit Bilici. Heilman taught at Queens College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY) for several decades and is now “retired”, living in Jerusalem; Bilici, originally from Turkey, lives in New York where he teaches at John Jay College and at the CUNY graduate center. This book grew out of their participation in the CUNY Graduate Center Committee for the Study of Religion, where they first met. Afterwards, they convened a Jewish-Muslim Working Group at this graduate center in 2019. Discussions with 24 scholars who met together for a full semester helped focus their thinking and shape this book. It has taken another five years for this book to be published, which demonstrates that it is the result of

much research and collaborative considerations. The authors explain a bit about their working together in their introduction:

This is not the work of a single author, but two; we write with common interest but speak with two voices. Each of us builds on our own cultural competence: one, an engaged Muslim and the other an equally involved Jew. Neither of us was born in this country [Heilman was born in a DP camp in West Germany and Bilici was born in Turkey]. But we are both convinced of the possibility of being American while still maintaining a distinct connection to our ‘other’ religious and cultural attachments... As academics, who are also committed to our religious identities, we also draw on our own experiences and the common elements between them to explore the topic.

In exploring this topic, the authors decided to focus their research on religious observant (orthodox) Jews and Muslims. In so doing, they have found that religious American Muslims and religious American Jews have a great deal of similarities. Both religious communities claim that their heritage reaches back to Abraham. Both worship in their original languages: Hebrew and Arabic. Both believe that their religious legal systems are the result of divine revelation. Both observe dietary laws—the Jews eat kosher food and the Muslims eat halal food. Both trace their origins to lands in the Mid-



The cover of the book.

dle East. Also, Jews fared relatively well in Muslim lands, as compared to the persecutions in Christian countries over many centuries.

This is a book with a clearly stated comparative perspective. The authors fervently believe that this way of looking at these two religious communities in America can contribute knowledge about both groups that would not be otherwise attained. They state their intentions forthrightly in their introduction:

We intend to provide a comparative picture of two minority religious experiences in America by looking at them through overlapping lenses, each of which constitutes one of our chapters.

Accordingly, the first 6 chapters of the book focus on 1) Law: Halacha and Shari’a, 2) Diet: Kosher and Halal, 3) Identity: Yarmulke and Hijab, 4) Preachers: Rabbi and Imam, 5) Study: Yeshiva and Madrasa, 6) Prayer: Synagogue and Mosque. The reader indeed learns a great deal about the sim-

ilarities and differences between religiously observant American Muslims and Jews throughout these six chapters.

However, I was particularly interested in chapter seven concerning anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, especially since I was told by the authors in their introduction that this past year's trials and tribulations regarding both communities have been exacerbated by the tensions caused by the Israel-Hamas war. While the authors had a goal of writing a book which would encourage more mutual understanding between Muslims and Jews, the war has dealt them and their communities a setback for these efforts. It is clearly much harder for Muslims and Jews to talk with and cooperate with each other in Israel, North America, or anywhere else in the world due to the tensions which have arisen as a result of the war between the state of Israel and the Hamas-run Gaza strip, since October 7, 2023.

Hamas is a fundamentalist organization, with an extreme anti-Jewish and anti-Israel ideology which seeks to annihilate the Jewish state of Israel. Even though most Muslims in North America do not agree with Hamas ideologically, they identify with the suffering of their fellow Muslims, just as Jews in North America identify with their fellow Jews in Israel, who were brutally massacred and kidnapped on October 7 a little over a year ago from their homes and army bases in the south of Israel.

There is no doubt that this war has reverberated all over North America. Unfortunately, for Muslims and Jews there this has led to an increase in both Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Both communities are suffering from more and more attacks than in the past.

As far as Anti-Semitism goes, which has been increasing in any event much of it during the past year has been directly related to the war. According to the authors:

The sight of Americans tearing down posters depicting and calling for the return of the kidnapped hostages, including the women, children, senior citizens and even infants abducted on October 7, 2023, from Israel into Gaza added to the anxieties about the normalization of anti-Semitic actions. The

combination of all these manifestations appears to have shaken American Jewry more than at any time in this century, including those not used to being the targets of such prejudice, especially in the mass media or at public events.

Similar developments have occurred within the Muslim communities in North America. Heightened tensions created by

puses in North America during the last year. Clearly the tensions between Israel and Hamas have had a major impact on both Jewish and Muslim communities in North America.

Will the most recent outbreaks of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia have a permanent impact on the relationship between Jews and Muslims in America? It is too early to tell. But the authors of this book clearly feel that these developments have already had a major influence on their communities:

What we can say for certain is that prejudice, whether in the form of anti-Semitism or Islamophobia, continues to rear its frightening head as we near the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century. The conflict in Israel/Palestine certainly cast a long shadow on the American sphere of encounter between Jews and Muslims. But we hope that a peaceful resolution may yet alter the course of events in a more positive direction.

I share the fervent hope of the authors of this groundbreaking new book, but I am probably not as sanguine as they are. In my view, the setbacks that have arisen from this unfortunate and very bloody war, appear to me to be very serious and are likely to be long-lasting. Relationships of trust that have been developed over many years have broken down because of the propaganda wars waged in the media between the spokespersons for Israel and those for Hamas and the Palestinians. This is happening with regard to Muslim-Jewish Relations in Israel as well, where any meaningful dialogue has been replaced by diatribe related to the explanations of the war on both sides, especially with regard to the mutual blame game that has resulted in the inability to reach a deal to end the war, bring the hostages home and begin to restore stability to both Israel and Gaza.

It is my hope that by the time this book review appears, the war between Israel and Hamas will have ended and Muslims and Jews in Israel and in North America can once again enter into dialogue and cooperative programs and projects. This important book will enrich their knowledge and their ability to do so. ■



Samuel Heilman



Mucahit Bilici

the Israel-Hamas war have led to more anti-Muslim hate crimes in which Arab and Muslim-looking people were targeted. According to the authors, this is a most unwelcome turn of events:

This unprecedented surge in anti-Muslim and anti-Arab bigotry is particularly unfortunate because CAIR'S most recent annual civil rights report on incidents of Islamophobia had been optimistic. [The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) is a Washington DC-based non-profit organization that seeks to position itself as the leading American Muslim civil rights organization in the U.S.] The optimism expressed in the title of the report "Progress in the Shadow of Prejudice," was, however, shattered in the aftermath of October 7, 2023... the overall backlash as Muslims face this new wave of anti-Muslim sentiment has felt broader and more culturally significant... Muslim students and faculty on college campuses report a growing sense of exclusion and fear to exercise their First Amendment rights in matters of pro-Palestinian activism.

It is amazing how one can say almost exactly the same things about the way Jewish students and faculty have felt on many cam-

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