

Toward a Jewish-Muslim dialogue

• By ZAIN ALI

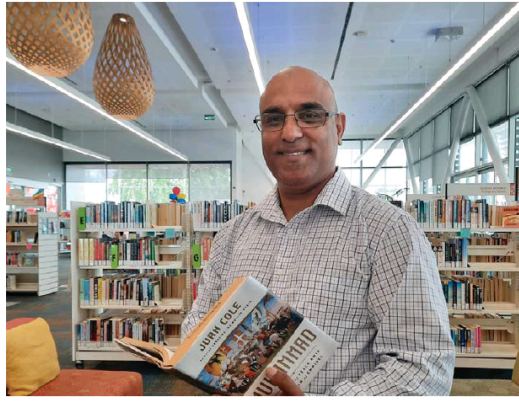
Rabbi Oury Cherki, in a recent opinion piece titled "A rabbi's open letter to Islam," raises an important question: Is Islam capable of progressing toward a spiritual horizon that will prevent such atrocities in the future? The atrocities he has in mind are the barbaric attacks carried out by Hamas on October 7. The question is important, as it is an honest expression of a deeply held concern, a concern that is perhaps shared by many. I am a Muslim, and I welcome Rabbi Cherki's reaching out to Muslims in an effort at constructive dialogue; he should be applauded for this.

For many years now, here in New Zealand, I have been involved with an initiative that brings together Jewish and Muslim students for a shared meal. Getting to know one another while sharing delicious food has proved to be a recipe for success. I have witnessed young Muslims and Jews genuinely bond around their shared experiences of being young and living in a modern world. We've also hosted each other at the local synagogue and mosque.

Soon after a terror attack in 2019 against two mosques here in New Zealand, the Jewish community in Pittsburgh donated close to a million dollars to support the victims. This deeply generous act was motivated, in part, by the local Muslim community in Pittsburgh, who helped raise funds for the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh after it was targeted in a mass shooting.

I have also had the pleasure of visiting Israel, and I very quickly fell in love with Jerusalem. The Old City has a deep and beautiful spirit. I was privileged to recite the morning prayer on Temple Mount and spent many moments in meditation, contemplating the beauty of this sacred space.

On my way out of Temple Mount, I recall seeing a group of young girls in school uniforms by an entrance. One of them stepped close to the entrance and began to pray, in a similar way to how I had seen Jews praying at the Kotel. What I saw next saddened me. The Israeli



'IMPORTANTLY, WHILE the Quran does challenge Jewish tradition, it is also reliant on it,' says the writer. (Courtesy Zain Ali)

guards interrupted her and waved her away.

Such are the sensitivities, that a young girl's prayer was interrupted. This seemed wrong to me. Jerusalem is significant to Muslims, and it is through my conversations with Jewish friends that I came to fully appreciate the significance of Jerusalem to Jews. As a young Jewish student explained to me, Jerusalem is the beating heart of Judaism.

RABBI CHERKI was correct to point out the shared Abrahamic heritage of Judaism and Islam. Both traditions acknowledge the God of Abraham. The love of God and the love of the neighbor are foundational to Islam (as they are to Judaism, I believe).

The Jewish dimension of Islam goes much deeper; in its early stages, the young Muslim community prayed facing Jerusalem and interestingly, Moses is mentioned more times in the Quran than Muhammad. The patriarch Joseph (Yusuf) also features heavily in the Quran; his life story is the subject of a whole chapter within the text. Joseph's life is described in the Quran as being among the best of stories. Muslim thinkers have viewed Joseph's narrative as having deep moral and spiritual insights.

Cherki also raises several moral and theological problems he sees

with Islam. These are also welcome, as he is not the first to raise such concerns, and reflective Muslims also think about these issues. There are four problems he highlights, which are as follows:

(1) Islam seeks world dominance and has no qualms about using violence. From my perspective, I do not feel obligated by my faith, as a Muslim, to seek world domination or to use violence to propagate Islam. As I understand it, Muslim tradition is committed to conditional pacifism, that is, we are not meant to cause or seek trouble; if, however, there is a threat, then proportionate self-defense is acceptable.

(2) Islam subjugates our moral conscience to religious norms. I do value my moral conscience, especially when it is at odds with my faith commitments. A good example is when God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son. Muslim tradition celebrates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son; he is an exemplar of faith. This raises deep ethical and moral questions. Was Abraham right in his willingness to act on this command, and was it right for God to issue such a command to Abraham? I continue to wrestle with these troubling questions.

(3) Islam does not give due respect to the Jewish scriptural tra-

dition. The Quran does bring into question the authenticity of Jewish scripture, and I appreciate this may be painful, and even considered disrespectful, by Jewish readers of the Quran. It is important to keep in mind that the context within which the Quran arrived, was one in which people openly critiqued and challenged one another. This included Jewish critiques of the Quran and Islam.

IMPORTANTLY, WHILE the Quran does challenge Jewish tradition, it is also reliant on it. For example, Hagar is very important in Muslim tradition, although curiously, the Quran is silent about her; to know her story, we must consult Jewish scripture.

On a personal level, I resonate most with the Book of Psalms (Tehillim). I find aspects of this book genuinely moving and Divine in nature. My favorite is Psalm 56:8, "You [God] keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book."

(4) Muslims do not recognize Jews as a nation. There are a variety of views among Muslims about Judaism and the Jewish people. I do not object to viewing Jews as a people and as a nation. I also do not have a problem with viewing Jews as being indigenous to the Holy Land. Muslims also have questions about Palestinians, and whether they are also to be seen as a people, a nation, and whether they too are indigenous to the Holy Land.

As I write this piece, I have in mind Palestinian and Jewish children. They are the real innocents, paying the price of a conflict that was not of their making. I would like to talk further about what we can do to alleviate their suffering, and how together we can progress toward a spiritual horizon that prevents such suffering. For now, though, I pray for Rabbi Cherki's well-being, and I pray that his initiative builds momentum and there is further dialogue among the children of Abraham.

The writer is an honorary academic at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. He teaches and publishes in the area of Islamic studies and philosophy.