Seeking Peace Partners

It was hot, muggy and partly sunny on Sunday morning, Aug. 31, as I left my home to drive to Cobo Center in Downtown Detroit to speak at the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) conference. My feelings reflected the weather: I was fearful, anxious and wanted to be hopeful.

This was the third time I attended an ISNA conference. In 2007, I was part of a panel presenting ways to bring Jews and Muslims together. At that conference in Chicago, I presented highlights from Reuniting the Children of Abraham toolkit for peace — a documentary and comprehensive educational package developed with the University of Michigan.

In 2010, with Sofia Beeg Latifi, I presented Friendship and Faith: the wisdom of women creating alliances for peace, stories of interfaith outreach.

What made me fearful and anxious this time was a demonstration against Israel that was planned to take place outside Cobo at 1 p.m. — a demonstration not sanctioned by the conference. What made me more fearful was the opportunity to speak to hundreds of Muslims from across North America who has come to the 31st annual ISNA conference.

Cobo was bustling. More than 15,000 Muslims attended the conference, mostly families, many with multiple strollers. ISNA’s hospitality was extraordinary. They provided me an onsite personal assistant Sana Ahmed, who happened to be a doctor from Ann Arbor, an overflowing hospitality bag, breakfast, lunch, snacks and dinner.

My first presentation was at 10 a.m. I shared the podium with Robbie George, a Christian scholar from Princeton, and Imam Zaid Shakir from Zaytuna College in Berkeley, Calif. I was asked to speak about what we have in common as Christians, Jews and Muslims. I listed the 18 values that we share, including loving your neighbor as yourself, helping the poor while respecting their dignity, welcoming strangers, educating children, honoring parents and teachers and the importance of family.

I spoke of the necessity to use bridges — to walk across them to meet each other and learn about each other so that we no longer fear our differences but see the value of them. I suggested we each give up on trying to change the other. In the Quran 49:13, it states “O Mankind, We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other.”

I said, “We can be Jews, you can be Muslims, and we can work together to make our world a better place.”

I ended my presentation by asking who wanted to create a coalition of Christians, Muslims and Jews willing to stand together to end racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and the killing of Christians? Six women signed up.

I then joined Najah Bazz, longtime friend and interfaith activist, at her session called “Identity Intersection: The Muslim Interfaith Advocate.” Najah addressed an audience of 30 young Muslim women on how to effectively participate in interfaith work. Around 1 p.m. the demonstrators started to gather. ABC reported there were 500 participants. To me, it looked like less than 200. What was most disturbing were the 20 participants in large black hats, long black coats and payot — the attire worn by ultra-Orthodox Jews. I never spoke to them, so I don’t know who they are or where they were from. The demonstrators chanted and ranted but were non-communicative. I breathed a little easier and met my husband for lunch.

My last panel was titled “Toward Peace in Palestine.” My longtime friend Syyed M. Syeed, national director of ISNA’s office for interfaith and community alliances, was the moderator. He spoke about the long-term relationship between ISNA and Rabbi David Saperstein of the Religious Action Center (RAC) and the Union of Reform Judaism (URJ) in Washington. Ambassador Warren Clark, executive director of Churches for Middle East Peace, spoke about the necessity of a two-state solution. Anwar Kahn, CEO of Islamic Relief, addressed the humanitarian needs of the Palestinians in Gaza.

I spoke about our Tectonic Leadership program for churches, mosques, synagogues and community groups and how to have a “cool conversation on the hot topic of Israel and Gaza.” I shared the program’s goal to minimize hate speech and inspire better understanding through responsible and productive communication.

I then took questions from the audience. All were inquisitive and valid enquirers but one. A gentleman stood and said, “I have nothing against Jews. Zionists are the problem.” My heart stopped. I had heard this so many times: The rant against Zionism. Zionists are terrorists. Zionists want to get rid of all Palestinians. Zionists don’t want a two-state solution.

I asked for the microphone and replied, “I am a Zionist. I care deeply for Palestinians and I care deeply for Israel and Israelis. Words can be powerful tools for understanding or words can be used to demonize. Let us come together and create understanding so we can find solutions that help both Palestinians and Israelis.”

Rosenberg’s Advocacy

Join me in helping deconstruct the negative narrative of Zionism that is prevalent in the Muslim and Christian communities. Hadassah has a wonderful webinar series: “Defining Zionism in the 21st Century.” The free program is an effective tool to deconstruct the negative narrative about Zionism and Israel, and it provides helpful talking points for conversations with Jews and people of other faiths. It’s available at www.Hadassah.org.

There are only 13.7 million Jews in the world. There are 1.2 billion Muslims and 2 billion Christians. If we are to survive, we must raise our voices with moderate and peace-seeking Muslims and Christians. The majority cannot be irrelevant. Let’s work together and inspire the silent majority in all communities — otherwise the zealots will win.