

Jewish-Muslim Relations: An Interview with Prof. Burton Visotzky

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Prof. BURTON VISOTZKY is Appleman Professor of Midrash and Interreligious Studies at the Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York, NY, USA.

Meral: Prof Visotzky, what stimulated you to engage in Jewish-Muslim dialogue?

Visotzky: I began my engagement with Islam on two levels. First, as an academic studying the narratives of the rabbis and their interpretations of Scripture, I found the need to learn as much as I could about Islam when I studied JEWISH texts from the seventh century CE, onward. Because my doctoral dissertation was on a Midrash (biblical commentary) from the ninth century CE, I started reading in Islam as early as the 1980's. I had already begun doing comparative work between rabbinic literature and that of the Church Fathers, so comparisons with Islam were a natural progression.

Because of my academic work, it was easy for me to do outreach with both the Christian and Muslim communities in North America. In the mid-1990's I did a ten-part television series on Public Television on the biblical book of Genesis. For those episodes that covered common material (e.g. Hagar and Ismael, or Joseph) we had Muslim guests on the television series. Because of this I became known to the American Muslim community and my ability to dialogue grew.

Meral: How pleased are you with the progress so far?

Visotzky: I am very pleased with the progress. Of course, after the horrible events of Sept. 11, 2001, everything speeded up incredibly. Dialogue with Islam became necessary to both keep the interfaith fabric of America from tearing asunder, and to help the United States maintain its alliances with Muslim majority countries abroad. Now, it is quite regular for

there to be Jewish-Muslim dialogue everywhere in the US and in many places abroad.

I point out with pride that the Jewish Theological Seminary began our Jewish-Muslim dialogue back in 1956 –so we have had much opportunity to make progress. I am privileged to build on the successes of my teachers.

Meral: Do you believe that your efforts have made a change and contributed to a better understanding between the two communities?

Visotzky: Yes, *alhamdulillah*.

Meral: What do you understand from “the Jewish-Muslim Dialogue”?

Visotzky: I continue to focus on two primary points: first the enormous amount that Judaism and Islam share in common –be it food laws, prayer customs, theology, and the like. Second –particularly in the US and Europe where there are Christian majorities– there are many opportunities for alliances between the Muslim and Jewish community over causes of mutual concern such as circumcision, kosher/halal food and the like.

Meral: Based on your personal experience, which Jewish groups are more inclined to Jewish-Muslim dialogue?

Visotzky: In general, the more progressive Jewish groups are more inclined to dialogue, which is ironic, as the more traditional Jewish groups have more in common with observant Islam.

Meral: Who are the target audience in Jewish-Muslim activities: Only the Muslims in the US? Or do you also address people in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, etc.? And what kind of classes are you in contact with: academics, activists or ordinary people?

Visotzky: The dialogues take place locally, nationally, and internationally. We meet with ordinary people in the mosques, we meet with teachers, imams, and other Muslim leaders, and we meet with political figures.

Meral: From your experience so far, how do you find your Muslim fellows in dialogue? Are they eager enough to promote Jewish-Muslim dialogue? Or are they hesitant and wary?

Visotzky: Usually when I meet Muslims in dialogue they are already inclined to be part of the conversation, as they have freely chosen to be there. In the early days we experienced many on both sides who sought to convert or prove the superiority of one religion to the other. Now, we find people of good faith on both sides of the dialogue who want to know one another and only compete in doing acts of righteousness.

Meral: While engaging in Jewish-Muslim dialogue, you regularly meet with your Muslim fellows in academic circles, conferences, symposiums. Do

you find Imams and Muslim academics to be knowledgeable enough on Judaism?

Visotzky: Both Jews and Muslims should learn as much as they can about the religion of the Other. I only learned Arabic about ten years ago, having finally exhausted all I could find in English on Islam. Of course, one can learn about the other without mastering a new language, but Arabic seems essential to learning Islam, much as Hebrew is essential to learning Judaism.

For those who are beginners, we published a book written by Jews and Muslims called: *Sharing The Well: A Resource Guide To Jewish-Muslim Engagement*. It is available free of charge for anyone who wants to download the PDF, it can be found at www.jtsa.edu/sharingthewell. The more we can learn about the other, the more respect we can show toward the other, the better.

Meral: Do you feel successful in attracting people to the dialogue activities? Or do you have an impression that only a limited number of volunteers are engaged in Jewish-Muslim dialogue?

Visotzky: The numbers vary depending on the activities. Sometimes there are very few, sometimes it is the same faces time and again, sometimes there are many new people. This is one of those mysteries where I tell myself, “Allah knows best.”

Meral: How is the general attitude of the Jews in America towards Jewish-Muslim relations? Do your Jewish fellows find your efforts useless? Are they suspicious of you because of your endeavors?

Visotzky: Many, many Jews applaud and support my efforts. Others remain suspicious and fearful. I find that when I speak in synagogues it is a revelation to those who hear me. They ask, “Why don’t I know about this?” The best thing is that then they ask, “How can I get involved?”

Meral: You surely know that the Qur’an has a considerable amount of criticisms against Jews. And in return, Jewish thinkers have made use of derogatory terms about Islam, the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad. Do you think that the religious literature of both parties stands in the way of a sound interaction?

Visotzky: I think it is too easy, and in fact wrong, to compare the best of my tradition with the worst of yours, or vice versa. Both Jewish and Muslim traditions each have great teachings and wonderful beauty. Yet both have texts that were taught in a given historic moment that remain difficult and require interpretation and explanation if we are to move on to comparing the best to the best in each tradition.

Meral: You have attended many programs in Arab countries and had many contacts with Arabs. How have you been treated by them, and as a rabbi, how do you evaluate their interfaith efforts in their countries?

Visotzky: I have had many, many good experiences in Muslim majority countries, many of which are Arab countries. I have also been subjected to anti-Semitic harangues. I try to not go back to repeat those experiences – I desire dialogue, not diatribe. In general I have been well received at every level, be it cab drivers, hotel employees, government officials, and imams. The Muslim community is very welcoming.

Meral: Is it possible to carry out Jewish-Muslim dialogue under the shadow of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Visotzky: It certainly IS possible to do so, Israelis and Palestinians carry out such dialogue. But there is no hiding the fact the Israel-Palestine conflict is the chief stumbling block to dialogue. I pray for two states for two peoples living side by side in peace, *inshallah*.

Meral: How do you feel when a bomb ruins your exhausting efforts to promote Jewish-Muslim dialogue?

Visotzky: With every passing year I come to appreciate Sisyphus more and more. In Greek mythology he was condemned to push a rock up hill all day long, only to have it roll back to the bottom at the end of the day. One bomb can set back a year of interreligious dialogue efforts. Yet, we must keep pushing the rock up the hill.

Meral: According to your experiences, what is the most favorable ground on which Jewish-Muslim dialogue should be based?

Visotzky: Mutual respect that leads to love of one another, and love of one another's traditions and religion. This does not mean we should convert, but rather appreciate that we were made as different tribes and peoples that we might know one another and each serve God as best we can.

Meral: How do you envisage for the future of Jewish-Muslim dialogue?

Visotzky: Much hard work, much learning about one another, much mutual labor to improve the lot of every human being. What we share in common is that we are all commanded to serve God that we may help our fellow human beings, *inshallah*.

Meral: Thank you very much for your time.

Visotzky: Thank you for this opportunity.