

## **Tarek El-Messidi/Andrew Rehfeld, “Jews and Muslims Turn Hate to Humanity: Interfaith Collaboration in Times of Religious Violence”**

March 8, 2017

### **Marie Griffith**

Good evening, everyone. Thank you so much for your patience there, we think we've got the technology fixed. Welcome to you all, my name is Marie Griffith and I am the director of the John C. Danforth Center for Religion and Politics here at Washington University and they are sponsoring tonight's event. It's a pleasure to see you here for this very special program and I would just like to remind you that if you haven't already to please silence your cell phones and other buzzing devices. While we ordinarily plan our events many months in advance, this one came together in one week. The only possible way that could happen is through the extraordinary capability of the Danforth Center staff. Above all, our assistant director Debra Kennard and our event coordinator, Leslie Davis, and our administrative coordinator Sheri Peña. On this international women's day, I would like to pause and offer my gratitude to these three super women for doing an enormous amount of work with grace and excellence, thank you. (Applause)

I'm also grateful for our postdoctoral fellows who staffed the event and the additional staff. And I'd like to especially thank the security forces who came out in full force today. It's a sad commentary and we're going to be discussing this up here in just a moment. But given all the recent threats and things of that sort, I'm very grateful to them for their presence. The Director of Hessod Shell Emmeth Cemetery Anita Feigenbaum is here with us tonight and taking a break from what must be an incredibly frantic work pace that she's had to endure for the past few weeks and I would like to recognize her as our honored guest. (Applause)

And many others are here from the St. Louis Jewish and Muslim communities and other communities and we're thankful for your presence here as well. Thanks for the generosity of Rory Picker-Neiss and the Jewish Community relations council. I was fortunate enough today to be included in a lunch with both of our honored guests and many of these other leaders today. It was an extraordinary occasion to learn from them what they share across Muslim-Jewish lines and also what they don't know about each other's communities. Rory teased me that I was the token Christian at this lunch and may I say it was truly a blessing to be a token so thank you Rory for including me in that.

The idea for tonight's program arose after we learned about the generosity of the Muslim community in raising funds to help restore the tombstones desecrated at Hessod-Shell-Emmeth Cemetery in University City. Debra Kennard and I went to the cemetery to morning after the news of the vandalism broke and we happened to be there when the first trucks arrived with workmen to start on long restoration work. We walked through the cemetery for about an hour, we visited with Rabbi Hershi Novack who was there at the time and we spoke with a few other somber wanderers who were there. But, mostly, we walked in silence among the broken monuments to pay our respects and as I walked I tried, truly tried, to imagine what it must feel like to be a family member of someone whose memory has been treated so carelessly, so hatefully. And how it must feel to be part of a community that regularly comes under attack. The day after we visited the cemetery, word first came that two Muslim leaders Tarek El-Messidi and Linda Sarsour partnered in a crowd-

funding project to raise funds to repair the vandalized tombstones. Already that day, by the time I first heard about this effort, something like \$20,000 had come in, later that day it was \$50,000 and as the money continues to flow in it has grown now to \$150,000. This is not only huge news in St. Louis but also around the country and it prompted many other acts of love that said to the Jewish community here and elsewhere that we stand with you. That effort endured hateful prejudice and acts of violence particularly since 9/11 and spiking in more recent times. Mosques are burning down. Muslims, or those suspected to be Muslims, are targeted in vandalism and even shootings. These Muslims chose to help Jews in their own moment of fear and need was inspiring to me and I know to countless others. In a world and a nation much too filled with distrust and fear and animosity, American Muslims turned hate into humanity and hope.

Tonight we are able to bring forth a prominent leader of the St. Louis Jewish Community and the Muslim co-organizer of that effort for a public about building interfaith collaboration in times of religious violence. Andrew Rehfeld is President and Chief Executive Officer of the Jewish Federation of St. Louis and he is also a faculty affiliate of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics he was already actively engaged as a lay leader in the Jewish Community prior to taking this position. He sat on the executive committee, the Jewish Community Relations Council, and also the St. Louis Hillel. Dr. Rehfeld is also a scholar of Democratic Theory with interest in the history of political thought and the philosophy of the social sciences. With a PHD in Political Science and a Masters in Public Policy both from the University of Chicago, he has been widely published in a range of journals and other outlets and he's the author of a book on political philosophy called the concept of constituency by the Cambridge University Press. Besides his academic appointments with our center, he is also a senior fellow at Hebrew Union College's Center of Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems. I would just like to add that Andrew welcomed my family and me to St. Louis when we moved here five and a half years ago with tremendous warmth and generosity. He has been a good friend to me throughout these years I have been in St. Louis.

Our honored out of town guest is Tarek El-Messidi, the co-organizer of the fundraising campaign for Hessod-Shell Emmeth. He is a Muslim-American social entrepreneur and activist who was listed as one of the 500 most influential Muslims worldwide in 2012. He holds an MBA from the University of Tennessee and also pursued Islamic studies in programs in the US, Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan. In 2001, shortly after 9/11, Mr. El-Messidi co-founded the Fast-athon—an interfaith event that raises money to feed the poor by asking non-Muslims to fast one day with their Muslim peers during Ramadan. The event's slogan is "Go hungry for a day, so someone else won't have to". To date it has raised a few million dollars worldwide. In 2010, Mr. El-Messidi founded Celebrate Mercy—501-C3 non-profit that teaches about the prophet Mohammed's life and character through webinars, social events, and social media. Celebrate Mercy has reached millions of people in its innovative campaigns for social passion. He's going to tell us more about these efforts in a moment including a campaign last year that raised \$200,000 for the victims of San Bernadino shootings. A campaign that President Obama in his Baltimore mosque speech and he will tell us more about his latest campaign for our local cemetery. So each of our guests will make a brief statement then engage in a larger conversation. Please join me now in welcoming to the stage Andrew Rehfeld and Tarek El-Messidi.

## **Andrew Rehfeld**

Thank you Marie. And I want to thank the Danforth Center for convening this conversation and Tarek, what an honor it is to do this with you. It's an honor and pleasure to participate in what is still the ongoing aftermath of an event that went from being a troubling offense to something that brought our communities together. Tonight it is serving for a little bit of a forum for self-reflection. As Marie has asked me to review the events from the last sixteen days and catalog some themes from what I've seen from the Jewish community in St. Louis. On Monday morning, February 20 at Hessed-Shell Emmeth Cemetery in University City, MO. Anita Feigenbaum, Director of the cemetery, discovered over 100 gravestones toppled. We don't know yet if the act is one of insensitive destruction or something more sinister targeted at the Jewish community. Whatever the true motivations of this act, we do know its unsettling effects. It came after a series of events that targeted Jews and the Jewish community here in Missouri tracing back less than three years ago. I must say that the way in which this particular desecration resonated with the community spoke not only to these events but also, as Marie beautifully described the way in which the cemetery represents, particularly in Jewish culture, the memory and history of those departed and the reflections of the lives hopefully well lived.

And just to remind us of the context in which this was all happening—in April 2014, less than three years ago, a citizen of southern Missouri had traveled to Overland Park, Kansas explicitly to kill Jews. He managed to murder three individuals in the parking lot of their Jewish community campus and as it happens of course because Jews and non-Jews live together without distinction anymore, the victims were not Jewish. Over the last few years alone, Jewish institutions in St. Louis have been targeted in a number of security instances including the ones you have heard about. The one about multiple bomb threats of facilities, schools, and centers. Most recently as January, our own Jewish community center received a bomb threat and was evacuated. So when the destruction of the cemetery occurred it was not surprising to us that it did strike the cord that it did.

Now the desecration had been discovered on a Monday, the Federation had been in close contact with Anita to support the work that she had been doing. We supplied staff and organized a Jewish community restoration of our own. Something that the federation does, we mobilize the community to port the needs that are here, to support and enhance the Jewish community in St. Louis, Israel, and anywhere that there's a need. This time it was to secure and restore the cemetery and after that, to the extent in which we could raise funds for institutions that needed security given the context. I remember consulting one of the members of my staff, Joel Frankel, about how much we can think we can raise and I said it's important that we have it as an outlet, people will want to give, so do you think we will raise \$10,000? I said well perhaps, the question is what are the needs and what do we need to give. Before we left the office today, we had received 1100 donors for 40 different states and countries and have raised over \$200,000. I want to thank all the donors who have supported this community. The next morning we found this out this is what we do as a federation, we convened a conference call of national and federal leadership. Participants included our staff, Jewish relations council, the St. Louis anti-defamation league, and the AJC. Along with national leadership of the secure Jewish federations of North America.

We ask three questions: First, what was known about the incident? Second, what do we know about existing security risks facing our structure and institutions? And, finally, what was the

appropriate community response, what was the need going to be of people to gather together? As a result of the call, it became apparent that we needed to mobilize and to show a united front against hate and intolerance against any kind. Rabbi Jim Bennett and Rabbi Moshe Schulman of the reform and orthodox communities, were also on that call to help us mobilize the religious community too. The Jewish Relations Council with Rory at the helm took the lead to organize an interfaith vigil. The choice of the day—do you do it the next day when there were conflicts on Thursday and Friday? Then you have the Sabbath on Saturday so it's either going to be Wednesday or Sunday. And then there comes the complexity of community organizing. The choice of that call was coming to us with Governor Gritin asking if there was anything he or his staff could do to help. I should tell you that elected leaders should always be invited to these events in order to show a solid showing of support. I explained to him what we were exploring and he said that he would be able to be involved only on Wednesday afternoon and not Sunday if we wanted to do it that day. I have to say he was very deferential and very open about what he could do for our community. Most importantly, he offered to us to mobilize a volunteer effort for the cemetery the hour before. I know Anita had been involved in these conversations and Tuesday afternoon we decided that we would try to pull something together in about 30 hours and mobilize a cleanup.

Again, thanks to the leadership to Maharat Rori Picker Neiss, the executive director of the JCRC and our senior rabbinic leadership. We got the word out to the Jewish community and the interfaith community and the governor's staff also organized in a far more effective way than we ever could have. Maybe we get 200, 300, maybe 400 people. This was a three o'clock in the afternoon on a Wednesday, a weekday, we are going to mobilize people. Well, we ended up gathering over 2500 people security estimates. All faiths were represented from the Jewish community to the Muslim community to the Christian community and I'm sure that the agnostic and atheist communities were there as well. In the midst of all of it, we got word that the Vice President of the United States would be visiting as well. So, on Wednesday afternoon, 48 hours after the desecration was discovered, I had the surreal experience of standing on the back of a pickup truck with the governor on one side and the director of the Jewish cemetery in front of me and Vice President Pence on my right. We were delivering a clear and direct message that was a message against anti-Semitism, hate, and prejudice. The Mufti from the Islamic Center of St. Louis and there was a deacon from the St. Louis arch diocese join us in the vigil along with the community's rabbinical leadership. The clear message that we delivered that day was very simple. There were three things that we have to do to defeat the scourge and combat it is to name it, condemn it, and to do something about it. That's what he said. And that message got honed over the next week as in the media and in ways that began to take on in international attention was incredible to all of us and took us by surprise.

So as we said, we have to name it, we have to call it for what it is. The racism, the bigotry, the antisemitism, the anti-Muslim bias, racism in any form. To just name it and say it is unacceptable. Number two to condemn it. The culture of hate and speaking up against it publicly and frequently. I think that the modern society has lost the art of public shaming. Shaming for things that deserve shaming, not for things that people are just offended by. And finally, do something about it. Educate against intolerance and bias, mobilize communities against injustice, and invest in infrastructure that would guarantee security for all of the minorities.

Now I go into detail not only because Marie asked me to do that for my remarks but also to give you a focus. Certainly, the federation and the leadership wants security and leadership for our

community. I recently heard about the events in Philadelphia which is one of my hometowns. About a Muslim group that was raising money and I saw online, J.K. Rowling (you'll talk about that). And I would always say that we are grateful to all of our partners for raising these funds but I never named the groups. I got a call from a woman on Friday afternoon in L.A. and it was voicemail and I'm glad it was a voicemail because I don't know how I would react if it wasn't. And she castigated me for not recognizing the contributions of the Muslim community to the Jewish community and that she is embarrassed that the Jews would be so narrow. By the way, she was a self-proclaimed Jewish woman whose grandparents were buried in the cemetery and it was like she was describing someone that I had no recollection that certainly was not me and I said ma'am what are you talking about? And she said that she listened to everything you've said. And then I said where did you hear this? And then she said that she read it and saw it in the news. And I said, well I don't control the news and edit what gets recognized but I said that's true we didn't say it that name and I'll explain why but it was that afternoon that I reached out to Tarek and we began a conversation about this. So why didn't I name it? One of the reasons I didn't name it was because in terms of responsible philanthropy, unfortunately in crisis it happens that organizations go out and raise money they don't have the legitimacy to raise funds and as the head of a significant philanthropic organization, if I start thanking all of these people it puts us at a risk. If it's International Red Cross or someone we have a relationship with of course—not only would I but I have—thank them.

That was one response. The other one was from the other side. The other side castigated me in particular publicly in an editorial for "allowing the Vice President of the United States into the cemetery that day." He came and he stood against the call of antisemitism and I'm sure we'll talk about why that was in particular but let me just finish by saying this. To the person in LA who called me and said why aren't we recognizing is so completely misrepresenting of the St. Louis Jewish community that has been welcoming and has been working intersectionally with the Muslim community and the Islamic community. Let me just formally end by directly naming and thanking Linda Sarsour and Tarek El-Messidi and Celebrate Mercy for your inspiring leadership, your humanity, and your decency in helping our community from turning hate into a thing of real beauty. Thank you very much.

### **Tarek El-Messidi**

As-salaamu alaykum. Peace be with you everyone. I would like to thank the organizers for putting this together and the John C. Danforth Center for putting this together with such short notice. Traditionally when we begin something—any act—in the Muslim community, we start by thanking god. My full name is Tarek Osama El-Messidi. My parents are from Egypt and I'm from Tennessee. These facts have allowed for several things. Number one, it has allowed people to call me the first radical Islamic redneck they've met and second, I've gotten a lot of free massages at airports going through security. Growing up a child of immigrants in this country, we moved around quite a bit before settling in Tennessee. My parents were not too religious growing up. I just remember going to school that I can't eat pepperoni pizza and that they needed to make separate cheese slices for me. I got involved in the thriving Muslim community and event started going to Sunday school. But still, as a member of the Muslim community I started to feel a confused identity. I didn't feel totally American in Tennessee. It was an over 90% white city, Knoxville. Most of my friends were actually evangelical Christians who saw me as a prime target of conversion. We often had theological debates. Every time I went to Egypt in the summer and went into a taxi and opened my mouth they knew I was not from Egypt. So in America I didn't feel American and in Egypt I

didn't feel Egyptian. It wasn't until I graduated high school when I was blessed with the opportunity to travel to Morocco for a one year program learning about Islam under Muslim scholars from America. I was actually introduced to more of the spiritual dimension of Islam and I came back with this understanding as one of my friends said that this identity of mine always made me feel that I wasn't at home and I as I met these scholars and had more of an indigenous experience that was rooted in America. I realized that home is not where your grandparents were born but about where your grandkids will be buried and that realization that I'm both an American and a Muslim came to me after high school. It was not until later when I founded Celebrate Mercy that reconnecting to the prophet Mohammed—peace be upon him—was such an important thing. Making his life more relevant more people to day-to-day people we recorded videos of prominent Muslims like Cat Stevens and Andre Carson and entertainers and scholars and speakers with these webinars. It wasn't until 2012 when the US ambassador Chris Stevens in Benghazi, Libya and a lot of people thought that he was killed because of the YouTube video about the prophet Mohammed and as a result there were riots on the streets—people were angry. There was vandalism at the US embassy in Cairo there were riots in Lebanon—even a KFC and a Hardee's were firebombed there. There was a lot of anger. At that same time, it was 9/11/2012 in Libya and I've been realizing that we have been teaching about the prophet Mohammed for three years now but if you look at his life he was insulted many time. There were many assassination attempts on the prophet's life but never did he seek to take revenge on people who personally insulted him. And I thought why are these people reacting this way to a video when he himself didn't react to insults. I thought we can't just be teaching about him we have to show the experience of his life so that's when we started our first campaign about compassion. We asked Muslims around the world to go on our website and write a letter of condolence and mercy to the family of Chris Stevens. I had been in touch with the State Department to give them these letters and the goal had been 1,000 letters, however, it went viral very quickly. The press release spread it quickly, it went to the front page of Reddit, and I started getting phone calls at 6:30 in the morning from news stations in Europe—this was all very new to me. We ended up collecting 8,000 from Muslims in about 150 countries. The family of Chris Stevens actually reached out to us about the story in the media and I actually met with his sister and gave her the copies of all 7,700 letters in DC when she was visiting the white house.

That was our first time to do a campaign like this and we did a few campaigns like this later. But one of the things that inspired me to teach about the prophet Mohammed—peace be upon him—inspired me when I saw the disgusting images of the cemetery here—the vandalism, toppled headstones. I thought of my own background as a child of an immigrant and I thought that this could have easily been a Muslim cemetery and there are a lot of groups now being targeted. Islamophobia is on the rise, Anti-Semitism is on the rise, hate crimes, vandalism, bullying of kids, bomb threats, and it all started during the election cycle—the spike. When I saw those images I was inspired by a story about a guy when he was in Medina after escaping persecution in Mecca and he was sitting at a table with his disciples and he saw a Jewish funeral procession passing by he stood up from where he was sitting—this is completely authenticated in the Muslim scripture, there's no doubting the authenticity of this source—he stood from where he was sitting out of respect for this funeral. His disciples around him were asking why he was standing—it's a Jew—and this was actually a time in Medina when there was tension between Muslims and Jews. His response was so beautiful—is it not a human soul? If the prophet Mohammed could put aside the politics and recognize the humanity of each person, that this is not just a funeral or a desecration of a cemetery. These things shouldn't be made into a political issue. Linda and I didn't think—"Oh, we are only

going to repair the headstones of those Jews who oppose settlements." We're not going to ask whether they supported a two state solution—we put the politics aside.

Thereafter, we (Linda and Tarek) both approached Launchgood at the same time to start a funding page. They told us that they don't want to have duplicate campaigns so they asked if I would be willing to cooperate with Linda Sarsour. And if she was willing to, I was willing to. We then talked on the phone and decided to collaborate on this project. What happened after that was history. Our goal was \$20,000 and we hit that goal in three hours and the campaign just went viral throughout the Jewish and Muslim communities. Both communities are reaching out to each other with love. At one point, later that day, the Launchgood website crashed for an hour—I thought why would people be trying to hack our website? I later found out that J.K. Rowling retweeted this story and because so many people visited the webpage the server crashed and then they had to actually pay for more server space. By the second day, Ellen DeGeneres had retweeted. At one point, every ten minutes, about \$1000 was coming in. A lot of donations came from the Jewish community as well as Muslims. As of today donations are upward to about \$160,000. Now it has been three weeks. So, that is the story of this campaign, inspired by the prophet Mohammed and what I find beautiful is the silver lining of this tragedy of this ecosystem of hate that has now been allowed to thrive. I am really excited for this conversation as I have learned so much in the past few weeks. I have never done a campaign with Jews, for Jews, and I've learned a lot just in these past three weeks. Again, thank you for hosting this and I look forward to this discussion.

### **Marie Griffith**

So thank you both so much and I guess where I would like to start is that you guys both talked about hate and converting that hate into hope and humanity. And I'd like to reflect a little on the source of that hate in both communities. What do you think it is? What do you think generates that kind of feeling? Jews and Muslims have experienced hate for centuries at different times and places and I would like for you to both reflect on the sources of that. Andrew, would you like to start?

### **Andrew Rehfeld**

Sure, so I'm actually teaching a class on Zionism right now and you look at the history before the founding of the state of Israel and it's all about the re-emergence of faith where it somewhat subsided in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and you're seeing it there again. You're also seeing it now come up that there are certain tropes and certain stories that are easy to go to when people are uncertain and unfortunately the hatred of the Jews is one of those stories. In the particular instance right now, there are a couple of things happening. Number one, I think social media has focused on people to focus on extremes and to not leave any ambiguity in their views and to allow a sort of echo chamber of rather nasty thoughts. We need to find a way to remember two things. Number one, there are lots of places that we can find alignment and, number two, the fact that we disagree with someone doesn't make them bad or evil it just means you have differing views. And even if you think you're right and the person is wrong that doesn't make them a bad person it just means they have different motives. What's happening is that social media is exacerbating some of those tendencies and then fixating on stories that are familiar to us. Finally, there can be no mistaking that the political rhetoric has been targeting the Muslim community and Jews are often up there right with them.

### **Tarek El-Messidi**

I agree with those comments—for Muslims in America the Islamophobia and hate defeated the election cycle. What's interesting in that spikes in anti-Muslim attacks and rhetoric always spikes around elections and unfortunately for the first time in my lifetime at least I've seen candidates making very bigoted remarks and getting votes out of it. Statements against shariah, against mosques—you know a direct quote from the president during the election was that "Islam hates us" in an interview with Anderson Cooper. You know, no footnote there. "I think Islam hates us". You put three to six million Muslims in one bucket with that rhetoric. There was an article that I read in the Atlantic that spoke about how does political rhetoric result in anti-Muslim hate crimes and Islamophobia. After 9/11 there was a spike in attacks on mosques and Muslims, but President Bush was quoted saying that Islam is a peaceful religion and that the hijacker hijacked Islam. He made positive remarks. Then there was data showing a sharp decline in hate crimes against Muslims after his statements. On the contrary, after San Bernardino, there was a spike again in anti-Muslim hate crimes. What were the statements from the candidate that would become our president? In December 2015, there was a proposed ban on Muslims in the United States until we could figure out what was going on. That was his statement, and after it, there was an 87% rise in anti-Muslim rhetoric and hate crimes.

No one can tell me that words don't matter because his words matter and I'll jump on the Jewish boat here and the delay in denouncing anti-Semitism is a problem as well. The fact that he was endorsed by Neo-Nazi groups—an ecosystem of hate has been accelerated and have been spiking. The people in charge have said some hateful things and there have not been any apologies. Even in the joint address to Congress last week, there were no mention of mosques that have been burned down—there was a statement condemning the anti-Semitism— no mention of the number of mosques that have been burned down since January 1<sup>st</sup> this year. No mention of that. There was a mention of the shooting in Indiana but no mention of the burning down of places of worship. That's troubling for Muslims that when you have the leaders in charge making the decisions, ignoring the Muslims and making the remarks, there is no question of where the hate is coming from and why it's accelerating right now.

### **Marie Griffith**

You know, I was thinking that hate stems from fear. I was wondering if you could reflect on what are the fears that you see when you look at the anti-Muslim violence?

### **Tarek El-Messidi**

I want to ask the audience here if they have ever seen a movie recently or at all where a Muslim was the hero. I don't see a hand or I don't know of any myself. That's the problem. Our culture has been portraying Muslims in a negative light. Since 2010, I believe, about 70% of the news coverage given to Muslims was negative. Now it's even worse. Caricatures and portrayal of Muslims lead to fear. 6 out of 10 people say they don't know a Muslim personally, the 4 out of 10 who do have much more favorable view of Muslims. I think that the hate stems from the fear of the unknown and there is portrayal in the media of Muslims as evil, as the terrorists, and as foreign. That leads to the creation of fear against Muslims.

### **Marie Griffith**

Absolutely, and what do you think about Anti-Semitism? Does fear ring true as well as being one of the sources of hate and violence?



## **Andrew Rehfeld**

I would say that it's creating a reaction of fear that is growing and resonating in the Jewish community. Jews both in the United States and in Europe have developed an infrastructure for security that reminds them particularly when they walk into a Jewish institution in Europe for example, you can't go to a synagogue in France without seeing armed police and officers and heavily armed police standing outside to watch. In our places there often is heavy security and while this is meant to make one feel secure a lot of that is just the perception of security and it reinforces at the same time that there is something to be afraid of. I think it's a combination—you don't have the trope of the Jew as a terrorist and an attacker but there's another kind of sense an indirect and insidious fearfulness of Jewish contamination and things like that. But I think what Tarek has said really identifies the source of it now. I will just say that the first statement from the administration condemning anti-Semitism—I could be wrong— was on the back of that pickup truck when Vice President Pence picked up the megaphone saying that we condemn hate, bigotry, and anti-Semitism in all of its forms. We can see that as a turning of the administration. Was it later than I have liked? Of course, any time that you have hate of any kind it needs to be condemned by the leadership. Now we will see if we can actually do something about it.

## **Marie Griffith**

Absolutely. I want to shift gears now and maybe think about what can be done? What can we do? Of course this is such an incredible act of humanity and generosity. And I was thinking about the things that divide Jews and Muslims and one of those things are the geopolitical issues in the Middle East. Without debating those points, I want to know how to build coalitions despite those profoundly different views in politics. Andrew?

## **Andrew Rehfeld**

I think you begin by saying, number one, that taking advantage of the island that the United States is. You know, we aren't on the front line at least in the United States we have the ability to form, deliberative, collaborative partnerships. What is a deliberative partnership? It's when you liberate together and understanding that you are not going to agree on anything. Despite these differences, it shouldn't escalate into physical violence, it shouldn't escalate into personal attacks and to begin by focusing on arguments on people and not on motivation and respecting disagreement even if you believe it's heading in the wrong direction. There are some people in the Jewish community who would not thank Linda Sarsour because she is a controversial figure because of her position against Israel. I think that's us heading in the wrong direction. It's marginalizing two communities, it's separating them and we don't have to agree—we can vehemently disagree. But ok, she still is a human and she still is someone who we can partner with for other causes. It's not because she just raised a lot of dollars for the community—I have been saying this for a long time. It's an opportunity to recognize that we have to treat people humanely and find places where we can partner with them.

## **Tarek El-Messidi**

I don't think there's any bigger challenge between both communities than the geopolitical divides. It's not going to be solved any time soon especially over the next four years. What I saw, what I reflected in that story was that the disciples of the prophet couldn't put aside the politics to respect the Jewish funeral. There's a lot of parallels today. I'm an optimistic person, perhaps, if both

communities could learn to trust each other and put aside those politics and maybe the beauty that comes out of this tragedy is that they have dialogue and maybe that that can be a microcosm for what happens overseas. Maybe, if we can figure this out among both of our communities in America—mostly immigrants—then maybe that can translate to peace abroad. That's my hope. But there's always going to be outliers like we try to find out if there are any neigh-Sayers—people who said that this campaign was a bad idea and looked suspiciously upon it. And there were people. Do you want to add more on that?

### **Andrew Rehfeld**

Just to reinforce what you just said about building partnerships in the St. Louis—so far I have heard nothing negative about this partnership and I believe that it was done very systematically and partnerships were made with the Islamic community. The Jewish community relations council supported every Jewish day of service and even though it's one day and there are 364 others—you know Jewish organizations. They're in meetings together, they go nowhere and it's like this meeting after meeting but as soon as you know it there are thousands of people on Christmas helping. Not only do we need dialogue—you have to find projects so that you can work together to build the bridges and build the relationship. And, to the point, we did see in national media certain prominent Jewish writers not to take the money saying that the offering of money is just a front to humanize them. I read this and whenever I would see a person outside of St. Louis make this remark I thought that maybe I should call him and see if he wants to make a contribution to the restoration fund. But I think it's cynicism of the worst kind.

### **Marie Griffith**

Did you get similar pushback from the Muslim community about raising funds for the Jewish community?

### **Tarek El-Messidi**

There was but there was a very small minority, if I had to quantify it less than 5% of the comments I saw and often they said things like how do you know they didn't just do this to themselves as a PR stunt? On the other hand, I saw comments from the Jewish community that said it seems like Linda and Tarek did this—the desecration itself—to pull off this campaign and get the PR out of it. Those kinds of comments are disgusting but I don't let that get to me because I saw the overwhelming positive response and one of the things that was really beautiful more than the shares on social media were the emails we got Jewish Americans who saw the news and emailed us personally to thank us. Some of those notes were just so personally moving I would look forward to reading these emails and they would tell the stories of their ancestors that were buried in those cemeteries. For the most part, 95% were very positive on both sides.

### **Marie Griffith**

And I think you bought some of those letters with you. Do you want to read some of them out loud? It would be really nice to hear some of that.

### **Tarek El-Messidi**

I think the most moving one was by the woman that left the voicemail. I clarify to Mr. Rehfeld that I did not tell the woman to call him and yell at him. She said that you have help to heal

the pain in my heart. I live in LA but I was born and raised in St. Louis. I have family buried in that cemetery and was heartbroken seeing the desecration of the resting place of my ancestors. Your kind, loving spirit gives hope to me about mutual respect about our differences and tolerance. Another person said my namesake Amelia was one of the many gravestones that was overturned. She was my grandmother's beloved sister died in childbirth in 1928. We saw the picture of her stone. Still waiting for the pictures of my other family members' stones. Thank you for making something positive out of ugliness and make every ugly act negated by kindness. It is said that cracks are where the light comes in. So, the response we got reading these makes me very emotional but just seeing that two communities where there is a lot of mistrust can put that aside and help one another. Two persecuted groups that are experiencing xenophobia moved me so seeing the response of the neigh-Sayers didn't really bother me much honestly.

### **Marie Griffith**

We're going to open it up to questions in a bit. You're talking about the two communities in which both of you exist and are leading in and hate comes from other sources and collaboration comes from other sources Christian, atheist. I just wondered about building bridges not just across your divide but also with other communities not just religious but also non-religious. How do you find people in the religious communities to partner with you?

### **Andrew Rehfeld**

We were talking about this at lunch, the Jewish community has a history of thinking of itself and tracks what it really means to be Jewish. Judaism is a culture, a set of values, more than just a religion. It's a history, it's a tradition. Often one of my teachers in grad school, Martha Nussbaum, describes it as the artistry that helps one be moral. It's not the religious significance of it and I think there's a lot of that that resonates with us with folks that aren't so religious. I was just reflecting today that there may be a parallel to the Muslim community that what are those special aspects that can resonate with an increasingly secular American population. Aspects that can enhance the beauty and what it means to be fully human in an artistic way and in the way that it can guide someone through their life.

### **Tarek El-Messidi**

I think there's a lot that Muslim-Americans have to learn from the Jewish American experience. The waves of immigration obviously many Muslims came to this country in the African slave trade, there's an estimate that a third of all the slaves that were brought here were Muslim. There were laws that banned slaves from expressing their religion. A major wave of immigration that was probably the biggest during the presidency of Lindon Johnson with an act that opened up immigration to not just a few countries but also banned discrimination on which countries were allowed in. Feels like were going backwards now, am I right. So, there was a huge wave and that's where my parents came. My dad came in the late '70s and from what I understand the Jewish wave of immigration was in the late 1800s/early 1900s. In fact, many of those buried in the cemetery were from that date range. The Jewish community is about 70 or 80 years in terms of their experience here in America as immigrants and we have a lot to learn from that experience—how do you preserve that identity and faith, what types of institutions do you build? We were just talking today that the primary institution for Muslims are mosques and we were talking about moving toward community centers as the Jewish community as. We don't have that many seminaries. We

are behind because we came here later but we should be learning from our Jewish cousins about what mistakes have been made and what mistakes we can expect to happen.

On a personal level, beyond that, I don't want to see this die down, I don't want to see this beautiful moment of collaboration die down. If there were to be a moment of escalation overseas, Israel/Palestine, seems to break out every few years, I hope that we can build now so that we can have honest dialogues on these issues. For example, the month of Ramadan is coming up, Muslims fast dawn to sunset everyday for a month and I was saying the synagogues can host a fast-breaking dinner in Ramadan and vice-versa on the Jewish days of fasting. Just children of Abraham reaching out and feeding each other and these sorts of things will build trust hopefully and what I've learned in these past few days—just a few hours ago I had my first kosher meal and in Islamic culture we can eat meat that is slaughtered by Christians and Jews and we have halal rules. Kosher rules are actually more strict. I've learned a lot from Anita—calling you on the Sabbath— I realized why I didn't get a call back for the next 24 hours. We had a conversation on this about what exactly happens at your home on the Sabbath. Again, I haven't had this interaction with the Jewish community before organizationally, individually, and growing up in Tennessee not many Jews in Knoxville. This is all new to me but I'm really enjoying it, I'm learning a lot, and I just hope that this continues in both communities.

### **Marie Griffith**

Alright, so now we are going to open it up now. We do have someone with a roving mic that will walk around. I did ask Anita if there was anything that she wanted to share with community at this time. Shake your head no if you don't want to...No, ok.

### **Audience:**

Thank you, I'm Bill Pait, I'm a Methodist pastor from Bathalt, Illinois and though my community is not directly involved in tonight's discussion I would like to say that I am thankful for this opportunity. Christians in the greater St.Louis area often don't know when they are interacting with Jewish and Muslim professionals. But most of our doctors at BJC have a great faith. My comment is to thank you for this opportunity, thank you for working together, and I look forward for the opportunity to arrive when mainline Christians can join the discussion because there's a space for all of us not all only in this community but in the world. The particular faith of expression is not relevant more so than the fact that we are people of faith. Thank you.

### **Tarek El-Messidi**

It's interesting to see that the Christians feel left out. (laughter). You're right though that we need to bring everyone together.

### **Audience:**

Hi, my name is Mohammed. I'm the president of the Muslim Student Association on campus and we recently had a fast-o-thon so it was nice to see that the founder of fast-o-thon. Just wanted to let you know that we raised \$2200 for fast-o-thon this year. (Applause) But my question is that when we are dealing with these kinds of issues how do we build that trust because it seems that the relationships between the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian community are delicate and that we are also grappling with real geopolitical issues. We are talking about people in settlements and war and

recognizing the facts that our faiths are more similar than they are different. How do you build that trust when geopolitical issues are relevant, real, and affect people?

**Andrew Rehfeld:**

I would suggest starting with a meal before you do the dialogue, start with something that you are put face to face with the other. You can share a kosher meal—at any rate, don't demonize the other and I would say more importantly, don't fall prey to the demonization of the other. Because the bigger problem in my view is not even the people in the middle it's the people who want to stir up the middle to take decisive sides. Again, we're not on the front lines and use that to your advantage. Have a meal and don't fall prey to the dialogue of the extremes.

**Audience:**

I'm Rabbi Shulemi Singer and I'm new to St. Louis and one of the things that I'm struck by is people of faith from Islam and Judaism are Semitic and some of claim that we're Semitic so anti-Semitism is for all of us if you define it properly. I think one of the problems here is that we have a pocket here in St. Louis that is trying to do good—but we're all in pockets all over the country. It's not national. I know in Chicago they have been having for years Iftar in the synagogue where they invite Muslims to lunch. It seems to me that these programs—when they work—people like you who are leaders who can escalate up to the national level perhaps can make it into a movement. Those dialogues don't have to stop here in St. Louis.

**Tarek El-Messidi:**

Yeah, I'd like to say that when we're talking about allies I feel like a gathering like this and the Muslim and Jewish community working together—I mean if we just work together on domestic issues there's so much in common and much more power that we can bring together and that's where we can start. One of the ideas and campaigns that we want to launch at Celebrate Mercy is more about response to an immediate tragedy—but this to me is the choir that we're preaching to the choir. One quote that I heard is that you preach to the choir so that you can hear them sing and after an attack happens this is the group here and all the interfaith alliances that have been built and building and getting stronger after the election, those are the groups that will come to each other's defense and aid in the case of a hate crime or bigotry but there's a whole other group out there. The six out of ten Americans that haven't met a Muslim personally—we'd like to start a campaign that would ask Muslims to just go and meet their neighbors especially in red counties and districts where there are sharp and much stronger anti-Muslim views. That's going to be a campaign we hope to do—we just created a website and for Muslims that will be worried about knocking on a random person's door in Tennessee with a plate of cookies then we are going to be asking those Muslims who are worried about knocking on their neighbors' doors to enlist the help of their interfaith allies. Hijab wearing women will be paired up with a white male before knocking on these doors just to feel safer. If we can somehow we can just bring nationwide in four years that six down to five of people who have not met a Muslim personally then we will see drastic changes in this country in terms of those Islamophobic views.

**Marie Griffith:**

You know I really appreciate you saying that and it makes you think. I was from Tennessee, you know, one of those white, deep in the South—we never left Tennessee, Georgia, or the country and many of them I am sure have never met a Muslim before. Those of us who have those networks

and connections already—it doesn't do to just get together at family gatherings and not do anything. It makes me think of how we can be allies. Maybe not just going door to door but when we're in those private spaces with folks as well is a very important role I think for us to take.

**Audience:**

Thank you, Tarek. My name is Ralik Ramidin(?) and I'm the chairman of the Islamic Foundation of the Greater St. Louis area, our mosque is on Reidman Road in the West County. We have a congregation of about 10,000 people. I appreciate really Andrew and the JCRC and I thank Tarek for this beautiful thing. I think there needs to be more discussion—such beautiful dialogue and discussion between a Muslim group and a Jewish group. With Marie being a Christian, that was also good. But just to add on to our interfaith we have very strong interfaith partners organization which has been here in St. Louis for thirty years we are part of that and JCRC is part of that. Just to add to that our mosque is open and everyone is welcome and well-attended. You don't need to wait for an announcement, please come we have open house periodically. I always hear the comment that this is the first time that I was at the mosque and how beautiful it is to see the mosque and talk to Muslims and see that this is just normal people like you and me and we like the same things. Thank you very much!

**Audience:**

Thank you my name is Julie Williams and I want to thank you all for being here together tonight. I work at the Holocaust museum here in St. Louis and one of the things we have is 30,000 visitors a year and when I speak to the kids as I did today from the John Burroughs School I challenge each of them and I believe that each of us has a voice and even if it's a small sphere it's incumbent on us to say something to negate hate when we see it. Of course, it's really great if we can amplify this message and negate the negative stereotypes they here. When I say to them, as a Jew, the first person I heard after desecration was a young Muslim friend in Thailand—she told me that she supported me and stood with me. To see these kids not really understand that—it doesn't register for them. What we do here in St. Louis is powerful—this Muslim and Jewish dialogue group is an amazing, transforming thing. The interfaith work that we are invested in here is amazing but it needs to get bigger. So my question for you is do you envision a national framework, do you envision something on a bigger scale—thanks to your work so much thank you. But it has gone beyond St. Louis and I was wondering if we can sustain it with a real sustainable framework.

**Tarek El-Messidi:**

I've gotten that question a lot recently after the campaign and I personally don't have plans but people have said that we do need to come up with a fund that combats both Islamophobia as well as Anti-Semitism—something more organized. People don't realize but even though we've done some great work and had some campaigns that Celebrate Mercy has just two full-time employees—me and one other person—and two part-timers and so we have a lot on our plate. We do one of these types of campaigns once a year and this is not the first so it's hard for me to redirect my personal energy but I would definitely love to help in an advisory role in setting something up. One of the beautiful things that I saw recently—after an arson attempt on a mosque in Tampa—that a lot of the donations that came in so quickly but in multiples of 18. We're starting to see reciprocation also—there's no expectation of reciprocation, there is a beautiful verse in the Quran talking about feeding people that says that we feed you for god's sake alone we're not doing this to get a thank you. The reciprocation is happening in these instances like the arson. I've gotten so

many emails asking what can I give to that would be good for your community? How can we give back to the Muslim community after you did this for us? But there's no set plan as of now but I hope that there will be and I would love to help in an advisory sense.

**Andrew Rehfeld:**

That is a great idea—a united fund for restoration. Julie, I want to thank you in particular for the work you do for the Holocaust museum and it is a great way that you've done with the people that you serve and the volunteers at the Holocaust museum connect people with a story—a story about the abuse of power and what happens to hate when it goes amuck. It's a story of when the people in power don't recognize that hate and continue to spread it. The work that is being done at the Holocaust museum and learning center in St. Louis is often partnered with other communities in very important ways. Karen Aresti from the Anti-Defamation League has worked with the Holocaust museum to bring police officers after training gets them to come there and understand that relationship with power. We can use the stories of Jewish history and Muslim history through time to spread the powerful message of the abuse of power and its relation magnifying hate.

**Marie Griffith:**

Absolutely. You know, Julie, the Holocaust Museum changed my daughter's life—Ella Schmidt—so that she wrote a piece about and was invited to speak about it at the Holocaust museum dinner. That's what happens with these kids—when you take kids that are not Jewish and they have no idea until they see it so starkly. Just wanted to echo that. I would just like to propose to both of you publicly that you should co-author something and that our religion and politics journal would be thrilled to publish as would many others. But just another way to get that message out in the media and to model the kind of interfaith collaboration that you said. So thank you both very much for being here and thank you all.