

One perspective on interfaith dialogue can be encapsulated in the last word in the Shema - Adonai Eḥad, Adonai is One. The challenge is Eḥad, the challenge of seeing the world through the lens of radical unity. How can God be one when there are so many different religions in the world. Each religion has its own name for God, history of God, biography of God, obligations to God. In response, we might appeal to a scientific point of view, in which all differences are an illusion. From the point of view of particle physics, you are made up of electrons, protons, neutrons, quarks, baryons, photons, neutrinos, and muons, the same thing that the chair you are sitting on is made up of, the same as the air around you, the same as the person next to you. The only difference between you and a chair is that your packet of energy is currently manifesting as a person, and the energy you are sitting on appears to be a firm, yet comfortable, surface. All energy started out as a single point of light which burst forth and differentiated itself into all of the material in the universe. Religion can be seen as an attempt by a little packet of person-energy to connect with the ultimate source of Energy, who we might call God. The multiplicity of religions can be explained as a variety of paths and techniques with which to connect, along with a different vocabulary to describe the same ultimate energy pattern. In the end, we are all trying for the same thing, and thus, at their kernel, all religions are the same.

On the other hand ...

I am totally uninterested in engaging in dialogue with a member of another religion if the purpose is to talk about how much we are the same. I don't care that our ultimate shared goal is to get to the Source of it all. I care about the path you are taking, and how it is different than the path I am taking. Sometimes it appears that the path that the other is taking is evil, or at the very least, just plain wrong. Sometimes it is. Most of the time though it is not inherently wrong, it is just different. If I took the time to understand why the member of another faith community makes certain religious choices, I could better appreciate the path that he or she walks, learn from it, and perhaps my own religious path might be enriched.

This is what I find interesting about interfaith dialogue, and this is the goal of **2012: The Year of Interfaith Understanding**, a community-wide celebration of different faiths. The leaders of this effort are encouraging us to participate in various expressions of interfaith understanding, so that we as individuals and congregations will move from tolerance to acceptance of each other as people of faith, will create a community that values diversity and respect for each person, and will engage in action for the common good.

The goal of **2012: The Year of Interfaith Understanding** is to promote dialogue, cooperative action, learning about other persons and faiths. The goal is to understand differences not erase them.

I'll give you an example of the transformative power of interfaith dialogue. Some of you may have heard this story, the story of what led me to become a serious Jew, and ultimately a rabbi. I spent my junior year in the One Year Program at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. By an odd twist of fate, I was given a conservative Christian roommate, Larry Ciccarelli. Ironic, considering that the year in Israel was intended to be an intense Jewish experience. Larry had a very good friend named Kel, or Yehudah, Rapuano, who was born Jewish but had become Christian. Larry and Kel went to Church every Saturday, because church schedule conformed to the generally accepted day of rest in Israel. Kel kept kosher and Shabbat. At the time my observance of both Shabbat and kashrut was inconsistent. The three of us had long discussions

about religion, Bible, and religious practice around the kitchen table. About halfway through the year, the realization hit me that this Jew who had become Christian was more serious about Judaism than I was. At that moment, I started down the path that within a year led me to keeping both kashrut and Shabbat, as well as engaging in prayer and Torah study on a regular basis.

Aside from the possible personal spiritual benefit, let me give you another reason that you would benefit from engaging in Interfaith Dialogue. The rabbis apply the dictum *mipnei darkhei shalom* to various ways in which we engage with the non-Jewish world not because it is a mitzvah, but because it leads to a more peaceful world. Without question, this applies to dialogue with members of other faith traditions -- greater understanding at a deep level leads to a more peaceful world.

The Torah speaks about loving your [Jewish] neighbor¹ and loving the [non-Jewish] resident alien who lives in your midst² and has adopted your practices, who in later Hebrew would be known as a convert. The Torah never speaks about an obligation to love the people who live far away from you or on the other side of town but are not part of your social circle. It's actually easy to love the complete stranger and the guy who lives across the city or country or the world - you'll never really have to interact with them. It's hard to love the guy who mows his lawn at 7:30 on a Saturday morning, lets his trash blow onto your lawn, borrows your power tools and forgets to return them, who you have to see day after day. Therefore, the Torah commands that you love your neighbor. Nonetheless, I would argue that we do have an obligation to build these bridges with the more distant members of our community whose faith and practice is very different than our own.

To define what I mean by dialogue, I am drawing on an essay by Leonard Swidler called *The Dialogue Decalogue*.³ He writes:

Dialogue is not debate. In dialogue each partner must listen to the other as openly and sympathetically as he or she can in an attempt to understand the other's position as precisely ... as possible

... The primary purpose of dialogue is to learn, that is, to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality We enter into dialogue so that we can learn, change, and grow, not so we can force change on the other, as one hopes to do in debate

... Each participant [in dialogue] must define herself or himself. Only the Jew, for example, can define what it means to be a Jew. The rest can only describe what it looks like from the outside.

Persons entering into inter-religious, inter-ideological dialogue must be at least minimally self-critical of both themselves and their own religious or ideological traditions.

1. Leviticus 19:18

2. *ibid* 19:34

3. From *The Dialogue Decalogue Ground Rules for Inter-religious, Inter-ideological Dialogue* by Leonard Swidler, first published in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* in 1983.

Each participant eventually must attempt to experience the partner's religion or ideology "from within"; for a religion or ideology is not merely something of the head, but also of the spirit, heart, and "whole being," individual and communal.

If the dialogue is carried on with both integrity and openness, the result will be that, for example, the Jew will be authentically Jewish and the Christian will be authentically Christian. There can be no talk of a syncretism here, for syncretism means amalgamating various elements of different religions into some kind of a (con)fused whole without concern for the integrity of the religions involved--which is not the case with authentic dialogue.

So far, Ahavas Israel is participating by scheduling as many representatives of other faiths as possible as Sanctuary Shabbat speakers. We are also leading our annual Pesah Seder Experience program at Fountain Street Church in March. In addition, we will of course advertise our Introduction to Judaism course for those who want to learn about our traditions in a serious, in depth way. I am open to other ideas or program suggestions.

I'd like you as individuals to take on the obligation during 2012 to read at least one serious book about a religion other than Judaism; and then read or research the questions that come up to find out how Judaism answers the same questions. Take the opportunity to learn more about your own traditions. I also invite you to help me lead the Seder program at Fountain Street, or volunteer to lead a non-Jewish group on a brief Introduction to Judaism and tour of the synagogue.

The benefit to you for participating is twofold:

1. You will better understand another faith tradition; Increased knowledge is always a benefit.
2. You will learn something about your own faith and hopefully deepen your commitment.

The benefit to our Grand Rapids community should be greater understanding and acceptance, especially of those like us who proudly and openly practice non-Christian faiths.

כן יהי רצון, May it come to pass.