

# Following Similar Paths: What American Jews and Muslims Can Learn From One Another

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As the dust settled on the 2024 U.S. presidential election, a few demographic trends came into focus. Perhaps one important trend saw that the war in Gaza was an incredibly divisive issue for Democrats. Frustrated by what they perceived to be as President Biden's indifference toward Palestinian suffering and political self-determination, many Arab and Muslim American activists decided not to vote for the Democratic nominee for President, Vice President Kamala Harris. Traditionally, Muslim American communities such as those in Dearborn, Michigan, which were Democratic strongholds, interpreted the atrocities in Gaza as a genocide and refused to support the Democratic candidate. They did not fill in a vote for either presidential candidate. Interestingly, only twenty percent of Jewish Americans did not vote for Vice President Harris. Yet, unlike most of their Muslim American neighbors, this twenty percent voted for President Trump, primarily because of his unequivocal support for the

state of Israel and his support of its current right-wing, authoritarian nationalist government there. Most of these Jewish Americans were members of Orthodox Jewish communities, who were both fearful of and outraged by Hamas' murderous rampage on October 7, 2023. These two communities seem to be living in two starkly separate political and religious realities.

At first glance, then, it might be difficult to see how Muslims and Orthodox Jews in the United States as sympatico sojourners on a potentially joint spiritual path. Yet in their book *Following Similar Paths: What American Jews and Muslims Can Learn From One Another*, Samuel Heilman and Mucahit Bilici make precisely this assertion: that "religiously observant Jews and observant Muslims walk similar paths." (p. 1) Despite the similarities of their experiences and orientations toward the preservation of traditionalist lifestyles and values in the face of a relentless cultural power to assimilate to an "American" way of life, Orthodox Jews and observant Muslims rarely interact with one another. The authors understand this fact as a problem and yet see opportunities for important cultural and religious exchanges. Anyone who has participated in interreligious dialogue probably has noticed more than once that Jews and Muslims share similar religiosities and orientations to ritual, law, and tradition. In a culture dominated by Christianity, these similarities stick out. Jews and Muslims eat differently. They pray differently, in different directions, and often in different languages. In fact, they believe in sacred languages. Their sacred languages Hebrew and Arabic are semitic and share many qualities. The metaphor "family resemblances" has often been used in describing the relationship between these two traditions (p. 234).

Despite the current political and cultural chasm separating these communities, Heilman and Bilici's book seeks to develop these "family resemblances." It also serves as an important introduction to these communities, their traditions, and their experiences in the United States. In so doing, the book contains seven chapters that focuses on these essential similarities: law, diet, identity, religious leadership, study, prayer, and how both communities experience and suffer from religious bigotry. While hoping to preserve the integrity and distinctiveness of both

religious communities, the authors create a framework for evaluating how each community considers participation in the civic domain, while also tracing how these communities acculturate religiously. The deeper question here is to consider how both communities experience the complicated realities informing American society on their own terms—i.e., how each community navigates the dynamic domain of American religious culture—while also considering how their experiences may blaze a joint civic path toward deeper engagement with American social, religious, and political life.

Informed by a similar commitment to orthopraxy and how each community orients to law, faith, and tradition, the lives of Orthodox Jewish and Muslim American communities, for the authors, provide a unique opportunity to think about how to build bridges across tacitly and artificially constructed social and political barriers. While similar, the authors stress that Orthodox Jewish and Muslim communities contain important differences. For example, due to anxieties regarding assimilation and loss of faith, many Orthodox Jewish communities often separate themselves from broader populations. They tend to live in isolated communities within neighborhoods to preserve their traditionalist lifestyles, while at the same providing a protective barrier from what they perceive to be nefarious cultural influences and norms. Living on the margins is obviously a delicate dance, since to live in this society, communities often participate in some manner within mainstream American culture. American Muslims face similar challenges. For the authors, both communities have developed interesting and important ways of living in a conflicting “hybrid” culture of both secular norms and traditionalist lifestyles. Balancing these influences is essential for both communities, since both fear losing the fundamental aspects of everyday religious life. The authors assert: “Both believed in their capacity to restrict cultural assimilation into modern American life, a consequence they saw as ideologically dangerous.” (p. 96)

Part of preserving this balance, then, requires wearing religious attire in public. Orthodox Jews and Muslims, interestingly, according to the authors, have sought to elevate the religious power and status of head coverings, as well as other aspects of modest religious clothing within

their communities. How people in these communities wear their clothing has become an essential part of their religious identity. This act is purposeful. In fact, Orthodox Jews and Muslims continue to identify themselves through their religious attire even in the face of persistent and ferocious religious bigotry and physical threats to their respective communities. Both communities have embraced the symbolic power of separating themselves through clothing from the general public. The authors also find this shared desire to use clothing as a way to separate themselves from American society as having an unintended positive influence on the public: both communities have made the symbols of their religious life acceptable by simply reimagining their theological meaning. Even though, for both communities, religious attire plays a marginal role in the domains of theology and religious law, it has emerged as a powerful force critical to the formations of both communities' religious identities. It has even become a source of pride. Orthodox Jews and Muslims are able to navigate this precarious separation of religious and secular life by asserting who they are without imposing it onto others. They are able to live their religious lives without compromising their theological sensibilities. Both communities, in the authors' view, can remain separate from and an essential part of the social fabric of American cultural life.

Unfortunately, one byproduct of this cultural achievement is the prevalence of Islamophobia and antisemitism in the United States. The identities of members of these communities are inexorably related to their experience of religious bigotry. Both communities experience hatred, yet each responds differently: each with very limited success. How these communities may rally together to combat the ubiquity of this religious hatred is indeed to see how, in many instances, their religious lives are similar. They need to build interreligious solidarity networks despite their differences and mutual distrust simply because Islamophobic and antisemitic incidents continue to proliferate. In that context, this book is an important guide for both communities. Because these groups share so many similarities, in the authors' view, they will be in a unique position to learn from one another's differences, which will yield many important social, religious, and political possibilities about living as a religious

minority within a Christian hegemonic, though pluralistic society. This is a daunting, yet critical challenge facing all religious minorities at this current political moment.

While most readers of this book will most likely be less sanguine about these dialogical possibilities than its authors, I hope they will still consider one unavoidable truth: as the country enters a Trump 2.0 presidency, Muslims and Orthodox Jews will need to find ways to organize, learn from one another, and build resilient interreligious networks if they—indeed we—are to meet these challenges and build a robust pluralistic society that protects all minorities from the threats posed by this potent rise in national and global hatred and religious bigotry. This book is an important roadmap to this goal. Even though, as I write now, I am less optimistic for such a moment, I admire and am incredibly grateful to have this work in the world.

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