**Remarks at the “Interfaith Gathering: Get To Know Your Neighbor”**

**Islamic Association of WV**

**December 7th, 2015**

Thank you so much for inviting me and for hosting this event of understanding and sharing. The Islamic Association of West Virginia has been a model of outreach and openness in this valley. From Imam Daoudi, to Imam Haque, to my new friend Imam Asal, the warmth and kindness that is shown by your leadership and this community is inspiring. I can speak as someone who for many, many years now has been treated not just as a friend but a brother.

I cherish that relationship.

I do not have a direct connection to Syria nor knowledge of the relationship between Jews, Christians and Muslims there to speak with any authority on how they lived peacefully for centuries. Yet, while I may not know how deep this relationship goes in Syria, I do feel most comfortable talking about the relationship between Jews and Muslims down thru the centuries. I also feel it is my responsibility to speak out so strongly today for the US to welcome and take in Syrian refugees.

Let me explain the reason I am so passionate about the latter.

In 1938, my family couldn’t enter America. My father’s parents weren’t allowed in for many of the same reasons we are hearing today: We Jews were a threat to the American way of life. We were different and our ways, texts and practices are evil. We would overthrow the government. We would cause the same problems we did in Europe. We would take away jobs from real Americans. We were even being accused of being spies for Nazi Germany and would attack America’s very institiutions.

My dad who was 4, one of his sisters and his parents were finally allowed entry- not to America but to the one country whose borders were not completely closed to us: Argentina. And only because we had a Red Cross pass. The rest of family, his siblings, his grandparents, uncles, aunts were trapped in Poland and perished in the Holocaust.

That is why I am passionate about Syrian refugees and why we as a nation should not our backs on them. This is a country that should welcome those trying to escape certain death and those innocents caught in horrific conditions who dream of being in a place like America.

There is another reason I am so passionate and feel so honored to be on this panel. And that is the connection Muslims and Jews have had with one another down through the centuries.

Because of the tensions that exist in the Middle East and how we sometimes find ourselves on the opposing side of the political and geographical conversation, many believe there is an unbridgeable divide between Muslims and Jews.

But for those of you who think that, I am proudly here to tell you that nothing could be further from the truth.

For most of the past 1400 years, Islam was far more tolerant and Muslims were far more generous and warm to other minorities than Christendom was. And I say that not out disrespect to my Christians neighbors in this country who today we share a closeness with that I can never fully express but I say it with affection for my Muslim brethren and to those who most do not realize how close we have been throughout history. Jews were the recipients of Muslim kindness and friendship throughout the Middle East and for centuries.

Where did I learned of this? At Yeshiva University. An orthodox seminary, a university heavily, deeply and proudly committed to a strong US/Israel relationship and to the state of Israel. In our Jewish history classes, my professor asked us to write a paper on the Muslim Jewish relationship We were asked to do so because our teachers wanted us to understand the historical connections between Islam and Judaism, between Muslims and Jews. Many of us were completely ignorant of the relationship between Islam and Judaism.

And what we learned surprised us.

In the 11th century, if Jews had a choice between living in Germany or living in Morocco, they would have chosen Morocco.

In the 15th century, if the choice had been Spain or Turkey, they would have been in Turkey.

In the 17th century, if the choice had been the Ukraine or Persia, they would have gladly chosen Persia.

***(Editor’s note: these historical comparisons were offered by Israel’s Ambassador to the US, Ron Dermer, a couple of weeks ago)***

For centuries, Jews lived, thrived and prospered in the Muslim world. Yes, there were interspersed periods of persecution depending on a particular Muslim ruler, but nowhere near the treatment Jews faced in Europe.

And so not only should Jews and Christians know that but Muslims should remember that with pride.

So I may not know firsthand the relationship of Jews in Syria but I do know the relationship between Muslims and Jews. And my people owe a debt of gratitude to Muslims who have welcomed us into their homes and countries down through the centuries, including when Jews were refugees and fleeing Spain in the 15th century and found safe haven in Syria. And I do know from my family what happens when people, out of ignorance, hatred and xenophobia, close their doors and borders to those who are fleeing certain death.

I cannot stand silent when it is happening to Syrians fleeing that terrible bloodbath.

I add one more point and that is the remarkable degree of scholarship, respect, and understanding that is developing and blossoming today between Jews and Muslim, here in America and in many areas of the world. Again, the political narrative sucks out much of the oxygen in the public discourse but what is happening in mosques, synagogues and temples, what we are seeing here for example with Rabbi Cohn and many members of our community here at the mosque, is remarkable. The dialogue that is occurring between Jews and Muslims is going unnoticed, but it is one of the seeds that has been planted in very fertile earth and will change what is happening currently in the world for the better.

I am reminded of what President of Israel Reuven Rivlin, speaking in Arabic, said on eve of Jordan Independence Day celebration this year (I add that President Rivlin’s father wrote the first translation of Quran into Hebrew):

“My late father was a great scholar of Islam. His Muslim friends told me that he fasted during Ramadan when visiting his Muslim friends, only because of the deep respect he felt for his Muslim friends and neighbors. I grew up learning about the rich world of Islam that is full of beauty, kindness and mercy.”

That is how Jews understand Islam and that is the historical experience between Jews and Muslims.

The more we interact with each other, study with each other, share and listen to each other as we are doing together tonight, we will hopefully discover the beauty, kindness and mercy found in all three of our traditions and the common connections we share.

I am blessed and honored as a Jew to be here.

To echo the words of President Rivlin, the religion of Islam is that of beauty, kindness and mercy. This place is a place of warmth, goodness and peace. And I, as a Jew, am honored to call all of you here, my brothers and sisters.