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Philly communities of faith banding together for justice

Led by broad-based interfaith justice organizations, communities of faith are crossing lines of religion, race, neighborhood, and income level to build a more just city and country together.



Mourners head to the funeral prayer service for Nabra Hassanen in Virginia on June 21.

Katherine Frey / The Washington Post

by Yosef Goldman

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As Independence Day approaches and we reflect on the values that shaped our nation's founding, we should also think about what each of us is doing to put those values into practice.

Last month, 200 diverse Philadelphians gathered in Rittenhouse Square to publicly mourn the loss of an Arab American teenager abducted on her way to her mosque in Virginia and murdered. From across the city, Jews, Muslims, and Christians came together with our Latino immigrant neighbors for a hopeful vigil that I organized with a friend, Raquel Saraswati, a local Muslim advocate. The vigil was followed by Jewish and Muslim evening prayers, side by side, in the park.

Had this horrific murder of Nabra Hassanen taken place just a few years ago, there would not have been as diverse or deep a community-wide vessel to hold this grief. Getting to a place of shared loss and responsibility has been a sacred, illuminating journey.

For my congregation, President Trump's first executive order barring entry into the United States for immigrants and refugees from predominantly Muslim countries lent our social-justice efforts greater relevance and urgency. The flight from persecution is too recent a memory for many American Jews to stand by and watch as victims of war and oppression are turned away from our shores — the same treatment that sent Jewish refugees to their deaths in Europe in the 1930s.

For many in our city and country, this is a moment of fear, and it is also a moment of unity. When the order was issued in January, Jews from local synagogues joined protests at Philadelphia International Airport. My rabbinic colleagues and I organized visits to local majority-immigrant mosques for Friday Jumma prayers and reached out to our Muslim colleagues — imams in immigrant and African American neighborhoods — to listen to their pressing concerns and to learn how we might support them. My congregation has committed to supporting immigrants and refugees in Philadelphia in partnership with [HIAS Pennsylvania](#) and the [New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia](#).

The Jewish community's vocal stance then inspired our Muslim neighbors to stand by us and help raise significant funds for restoration in February when cemeteries in St. Louis and Philadelphia were vandalized. When Philadelphia's Mount Carmel Cemetery was vandalized, a group of rabbis was quick to arrive and lift tombstones, and we were joined by Muslims, Christians, and Quakers who also felt called to respond. Though we started the day as strangers, some of those who came to honor the dignity of the cemetery have become valuable partners in strengthening Jewish-Muslim relationships and working for immigrant justice. As daylight waned, a quorum of Jews gathered amid the toppled stones to offer our evening prayers, surrounded by allies holding space for our grief and hope.

That night's prayer experience came vividly to mind last month in Rittenhouse Square, as we honored Nabra and the sounds of Muslim and Jewish prayers rose intermingled toward the heavens. Saraswati described it as standing shoulder to shoulder, as a wall against injustice. At Raquel's invitation, dozens of allies stood around the praying Muslims in solidarity, reinforcing that wall and helping to facilitate our sacred dialogue with the Divine. Numerous unaffiliated participants later told us that if our synagogues, mosques, and

churches prayed like that every day they would attend services because it would meet their yearning for interdependence and moral action.

What brought us together was the hate-filled murder of a teen in a culture that undervalues Arabs, Muslims, and women of color. Her identity can't be separated from the crime. We publicly mourned and celebrated her, gathering in sacred community in an act of resistance that this moment demands, holding joy, hope, and heartache together.

The Philadelphia community of faith is getting stronger. Led by broad-based interfaith justice organizations like [Philadelphians Organized to Witness, Empower & Rebuild](#), communities of faith are crossing lines of religion, race, neighborhood, and income level to build a more just city and country together. Empowered by deep relationships and hope rooted in our moral traditions, we are showing up for each other more and more in our times of need.

Acts of violence like Nabra's murder fill us with fear and anger. If we don't want our children targeted, it behooves us all to embrace a narrative in which our future is bound up with our neighbors', however different their background. This moment calls us to reflect on the values that are the foundation of our great city and to ask how we are putting legs on those values. What are we doing to promote religious toleration, economic dignity, access to quality

education, and health care for all? What are we doing to combat racism and injustice against immigrants, regardless of immigration status?

In these times, clergy are more important than ever. We sit with people in their most vulnerable moments. We offer people comfort, and we also pastor people through hope to action. We became clergy for this moment. We are here for you, regardless of your faith. Let's make this road together.

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