

B'NAI B'RITH

M A G A Z I N E

PUBLISHED SINCE 1886

SPRING 2019

VOL. 133, NO. 1

The Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom: Finding Common Ground

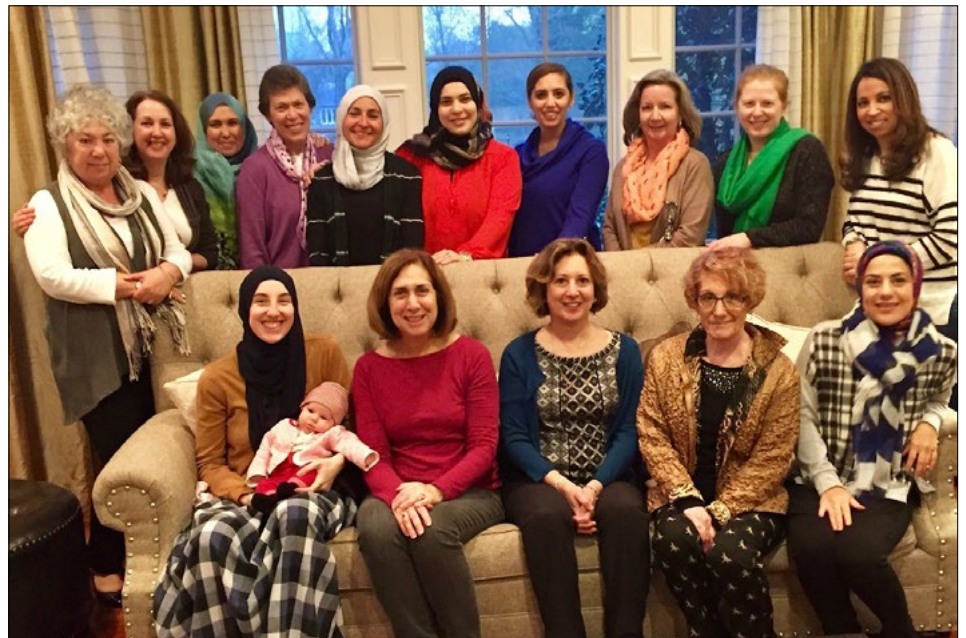
By *Miranda S. Spivack*

The women gathering in an elegant suburban home are adorned in an array of styles. Some wear headscarves; others are in casual tops and slacks. As they drift in on the spring evening, they quickly embrace, trade kisses and catch up on family news. They are young, middle aged and bordering on elderly. They are all friends. They are Muslims and Jews.

The tensions in the outside world between these two religious groups matter little to this group, whose members have known each other for four years. This is a Northern Virginia gathering of the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom, an all-women interfaith group that meets regularly to celebrate their similarities, not dwell on their differences.

At a time when world peace seems a fragile, distant idea, exacerbated by mostly male leaders who speak in divisive and often hate-filled language, the Sisterhood offers a way to unite disparate groups and create lasting bonds.

The first Sisterhood group was formed in 2010 in New Jersey by Sheryl Olitzky and Atiya Aftab. Olitzky has a background in marketing; Aftab is a professor of Islamic law at Rutgers University. In its nine years of existence, the Sisterhood has grown to include dozens of groups of Muslim and Jewish women around the United States — at last count, there are at least 2,500 members in about 120 chapters in the United States and about 1,000 women on a waiting list. Most of the groups keep their membership to around 20 women — half Jewish and half Muslim. This is not always a simple mathe-



Over time, the women who belong to the Northern Virginia chapter have developed lasting and meaningful friendships.

matical calculus. It is harder to find Muslim women, organizers said, many of whom are younger than the Jewish women and are often caught up in the usual busyness of millennial and young parent existence, juggling work, home, children and spiritual life.

But Olitzky knows where to look, if anyone wants to form a chapter. “To recruit women, go to soup kitchens,” she said. “The largest number of volunteers are Muslim and Jewish.”

Modest but Chic

Amany Jondy, a young professional Muslim mother in her 30s, is among the youngest in the Northern Virginia group.

Jondy and her sister Bayan run their own fashion company specializing in modest but chic clothing for women who need to navigate the world but adhere to religious strictures for modesty. Jondy said the Sisterhood meetings have provided her with opportunities to meet

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people she might not ordinarily encounter, to exchange ideas and to make close friends.

"I find we are really able to connect on a deeper level. It is very special. We are actually building friendships," Jondy said in a phone conversation a few weeks after the Northern Virginia gathering at the home of Leina Wahba, a pediatrician who is Muslim.

Many of the women have not been in inter-faith groups before, though Jondy has. "Forming the personal bonds first, now we are able to delve into what might be perceived as difficult conversations. We have a level of respect for one another on a personal level," she said.

That means, Jondy said, "we can all be true to ourselves." And it also means that she is at ease expressing her views "without being uncomfortable, irritated or upset with anyone else."

Objects of Hatred Forging a Bond

Olitzky, who is married to a rabbi and whose two sons are rabbis, was inspired to start the Sisterhood after a trip to Poland. The visit, despite her knowledge of history, left her with a profound sense of unease. There were signs of anti-Semitism almost everywhere, including a male Jewish doll with peyos, or long sideburns, carrying a bag of money.

"From a Jewish perspective, we know what it is like to be hated and a community wanting to get rid of us," she said. "Our response as Jews is to make sure that this never happens to anyone else again."

Her Muslim friends in and around her New Jersey community of North Brunswick have seen an astonishing rise in overt displays of hatred directed at them, she said. "The hate they have seen in the past two years is unbelievable," Olitzky said.

She also has seen a rise in hatred toward Jews long before the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue massacre, during which witnesses said the shooter shouted, "All Jews must die."

Olitzky has heard stories of Muslim children being bullied and intimidated at school and being told that their grandparents should be sent out of the country. "No kids should fear this. As Jews, as Muslims, as Americans, we have a responsibility to do everything we can to change this."



Photo credit: Samir Ahmad

Executive Director Sheryl Olitzky (left), a marketing professional and Atiya Aftab, an attorney and academic, founded the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom.

Being objects of hatred has helped forge bonds among the Muslim and Jewish women, she said. But there are other, more pleasant bonds to dwell on, too.

Sisterhood groups often are struck by language similarities between Hebrew and Arabic, rituals such as funerals that have similar characteristics and similarities in cuisine and a sense that it is the obligation of both to repair the world.

Aftab was the first person Olitzky sought to help her form the first Muslim-Jewish women's group. After her trip to Poland, Olitzky contacted a local imam whom she knew and asked him to suggest a Muslim woman. He suggested Aftab. Olitzky called her. No response. She called again. And again.

"This was the last thing I was interested in doing at the time," recalled Aftab. "I did not call her back." After two more calls, Aftab thought "Oh my god, this woman is serious. Let me meet with her. It won't go anywhere." But it did. The two women met up at a local coffee shop. "We just hit it off. It felt like we had known each other for years," Aftab said.

And she accepted the hand that Olitzky had extended. "All busy people have to prioritize what is important and realize opportunities don't always land when they are perfect," Aftab said. "I was glad to recognize this and join her as a partner in this effort."

A month later, 12 women, six Jewish and six Muslim, whom Aftab and Olitzky had

recruited, got together at Aftab's house. "It was magical. We did not need any kind of agenda. We were so excited to realize how much commonality there was and how much of a connection there was. We were all interesting women. We happened to all be mothers. And we were all active in different areas," Aftab said. "Forget the religious aspect. We all just connected."

They also agreed that the meetings should continue in private homes. "We said we don't want this to be situated in religious institutions. They are still patriarchal. We wanted to open our homes and hearts to people. It changes the narrative when it is in someone's home," Aftab said.

Building Bridges

In Northern Virginia Wahba and her fellow pediatrician Sue Kohn formed the group three years ago, after Kohn had learned of the organization and wanted to create a sisterhood in her community. The experience has been full of love and enlightenment, Wahba said.

"It is educational and enriching, and I am getting to know my sisters, whom I love." The husbands and boyfriends "are very jealous," she said, laughing.

"I am educating myself and educating the generation to come. We are building bridges and getting to know one another human to human. There is no baggage."

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Sisterhood members on a visit to Washington, D.C.'s Islamic Mosque and Cultural Center.

Kohn said their meetings usually have a focus. “We usually have something to talk about, but we understand that just getting together is worth it too.”

This night’s topic is the #MeToo movement, and Kohn is leading the discussion, using a whiteboard and calling on anyone who volunteers to speak. The conversation edges toward the notion of equality in relationships between men and women.

One Muslim woman describes her home life this way: “We both take out the trash, fold laundry and do dishes. My husband cooks. I stopped cooking a few years ago.” But she is the handiest: “Anything that needs to be fixed, I fix.”

Another woman, who is Jewish, pays the bills. “My husband would not do it,” she said.

A Muslim woman who said she is originally from Turkey, had a different view. “I don’t believe in equality, but I do believe in completing each other. My dad and my mom, they have their roles, they are happy in that,” she said. “We cannot be equal. They (men) can never give birth.”

Many of the women recounted incidents where they had been sexually harassed

and had not spoken up. “We could all tell stories,” said one of the Jewish women. “I didn’t know how to deal with it.”

Wahba said she was glad the #MeToo issues were attracting greater public attention. “I think we always have been talking about it.”

For Kohn, the conversations are inspiring. “Just sitting down in a room like this does a lot to break down stereotypes. That is what makes it so lovely to be in this group.”

Olitzky said that the small groups “are the heart of what we do.” There is a guidebook and a curriculum, monthly webinars, videos and a help desk for the leaders to call on for advice. Each group must have two leaders — one Muslim and one Jewish. There are regional meetings and an annual meeting. The challenge, as the organization expands, is to be sure to maintain contact “and be sure everyone is learning,” Olitzky said.

The last annual meeting, held in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, on the weekend after the massacre of 11 worshippers at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, focused on that horrific event. “When the shooting happened, our Muslim sisters reached out to the Jewish sisters to offer emotional and

physical support,” Olitzky said. “This was genuine and came about because of the relationship. It was demonstrated through phone calls, attending synagogue together, letter and card writing, delivering meals.”

But the Sisterhood intentionally stays away from Israel-Palestine issues. “This is not the purpose of the Sisterhood,” said Olitzky. Yet, she added, there is a curriculum “for our chapters to follow if they are ready to enter into this challenging conversation.” If the group decides to take on this topic, the conversations are tightly structured, with the women pairing up and each speaking for five minutes. The method, Olitzky said, is “one of the classic techniques used in interfaith dialogue.”

Besides the local and regional meetings, the Sisterhood has organized trips. In 2018, a group from around the United States took a tour of civil rights sites. Previously, there was a trip to Azerbaijan and the Balkans. There is also a recent effort to create chapters of teenage girls, Muslim and Jewish.

“You take two people who are different from each other, in this case a Muslim and a Jew, and bring them together in a safe space, in each other’s homes, this will build positive relationships,” said Olitzky.

She had little sense when she started the first Sisterhood group that it would grow into an internationally recognized organization. “We know that we can change the perceptions of Muslims and Jews in the Islamic community and in the Jewish community,” she said. “And we have proof that the Sisterhood is changing things.”

Olitzky’s trip to Poland in 2010 was jarring. “There was overt anti-Jewish behavior and rhetoric on the streets.” A guide, explaining why she saw no one who was of color, LGBTQ, Asian, Muslim or Jewish, told her: “Poland is for the Poles. There is no Muslim problem because they are not welcome here.”

Olitzky returned home to New Jersey, puzzling over what she had seen and heard. “There are lots of babies coming into this world. I could sit back and complain about the hatred or I could do my part to change it. It took me a while to figure out what to do.”

Initially, she thought about forming a small group in her community, which has

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sizeable Jewish and Muslim populations. “I decided, ‘let’s start there and let’s build relations.’ These are two communities that distrust each other.” There was a connection, although a not particularly happy one. “We are hated by the same people, so let’s come together.”

Soon there were 12 women, getting together on a regular basis, who now “are truly sisters,” Olitzky said. “Women come together as strangers, and they evolve into friends, and friendship changes dramatically as they become ‘sisters,’” she said. Now, “these are our family members and we will do anything to protect our family members.”

Most of the focus on Judaism in the news, Olitzky said, “has to do with Israel and the political situation surrounding that in Israel and America. As opposed to people really understanding the values of Judaism, what it stands for and what as Jews we are obligated to do.”

And for Islam, she said, the public perception is that it is a “religion of terrorism. Nothing could be further from the truth than that.”

While the Sisterhood meetings don’t shy away from tough topics, Olitzky has a curriculum that lays out how to approach the first year, and it discourages talk of politics or the Middle East.

Birth of a Chapter

Najiyah Khan is a PTA president, a consultant with a major firm and a Muslim member of the Sisterhood. With her Jewish counterpart Susan Morawetz, the women have organized a Sisterhood branch in suburban Maryland.

Khan had heard that there was a Washington, D.C., chapter of the Sisterhood. “I cold emailed Sheryl.” Khan got a response with information about a D.C. chapter. “Then I let it sit on the back burner for a while.”

But during the summer of 2016, she dug out the information. “During Trump’s campaign that summer, I reached out again and found there were a few women in Montgomery County also seeking to get together.”

The women — three Jews and two Muslims — gathered for dinner to talk about possibilities.

“We decided to slowly reach out to women we knew who we thought would be interested. We recruited about 12 to 15 women, trying to get it diverse, to get an even number of Jewish women and Muslim women. The main thing was trying to be equal. We also were trying to get different levels of interest, faith, ages, races.”

It was, Khan said, “a very interesting time to birth a chapter.”

The women try to meet once a month at someone’s home. “We try to have an agenda,” said Khan. “We put a poll on Survey Monkey, try to have topics, and general conversation about what is happening in the world. And we kind of just hang out.”

The group did a model Seder at Passover and a model pre-Ramadan meal. It also took part in a local protest about intolerance and participated in an interfaith walk in Washington, D.C., to show solidarity against hatred.

There has been some turnover of its membership, Khan said, partly because the Muslim women tend to be younger and busier. Attracting older Muslim women, who often have a more traditional background and less interfaith experience, has proved a challenge.



Sacramento, California Sisterhood members “pray with their feet” — Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s paraphrase of Frederick Douglass’s description of his actions to further civil rights — to keep families together.

“A lot of our Muslim women in their 30s and 40s have kids and a lot of pulls on their attention,” Khan said. “On the Jewish sister side, they are mostly older, they have more time to commit.” But for now, the group is pretty stable and members are very committed, she said.

Nonpartisan and Nonprofit

By late 2013, the growth of the Sisterhood was so vast that Olitzky talked Aftab into organizing it as a nonprofit. Aftab is now the board chair; Olitzky is the executive director.

“We are nonpartisan as a nonprofit. But we deal with issues. We are living in a climate, quite frankly, when many of the political leaders subtly are supporting white nationalists, or nationalism, as it is called. We can’t help but talk about these issues. It just underscores the work that we do and how important it is,” Aftab said. The organization, for instance, has encouraged its members to participate in voter registration — a nonpartisan issue.

The Sisterhood has attracted international attention, and women in Europe and Israel have asked to form chapters. Olitzky says for now the organization is focused on North America, in part because it is still lacking sufficient bandwidth to expand, and in part because she views the need in North America as substantial and something she and her colleagues can tackle.

“There is so much work to do in North America. There is a need for this throughout the world for sure. But until we meet our goals in North America, we are not able to move out further.”

To learn more about the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom, visit their website:
<https://sosspeace.org/>