

Did You Know?



AAi Executive Director Rod Cardoza received an international platform for peacebuilding earlier this year, publishing an article in a leading academic journal on Muslim-Christian relations, and speaking on a Turkish television program about how Jews, Christians and Muslims are building bridges of understanding and respect while collaborating in compassionate service to others.

In January, Cardoza was featured on Channel A9's "Building Bridges Gateway" program in Istanbul. He spoke of lessons learned in AAI's work in bringing Jews, Christians and Muslims together to serve the poor. He emphasized how members of the three religions are forging new friendships, overcoming stereotypes, and becoming more educated about each other while obeying divine commands to feed the hungry together. He stressed that a wise response to conflict begins with the family unit, and should always be handled with grace and love. "The way forward to build peace is really serving together as our sacred texts call us to do," he told the three panelists on the show, which features opinion leaders from around the world who build bridges between members of different religions.

Cardoza said after the inter-

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PHOTO BY RAY HIEBERT

Diane Eldridge (left) of Lincoln Glen Church and Leyla Kose of Pacifica Institute Silicon Valley Branch help prepare meals for service at InnVision's Montgomery Street Inn on March 2.

Volunteers Witness Divine Provision

by Jonathan Partridge

At first, it seemed like a silly mistake. Due to a communication error, members of Lincoln Glen Church and Pacifica Institute, a Turkish-American Muslim community, prepared far more food on March 2 than 60 guests of InnVision's homeless shelter could ever hope to eat. But when organizers learned that another homeless shelter nearby did not have enough food that evening, an invitation was promptly extended. As it turned out, the food prepared was just enough to meet their need too. More than 150 people filled the Conservative synagogue to hear a rabbi, pastor, and imam share what the Bible and Qur'an say about serving those in need. Each speaker stressed the need for action above words, noting that their faith groups often were far from perfect in carrying out these commands.

"As humans, we do our planning, but God has his plan, and he is the Best of Planners," volunteer Oktay Erbil of Pacifica Institute remarked following the event. Erbil, who led fellow Muslims in afternoon prayers prior to meal service, noted that all the miscommunication led to a beautiful

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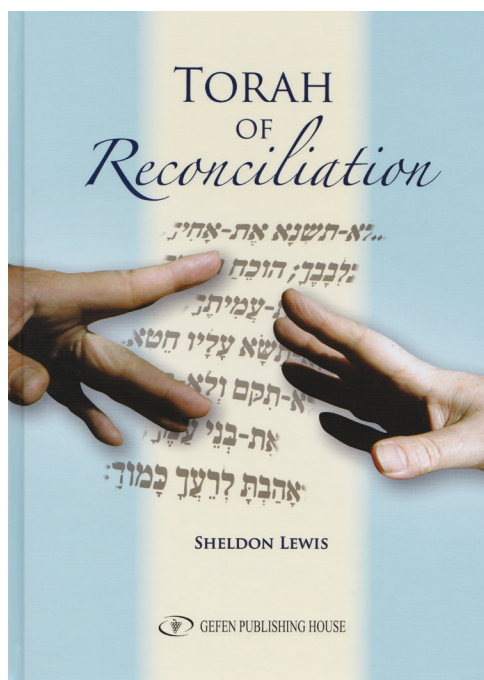
Jewish Teachings on Reconciliation and Peace

by Rabbi Ron Kronish

This week Jews around the world read the weekly portion from the Book of Exodus in which we find the *Song of the Sea* (Exodus 15), one of the most troubling portions in the Bible, in which God is referred to as a man of war. This raises the question of whether the God of the Bible—and the God of the Jewish Tradition—is a God of War or a God of Peace! Or can this God be both? There is no question that the Bible is replete with wars and conquest. It is part of our history. We can't deny it. Joshua conquered the land from the local inhabitants, and the kings of Israel fought many a war. But is this theology the essence of Judaism? Or can we uncover a theology of peace and reconciliation as more central to Jewish faith and yearning.

Well, one rabbi has uncovered it! I recently received a new book called *Torah of Reconciliation* by Rabbi Sheldon Lewis (Gefen Publishing House, Jerusalem, 2012). In this book, Rabbi Lewis' introduction on Peacemaking in Jewish Tradition is the best article that I have ever read on the subject. It is thorough, well-documented and convincing. I would say that it is a "must read" for anyone who

wants to know how deeply the search for peace and reconciliation is central in Judaism. Rabbi Lewis argues persuasively that "there are more expressions lauding the virtues of peace than of any other single value" (p.2). Indeed, he claims that "when one turns the pages of Jewish sources, the



quest for peace and the praise of peace appear to be an obsession" (p.1). It is certainly an obsession for him! And for me! And I only wish it were more of an obsession for more rabbis, Jewish educators, and Jewish leaders. In Israel, to my sorrow, very few rabbis in our country speak up for peace these days. Perhaps there are more in North America. I'm not sure any more, but I still hope so.

For Rabbi Lewis, peace is one of the central tenets of Judaism, certainly of his understanding of Judaism. It is linked inextricably to justice, and it could become a central component of our Jewish way of life, if we not only preach peace but pursue and teach it, and live it in our human behavior through moral interpersonal relations.

Lewis emphatically believes that pursuing peace leads us to the values and methods of reconciliation in our personal, communal, and national

lives. It is not just an abstract concept, but a guide for living.

Beyond the major introductory chapter, this book takes each Torah portion of the week and mines it—as well as classical and modern commentaries—for inspirational sources that can guide us to seek out peaceful living. It is a wonderful book to take to synagogue every week (as I do now) or to read on Shabbat afternoon. Rabbi Lewis brings to us wonderful, meaningful, and inspiring commentaries, which can often turn difficult passages on their heads, by creative interpretations which are always well-grounded in classical commentaries as well as new ones. For example, he brings an enlightening explanation of the problematic verse that "God is a man of war," the verse that we confront this week in our Torah text:

God is a man of war. Rashi interprets: This means a master of war. According to Rabbi Raphael Gold, this means that God has mastery over war. He rules over it and stands above the cruel manifestation of war. Even at a time of war, He is a master of mercy since God is His Name.

Therefore, even if war is sometimes necessary, as in a just war for self-defense, one must approach it with care and mercy. Killing of innocent civilians should clearly not be allowed.

In another famous rabbinic commentary, which is often mentioned this week with reference to the miraculous exodus story in which the Jewish people are saved by parting of the Sea of Reeds, they are criticized for singing a song of triumphal victory: "The work of My hands are drowning in the sea, and you are singing a song!?" (Talmud, Megilla 10b)

We are taught never to rejoice when other human beings are killed. This is a vitally important Jewish value.

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Susan at a Glance

Home: Gilroy, California

Faith Community: Jewish

Work: Retired, Dean of Education, College of Education, San Jose State University, San Jose, Calif.

Hobbies: Bike riding, going to the gym, downhill skiing, hiking.

“When a community ... sees people of ... three religions involved together, it makes a pretty powerful statement that that’s the way life needs to be.”

—Susan

Meet a Member:

Susan Meyers

by Loureen Murphy

The first time I saw Susan Meyers, she was standing atop a picnic table, addressing volunteers at an AAi service event in Gilroy, California. The spring blossoms behind her complemented her liveliness and joy as she spoke.

Loureen: How did you learn about AAi and its mission?

Susan: My congregation, Congregation Emeth, has been involved for the past several years because Bette Gardner and Michael Heil were in contact with Rod Cardoza. We’ve participated in a number of events with them.

LM: Were AAi service events your first opportunity to serve alongside Muslims and Christians?

SM: Not the first for me. Our congregation has a longstanding relationship with the local Muslim community as well as with the Lord’s Table at St. Joseph’s Family Center.

LM: Tell me a little about your faith background.

SM: My great-grandfather was a founder of Temple Beth Israel in Fresno, where I grew up. My grandparents on both sides were members of that synagogue, and my parents were very active in leadership positions. Close involvement becomes a way of life for a family. My granddaughter is sixth generation of our family to be named in that Temple.

LM: So were most of your friends Jewish in childhood and youth?

SM: Actually, most of my friends growing up were Christians. There were maybe four or five Jewish kids in my high school. Once I started living in the Bay Area during college, I got to know Muslims as well.

LM: So peacebuilding came naturally?

SM: To be honest, I was not automatically interested in peacebuilding activities because I hadn’t experienced a lack of peace among the faith communities. Throughout my life I’ve been interested in other religions and have had lots of opportunities to learn about them all along.

LM: But you do participate in AAi and other peacebuilding activities. Why is that?

SM: The part that intrigued me at the beginning was how the Abrahamic

Alliance event was organized to provide the opportunity to meet in the small groups with pre-planned questions. This setup allowed you ask things that may not be appropriate to ask in other settings.

LM: For example?

SM: Like why a woman wears a hijab and what that means to her. You have permission to ask because you’re really interested, or you wouldn’t be there in the first place. It’s a safe context in which to inquire.

LM: What else draws you in?

SM: What AAi also does is stimulate group relationships, not just the one-on-one. I think it makes a statement to the community that Christians, Jews and Muslims appreciate one another, that we come from the same father, Abraham, and we really have more in common than not.

LM: What are some values you see that the three faith communities have in common?

SM: Living an ethical moral life, caring about one another, and appreciating what we have.

LM: What would you say to someone standing on the fringes of peacebuilding, who is perhaps hesitant to get involved?

SM: What is there to be afraid of? For that person, I would describe in some detail exactly what happens at an event. When you have a clear idea of what’s going to happen, the fear should disappear. ●



Susan Meyers (left) preparing dinner for guests of St. Joseph’s Family Center at AAi’s Abrahamic Reunion Community Service event in Gilroy, California.

PHOTO BY KAMBIZ NARAGHI



Three clergymen, three faiths, one friendship. The three amigos (Imam Jamal Rahman, Pastor Don Mackenzie and Rabbi Ted Falcon) visit Jerusalem together.

Good News to Remedy a Skewed Worldview

by Jonathan Partridge

“Jewish Schindler reaches goal of saving more than 1,200 Muslim and Christian refugees”

“60 imams and rabbis unite in Washington to promote peace”

“Muslims and Christians pray for peace in Nigeria”

Headlines with good news are often buried in periodicals worldwide behind front page stories of tragedy and death. The reporter’s adage, “If it bleeds, it leads,” has become standard practice in many newsrooms internationally as editors seek to satiate the interest of the public at large. After all, no one wants to read about a train that arrives on time at its proper destination. If it crashes, on the other hand, or if it is delayed by a strike, people want details.

I recall a discussion in a journalism class at the University of Southern California in which a professor said the challenge of “peace journalism” was to find stories that people find interesting. We are naturally drawn to tales that contain conflict narratives. Unfortunately, our interest in conflict

narratives can lead media consumers to develop a skewed perspective when reading stories or watching broadcasts about matters of faith. Westerners may come to believe that most Muslims and Christians in Egypt, Nigeria, and the Central African Republic are at odds with one another and that most Middle Easterners support terrorism. Similarly, Muslims in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa may come to believe that most Christians and Jews in the West are war-hungry, immoral, and materialistic.

Yet these are only stereotypes, and as such they are wildly inaccurate as a whole. There are plenty of everyday examples of cooperation among Jews, Christians, and Muslims that go largely unnoticed. Abrahamic Alliance International is working to highlight these efforts through

our web site and social media. Our web site news page now contains several years worth of media reports on cooperation between Jews, Christians, and Muslims worldwide. Our followers on Facebook and Twitter regularly enjoy such good news.

Past articles at AAi News have not only highlighted official statements made by influential rabbis, ministers, and imams, but also a wide range of inter-religious cooperation by laypersons in activities like disaster relief, sports, arts, and even comedy designed to expose stereotypes and promote camaraderie among Jews, Christians and Muslims. AAi News also features a wide range of articles about peace-building endeavors carried out by individual synagogues, churches, and mosques around the world. Many of these stories are fascinating windows on our world today, offering a much-needed corrective to the sensational conflict narratives that dominate mainstream media. Some feature dramatic reports of people inspired by their faith to risk their lives in service of others despite enormous odds.

Our readers are also inspired as they read first hand accounts of Jews and Christians fulfilling the Biblical mandates to “love neighbors and strangers as you love yourself”, and of Muslims fulfilling the Qur’anic mandate to “do good unto parents, kin, orphans, the needy, neighbors and strangers.”

It’s time to change the narrative among believers in the God of Abraham. My hope and prayer is that AAi News will help do just that, while bringing glory to God who continues to move Abraham’s children to live in obedience to his divine commands. Check out our latest good news at abrahamicalliance.org/aai/news and be sure to follow AAi on facebook. [com/abrahamicalliance](https://www.facebook.com/abrahamicalliance) and Twitter [@abrahamicallies](https://twitter.com/abrahamicallies). ●

Opening Sacred Texts with Open Minds

by Rabbi Simcha Green



For several years I have engaged in dialogue and study of the Bible with several Christians. In each case

I approach these sessions with great anticipation and enthusiasm. I learn much from these encounters and share my understanding of my traditions to the best of my ability.

Because those with whom I have been studying do not have much knowledge of Hebrew, the original language of the Bible, it has been difficult to point out to them that English Bible translations are often lacking some of the nuances found in Hebrew. For example, when the text speaks in a technical way, translations often suffer in accuracy.

This is evident in texts speaking of the Sabbath and the prohibition of work. The Hebrew term *melacha* is not equivalent to the English term *work*. Work often implies something difficult, heavy or time consuming. Compensation is sometimes provided for work done. Consider the word homework. Let any student in your home explain how they understand the term work in that expression. In the Hebrew text, *melacha* is used to elaborate upon the 39 activities that are not permitted on the Sabbath day. One of them is the kindling of fire. For a Boy Scout, that might involve gathering twigs and using a flint stone. For others, it might simply require a flick of a lighter. Whether much effort is needed or not, the *melacha* is still prohibited.

The word *kosher* is usually translated as “fit for use.” However,

the Bible text is much more detailed. The methods of preparing meat, the separation between milk and meat, the preparation of food in the kitchen and in a restaurant are quite elaborate and cannot be understood simply by the words “fit for use.”

Even the phrase “Ten Commandments” is inaccurate, for there are more than ten commands in Exodus 20. The Hebrew is more accurately translated as “The Ten Statements” or “The Ten Paragraphs”.

“An open mind is a wonderful thing. An open mind is never closed.”

Thankfully, a lack of Hebrew knowledge will not prevent good and meaningful dialogue and study. I indeed have learned much from my students. They have shown me the way they have been taught the text. It is important for me to hear their understanding of the words and terms.

What has been very meaningful to me is the way our “between the lines” understanding is reached. I have the great benefit of having available to me the words of the *Talmud*, the *Midrash*, and the *Mephorshim* (traditional commentaries on Biblical and Talmudic texts throughout the ages). Christians, by contrast, often interpret the Hebrew Bible with other documents. For example, the Book of Exodus relates how Moses fled Egypt, but it does not tell us his age at that time, even though later in Exodus we read that he was 80 years old when standing before Pharaoh, speaking in the name of GOD saying, “Let my people go.” In a

recent study session with Christian friends, I explained that our Midrash teaches that Moses was less than 20 at that time. Imagine my surprise when I was told Moses was 40 then. They understood this from a Christian text reporting the testimony of Stephen before the Sanhedrin. Later that week I went back to my Midrash source. To my surprise, I found three opinions there, one of which was that Moses was 40 years old. Although that is not the traditional Jewish explanation of the Exodus text, there it was, another consideration, in the Midrash text. I had learned something and was appreciative.

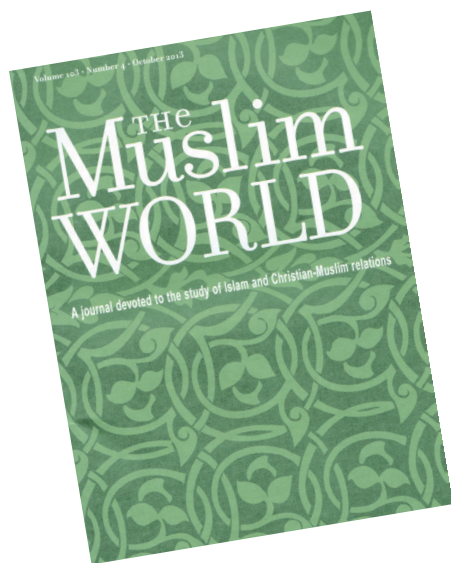
The text of the Qur’an also speaks of personalities in the Bible as major historical figures, leaders, preachers, and teachers. It is rewarding for me to see this, and our mutual study benefits from this. All who study the Bible recognize both Abraham and Ishmael are major personalities of the text. The Book of Genesis allocates many lines to Abraham and his descendants. As we study together, it is most proper to consider the role of Ishmael in the history of Judaism.

Obviously, the concept of Messiah is found throughout our common texts. It is therefore most important to study together the various citations. Our conclusions are different. Yet, by studying carefully together we might—you and I—recognize certain nuances that we missed previously, certain understandings of words that may have eluded us. My Christian students have appreciated the explanations I have shared concerning the messianic possibilities throughout the more than 3,000 years of our history. After opening sacred texts together with an open mind, I can now better understand why they see things in a different light. Different conclusions need not preclude our sharing thoughts together. Not at all.

An open mind is a wonderful thing. An open mind is never closed. ●

“Did you Know” continued from page 1...

view that he was encouraged by the interest of show hosts to join in the peacebuilding work of AAi. When they asked when he was coming to Istanbul, Cardoza said that AAi looks forward to working in Turkey, God willing. He noted after the interview, “There is increasing interest in peacebuilding among children of Abraham all over the world, and AAi’s challenge is to serve, equip, and help organize those who are hungry to join such a movement.”



In February, *The Muslim World*, a leading academic journal devoted to the study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations, published an article by Cardoza entitled, “New Paths in Muslim-Christian Dialog: Understanding Islam from the Light of Earliest Jewish Christianity.” The article explores the roots of an important textual difference between the Bible and the Qur’an that has divided Christians and Muslims for centuries. Excavating past the complexities of translation, worldview and historical semantics, Cardoza probes the original Hebraic meaning of biblical terms most Muslims believe constitute clear evidence of the Bible’s corruption. He performs the same careful analysis of Arabic terms in the Qur’an that most Christians believe constitute clear evidence

that the Qur’an contradicts the Bible.

Thereafter, Cardoza demonstrates how such a careful reading of each other’s Scripture can reveal profound correspondence, even where translations suggest contradiction or corruption. “The light of earliest Jewish Christianity,” writes Cardoza, “allows us to focus our dialog not only on matters of obvious common ground and agreement, but also on topics many assume are irreconcilable differences. Once immersed in this light, we just may find a way out of the theological gridlock

which has hindered Muslim-Christian dialog for centuries.” Cardoza then proposes a cooperative effort between Christian and Muslim scholars to gently and respectfully address these matters in churches and mosques internationally to build genuine understanding and greater peace between our communities. ●

“...we may just find a way out of the theological gridlock...”

“Jewish Teachings” continued from page 2...

Rabbi Lewis ends his introductory chapter on Peacemaking in the Jewish Tradition with a powerful statement that responds to my initial question of whether our God is a God of war:

Nowhere (in the Jewish Tradition) does one find militant, angry, warlike or violent images of God held up as worthy of emulation. The sages carefully filtered divine actions on their way to a more compassionate understanding of God, and that evolving belief shaped what they asked of the Jewish people. The softer, gracious image of God became the model to which to aspire.

I suppose that one of the reasons that I found Rabbi Lewis’s new book so important is that it provides the Jewish textual foundation for so much of my own work in peacebuilding through interreligious dialogue and education in Israel during the past 22 years. In addition, the idea that traditional Jewish sources actually call for peace and reconciliation—and not just for conquest, occupation and settlement—is unfortunately virtually unknown in Israeli society, especially

in establishment circles here. I wish that every rabbi in Israel would come to understand how central these values are in Judaism. They might even begin to preach and teach peace to their congregants and to the Israeli public at large! Wouldn’t this be a refreshing change! And maybe even some of our politicians—especially some of those on the so-called “religious right”—might learn some new ideas, which would influence Israel’s search for peace with our neighbors!

I look forward to hosting Rabbi Lewis to share his important insights about the *Torah of Reconciliation* when he will be in Jerusalem next month. ●

Rabbi Ron Kronish is the director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel.



Book Author Rabbi Sheldon Lewis

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outcome. “Anything that you do with good intentions, God puts a blessing in it,” he said.

Several miracles were evident that day, leading Erbil and Cathy Kincl, AAi community service facilitator, to ponder God’s provision as they later conversed about all that had happened during their service together. “It was perfect,” Kincl said. Even the opportunity to serve at this particular shelter seemed divinely arranged. While making arrangements for this event, all of the soup kitchens and shelters typically frequented by AAi congregations were booked on the date needed, prompting AAi staff to make some phone calls and discover the need at InnVision’s shelter. It was a smaller facility than others, so it could not accommodate the typical number of volunteers who want to participate. However, the smaller venue ended up creating a more tight-knit setting for volunteers, Kincl said. “I think the intimacy of our smaller group really allowed us to talk to each other,” she added.

Before serving the meal together, volunteers listened to a presentation from InnVision staff member Juan Parra, who described how they serve and support their guests. While their Montgomery Street shelter (where the meal was served) accommodates homeless men, their Julian Street shelter (whose residents were short on food that night) accommodates residents with mental health issues. The Montgomery Street Inn kitchen does not have a full-time cook, so they generally receive donated meals from volunteers or food prepared at another shelter.

Divine intervention also seemed evident in other ways. Jerry Chang, a Christian volunteer who attends Garden City Church in Santa Clara, noted that he had just been reading an article about the Gülen movement—a religious and social movement led by



PHOTO BY UMIT DOGRUER

Tefvik Yücek (left) of Pacifica Institute Silicon Valley Branch and Jerry Chang of Garden City Church serve a dessert of fresh fruit and revani, a sweet Turkish delicacy, to guests at InnVision’s Montgomery Street Inn on March 2.

Turkish Islamic scholar and preacher Fethullah Gülen—during the morning of the service event. Little did he know that he would be speaking with people inspired by Gülen that very evening. “It was really great to hear a different perspective,” Chang said of his conversations with Pacifica Institute volunteers. It was also helpful, Chang reported, to speak with Muslims and learn more about their faith. “For me, to really know what I believe, I need to understand what other people believe,” Chang explained.

In other ways, the event was rather typical of AAi service events. Members of different religious communities got acquainted while serving those in need. But even this, volunteers noted, was the work of God. As Pacifica Institute member Hikmet Ozkan stressed toward the beginning of the event, the need to love one’s neighbor is emphasized in both Christianity and Islam. He cited a quote from the Hadith (a collection of sayings from the Prophet Mohammed SAAS) that “he who sleeps on a full stomach whilst his neighbor goes hungry is not one of us.”

“People are hungry each day, and we always like to repeat this,” said event coordinator Mehmet Sen of Pacifica Institute regarding AAi meal

service events at area shelters and soup kitchens. While InnVision’s network of shelters in the Silicon Valley receives some 18,000 volunteers each year who conduct a wide variety of tasks, including grounds maintenance and teaching seminars on finances, there is always a need for more helpers, said Maria Duzon, InnVision’s associate director of marketing. “We’re grateful for the connections that we have,” she said.

Shelter residents were also grateful for the food served, and many returned for a second helping of dessert, a sweet Turkish specialty called *revani*. Their thankfulness was unmistakable when the dining hall erupted in spontaneous applause at one point. “The delight of a home-cooked meal was a treat for them,” Kincl said.

Duzon noted that volunteers who bring meals to the Montgomery Street Inn save InnVision money and time. While Duzon said a host of faith-based groups volunteer at the shelter, a couple of guests on Sunday expressed surprise to see both Christians and Muslims serving together. Many said they were happy to see cooperation between members of the two religious communities. “I think our presence brought an atmosphere that was peaceful,” Erbil said. ●

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Help us unite Jews, Christians, and Muslims to serve communities, build peace, and save lives.



Oliva is the newsletter of Abrahamic Alliance International, aiming to reveal the bountiful harvest of charity and righteousness (Hebrew תְּדָקָה *tzedakah*, Arabic صدقة *sadaqah*) produced by a growing movement of Jews, Christians, and Muslims uniting to serve communities, build peace and save lives.

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About AAi

Abrahamic Alliance International is a faith-based, nonprofit organization uniting Jews, Christians, and Muslims for active peacebuilding and poverty relief. AAi builds peace by uniting Jews, Christians, and Muslims to serve the poor, suffering, and marginalized together in a context of compassion.

Interested in attending or hosting a Loving Neighbors Seminar?

Contact AAi at info@abrahamicalliance.org or call +1 (408) 728-8943



Something I Learned about Muslims...

"There's more understanding than fear for me now."

— Eric Lo, Intern, Regeneration Church, Oakland, Calif. after attending AAi's Loving Muslim Neighbors seminar