



How to be a Muslim (10/4/17)

00:00:20 Alice Greenwald: Good evening. And welcome. I'm Alice Greenwald, I'm the President and C.E.O. of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, and it is my pleasure to welcome you to tonight's program.

00:00:53 As always, we are delighted to see our museum members in the audience. And I want to thank those who are tuning in to tonight's web broadcast at 911memorial.org/live. This evening, we host author and New England native, Haroon Moghul.

For the past several years, Haroon has served as an informal adviser to the museum, helping us with audience development, outreach to millennials, and interfaith considerations. Tonight, he will discuss his recently published memoir, "How To Be A Muslim: An American Story."

00:01:27 Hailed as profound and intimate by "The Washington Post," "How To Be A Muslim" reveals a deeply personal story describing Haroon's struggles with his Muslim American identity both before and after 9/11.

In 2001, Haroon Moghul was an undergraduate at New York University, where he was the student leader of N.Y.U.'s Islamic Center. Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, he was called upon to be a spokesperson on behalf of the Muslim community in New York City.

00:01:45 Today, Haroon is a fellow in Jewish-Muslim relations at the Shalom Hartman Institute and a contributor at the Center for Global Policy. He is a frequent CNN contributor, and his writings have been published widely.

Before I turn the program over to our executive vice president and deputy director for museum programs, Cliff Chanin, I feel compelled to address some who have expressed publicly that this program is inappropriate for this institution.

00:02:16 I want to state unequivocally that this program reflects the commitment and the mission of the memorial and the museum to document and increase understanding of the ongoing repercussions of the 9/11 attacks. One particularly sensitive subject is the impact the attacks have had on Muslim Americans.

00:02:37 In our exhibitions, we document and attest to a number of these impacts. We show in our historical exhibition video footage of Muslim charity network volunteers standing on street corners in New York City in the days after 9/11, raising funds for the widows and the children of 9/11 victims. Why? Because their hearts, like all of ours, went out to those most directly affected by the unthinkable horrors of that day-- because their country, too, had been attacked.

00:03:14 Also in the historical exhibition, there's a photo taken of a Yemeni-born American, taken-- the photo taken-- after 21 shots had been fired into the plate glass window of his gas station in Gary, Indiana, on September 12, 2001. The police presumed it to be a hate crime. If you were a Muslim American, or just looked like a Muslim, the world you inhabited after September 11 was a very different place than it had been on September 10.

00:03:46 Visitors to our museum can also listen to President George W. Bush speaking to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001, saying, with conviction, and I quote: "That those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah. The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying in effect to hijack Islam itself. The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends, it is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists and every government that supports them." Unquote.

00:04:26 When you go to our memorial exhibition, most importantly of all, it is clear that Muslims, too, were among the 2,977 victims of the 9/11 attacks: an assistant vice president at Fiduciary Trust hailing from Karachi, Pakistan; a nurse from L.A. born in Tehran; a mail room operator in the South Tower, offices of Aeon Corporation, from Bangalore, India; and others.

00:04:53 And so precisely because we are committed to documenting the full impacts of the attacks and their continuing implications in people's lives, it would be irresponsible not to look at the impacts on Muslim Americans in the wake of those attacks.

At a time in our nation when there is so much in the news about intolerance and bigotry, it is more important than ever that we respectfully listen to one another.

00:05:20 In tonight's conversation with Cliff Chanin, Haroon will discuss his experiences growing up as a Muslim in America, and working as a self-described "professional Muslim" during an emotionally and politically tense time for our country. After their conversation, there will be an opportunity for questions from the audience.

We'd like to thank Haroon for sharing his time and his insights with us. We are also deeply grateful to the David Berg Foundation for supporting the museum's 2017-2018 Public Program season.

00:05:52 And without further ado, please welcome me in joining Haroon Moghul.

(applause)

00:06:05 Clifford Chanin: Thank you, Alice, and welcome, Haroon. If I'm remembering correctly, we first met before the museum opened. We

walked through some of the spaces together, a group of people you were part of from the Muslim community, and it's been, you know, an ongoing dialogue since then. And very rewarding, I would say, on our end. I hope at least a little bit on yours.

00:06:30

But this is really part of an ongoing conversation, and what was interesting to me in reading the book was how the tone of the conversation that we've been having is reflected in those pages.

It's a tone of questioning, and questioning, I would say, first and foremost, yourself and whatever certainties you've come to-- if certainties is not too certain a word-- whatever certainties you've come to are still open to question in your mind.

00:07:01

It's a long story that we're going to try to summarize in this conversation. But I want to go back to the beginning, because one of the things that struck me in your story-- putting the religious aspect aside-- is, you are the child of immigrant parents to this country who uprooted themselves in the way that immigrants from many, many countries have done. Many of us, of course, our own family histories are like that.

00:07:31

And I wondered if you saw, thinking back about your own experience-- particularly as a child, a young person-- whether you saw this in this immigrant context more broadly, or was the religious, ethnic dimension always foregrounded? Did you see similarities with others who you might have met who did not have the same background, but who had something of the same experience?

00:07:56

Haroon Moghul: So first of all, thank you, everyone, for being here, and the museum, Cliff, and everyone else who put on the event. I'm truly honored and humbled to be here.

Ashi, for attending. She's an N.Y.U. student who came over and introduced herself, so I thought I would make it very uncomfortable for her...

(laughter)

Haroon Moghul: ...by immediately drawing everyone's attention to her. But wishing you all the luck as a fellow N.Y.U. trauma victim.

(laughter)

00:08:21

Haroon Moghul: So it's an interesting conversation to have, that... I grew up in a town that was overwhelmingly white and Christian, and a little bit of the flavor of that can be found in an exchange I had with a student who I'll call Dave.

Dave was a year older than everyone else in his grade-- he had been held back a grade-- and you know how cruel public school students can be. So this had become, you know, in our imagination, this myth of the student who had been held back ten years. So every time he would walk by a classroom, someone would yell, "Your car is being towed!" And, you know, he was ten years old.

00:08:59

(laughter)

Haroon Moghul: So, you know, I remember, Dave asked me once what my religion was, and I said, "I'm Muslim." He became very quiet, and he said, "So is that Catholic or Protestant?" (laughter)

And I said, "No, it's a different religion." And he looked very confused. And I said, "You know how Judaism is a different religion?" And he shook his head. He didn't know anyone who was Jewish, either.

00:09:20

So... I don't want to say that I felt, very much, this experience of being on the outside looking in. New England was, and I presume, remains, it was a

very welcoming place. I never felt any overt hostility or intolerance. It was mostly a very well-meaning ignorance or simply confusion.

Many of my friends didn't believe my name was real. They thought my parents had simply made it up, I suppose, to amuse themselves. And the reason I draw attention to that is, is that for a lot of-- a lot of American Muslims, you know, there are basically two big populations of American Muslims, African-Americans and then people of recent immigrant origin.

00:10:01

And the African-American Muslim community is generally better known by the wider American population, even if they don't necessarily know they know. So Muhammad Ali, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Dave Chappelle, figures like this who are, you know, very prominent in public. The Muslim community of recent immigrant origin is usually who people are talking about when we have the kind of rhetoric we have right now.

And for that community, for many of us, and at least my own personal experience was, we felt like people who were maybe misunderstood or on the outside, but not necessarily in a bad way. And then after September 11, that experience was suddenly transformed into something much scarier and much more confusing.

00:10:38

Clifford Chanin: You know, you talk about that, and we'll jump back and forth a little bit. But you were in class at N.Y.U. on September 11, and I want to read you an excerpt, but first, let me ask, you know, what was your reaction as, of course, the human horror of this unfolded and the magnitude of this attack unfolded? And then, when it became clear who was responsible for this, how did your reaction shift, if it did?

00:11:16

Haroon Moghul: I used to live on the Upper East Side, and I would come early... And I throw in some color to, I think, this is how a lot of us experienced the day. I was taking Persian class, primarily to get a girlfriend, to be totally honest with you.

Clifford Chanin: That is, by the way, a subtext in many parts of the book.

00:11:37

Haroon Moghul: Yeah, I mean, there's...

Clifford Chanin: Spoiler alert, but, you know...

Haroon Moghul: And I sort of want to draw our attention to this, because it underlines the horror of the day, is that, you know, the day began like any college student's day would begin, with the concerns of a college student, except for Ashi, who only studies.

(laughter)

Haroon Moghul: And, you know, I would go early to class, and I wanted to sit down next to this very pretty undergraduate who I was hoping to date. And I got out of the subway early, and that was when the first plane... the first tower was hit.

00:12:13

And like most New Yorkers—I imagine, every New Yorker-- you know, we thought it was a horrible accident. You know, terrible, but an accident. And in retrospect, you know, nobody really sat there and said, "Why would a plane that large be flying directly into a building," right?

Would there not be some evidence of a pilot attempting to—you know. And many people sat, you know, or stood staring and watching, and I thought to myself, you know, "I'll go to class and we'll figure out what happened."

00:12:41

And I went to class. Class was in the basement at Washington Square Park, and about, I don't know, maybe half an hour later, a student came downstairs and said, "The second tower's been hit."

And, it's interesting you ask me the reaction. I knew it was bin Laden right away. I was... I studied the Middle East, I came from a very religious family. My parents encouraged me to be, I think, deeply aware of the Muslim world, both the good and the very ugly.

00:13:12

And I knew instantly that there was no other movement or organization that could do that or would want to do that. And I remember one of the first claims of responsibility was the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. I don't know if anyone remembers that, it was brief.

And I remember thinking to myself, "There's no way PFLP would or could do this." And it was a very strange moment, because, you know, for one thing, my brother worked in the towers. So, you know, I was panicked because I didn't know what had happened to him. I was scared, just like anyone else was scared, because this massive attack was unfolding.

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Rumors were swirling, I'm sure you'd heard that... You know, we heard Denver was hit, and Pittsburgh was hit, and Seattle was hit. And I was president of one of the, if not the largest, community in proximity to Ground Zero, Muslim community.

00:14:02

And I'm a 21-year-old kid whose intention that morning was to go on a date. And now I'm standing there in Washington Square Park looking at a sky full of smoke, and I asked a friend of mine, you know, "What are we supposed to do now?" And he said, "Well," you know, "You're the president of the Muslim Club, so that's up to you." And that was a very... It was a very overwhelming moment.

00:14:30

Clifford Chanin: You were held back by the professor of your Persian class. You write, "Our professor, who'd suffered the shah's authoritarianism and then Khomeini's, let everyone except the Muslims and Middle Easterners leave. He shook his head. He was afraid. Not just because our nation had been attacked, but by whom. Be careful as you make plans to find your ways home. 'Travel in groups. Accept that it will never be September 10 again.'"

00:15:01 So there is this sense of an instantaneous change. At this level, I mean, I think there were many ways in which people felt an instantaneous change of 9/11. But there is implicit in that the anticipation of an accusation against Muslims writ large. And also, the recognition that somehow, Islam-- whether Muslims or anybody else likes it or not-- is implicated in this event. How did that act upon you as a group and you, of course, as an individual?

00:15:45 Haroon Moghul: My poor Persian professor. He was a Communist. So, you know, first he was arrested and probably mistreated by the shah's regime. Then there was a revolution, and the other guys came to power, and they arrested him. So he kind of-- he wasn't winning any battles there.

00:16:03 And he fled to Pakistan, and then from there he fled to Switzerland, and he arrived in the United States. So I think he spoke from a place of, you know, real trauma. I think the way I want to answer that question is, for me personally, what was really hard about that moment to process is that I felt, standing in the park that day, that now I had a responsibility, given what I knew and my position, to be part of a conversation that I knew was going to happen, and in many respects, this conversation is an outgrowth of those conversations.

00:16:36 And yet, I also realized that I had almost no means of entry into the conversations that really mattered. And so, you know, here I am, a brown Pakistani-American Muslim kid who's 21 years old and, you know, walks around with a backpack attached to him. I had no idea how any of these political conversations were even structured. My parents were doctors. You know, it was assumed I would be a doctor. Everyone I knew was a doctor. If we were formed our own country, everyone would starve to death because there were only doctors.

00:17:03 (laughter)

Haroon Moghul: But we would know exactly why we were starving to death. So there was this very unique kind of society we were constructing.

And the reason I point that out is because then there was this feeling that, "Okay, my identity is now going to be implicate in this. But how do I... How do I push back against that?" And the challenge for a lot of American Muslims was that many of us weren't... We didn't even know how to be part of the conversation.

00:17:29 So one of the things I often hear when I travel the country is, "Why don't more American Muslims..." or, "Why don't more Muslims condemn terrorism?" Every single Muslim organization I know of has condemned terrorism so often that it seems like that's all they do. And yet, nobody hears it. Sometimes, that's because nobody's listening, but sometimes that's because the people who are speaking don't actually know how to get their voices into mainstream conversations. It's like they're talking to themselves. And what I felt for the years after 9/11 was that my identity was implicated, that Islam was implicated, and I wanted to say things, and either nobody was listening to me, or it was assumed that, you know, because I'm Muslim, I'm speaking out of some partisan or sectarian perspective, and I can't actually have the best interests of my country at heart.

00:18:15 Clifford Chanin: What is the sense, and... It's clear that there's a connection here. How do you explain the connection of Islam writ large, Islam as interpreted by the terrorists, and the faith of most American Muslims, let's say? What's the connections? How do you explain what Islam had to do with 9/11?

00:18:44 Haroon Moghul: I'm going to come at that question from two sides. Because that gives me stalling time...

Clifford Chanin: (chuckles)

Haroon Moghul: ...to think of a better answer. It's a deeply humbling moment, I think, for Muslims, when the greatest victims of Islamic extremism are themselves Muslims. Groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda primarily kill Muslims. They kill lots of people, but their primary victims are Muslim.

00:19:14 Some of that is proximity, simply because they are, you know, within Muslim-majority societies. Some of that is ideological-- they believe that most Muslims are incompletely or insufficiently Muslim, if not actually heretics of some kind, and so their lives are forfeit. And so, it's this-- it's deeply humbling because the actions of a small minority, although, albeit very dangerous, but a small minority, have come to stand in for the religion writ large.

00:19:44 So it is a very unique moment, to say the least, when you are a member of a community of one-and-a-half billion people who cannot escape the actions or the ideology of a minority among them, especially one that is sort of murderously set against them.

So, that is, that is, I think, for a lot of American Muslims and a lot of Muslims globally, a profound challenge and a deep psychological wound. That, "Why am I associated with that?" And what is it about my religion that allows it to be associated with that?"

00:20:19 Parallel to that, I think there was, after 9/11, a very brief window in which we as a country could've decided how we wanted to respond to terrorism. And we could've responded with direct action against those individuals and organizations that were immediately responsible, but that was, to use a resonant word, hijacked by many people in, sort of, policy-making circles into a civilizational conflict.

00:20:48 We decided to conflate Saddam Hussein with Al Qaeda, and in so doing, we turned the problem of terrorism into a problem with Islam and made the decision to go to war with Iraq. I believe that was probably the worst foreign policy decision in American history. We will suffer its effects for

years, if not decades, to come. And if we are lucky, the region can maybe return to a status quo that pertained ten or 15 years ago.

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So I think there's two things operating here. One is there's a decision, you know, in Western media, generally, to sort of conflate anything to do with Islam with extremism, and within Muslim communities themselves, an inability, or perhaps sometimes even unwillingness to own up to the reality of extremism, let alone to come up with some kind of robust response to it.

And so the two of those things have come together to accomplish exactly what it is you're saying, this feeling of Islam and then extremism getting fused together in people's minds.

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Clifford Chanin: But we are talking about, you know, citations from the scriptures...

Haroon Moghul: Sure.

Clifford Chanin: ...historical antecedents, concepts that are jihad or anything else that is broadly understood within the community. And I'm interested in, you know, how it is, because you are-- you have background, you have training in this. How the distinctions are made in a way that makes clear where this is situated within the Muslim community, the limits of how it is situated, and yet, the fact that there are, let us say, somewhat porous edges between those who are the hardcore believers in this, and some of the other ideas that spring out of those kinds of most fanatical beliefs.

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Haroon Moghul: Do you want the nerdy answer, or the more...

Clifford Chanin: (chuckles)

Haroon Moghul: You know, I mean, how granular do you want me to get?

Clifford Chanin: I think we're going to let you...

Haroon Moghul: Because I can really geek out here. I'm wearing a "Star Wars" Band-Aid, so, just a-- I'm not even kidding. It's Kylo Ren. He's a member of ISIS.

(laughter)

Haroon Moghul: So-- some of you don't even know who Kylo Ren is. That's really deeply disappointing.

00:22:57 So, you know, I'll give you an example. Traditionally, if a Muslim has a question about a religious practice, like, let's say, you know, I'm traveling and I'm, you know, I'm in a foreign country. I can't read the label on the food. Can I eat the food if I don't know if it contains pork? I don't know, something of the kind. Let's assume the person doesn't have Google Translate.

00:23:25 Traditionally, what Muslims would do is, they would ask a religious scholar. They would go to someone who they respected, who they considered a religious authority, and ask for an opinion. They would never consult the text on their own. And what I find is a fascinating parallel between extremely Islamophobic groups and Islamic extremists themselves is that they lift citations from the texts, right? And then they turn them into law.

00:23:58 And the problem with doing that is that the Islamic tradition contains vast contradictions because it was developed over a long period of time, and, like, even within a short period of time, you have radically different situations and contexts.

00:24:12 So, you know, I'll give you a simple example. There's a story-- and I'm getting very granular-- there's a story of a man who approaches the Prophet Mohammed during the month of Ramadan, when Muslims are supposed to fast. We go-- there's no food, no drink, no sexual relations for the daytime hours. And a man approaches the Prophet Mohammed and he says, "I'm fasting, can I kiss my wife?" And the Prophet says, "Yeah, sure." And then, shortly thereafter, another man comes and says, "I'm fasting, can I kiss my wife?" And the Prophet says, "No, absolutely not." And then the people around him are, like, "Uh," you know, like, "Did we just miss something?"

00:24:45 And he says, "Well, you know, the first man was older. He can control himself. The second man was younger. He probably won't control himself." And then that was it.

What you have with Islamic extremism, and I'm using a trite example, is groups that have neither the access to the text themselves tend to cherry-pick, have no interest in or ability to reconcile competing traditions, right? So they take whatever they want out of it.

00:25:13 But most importantly, a lot of these people are just bad people. I'm sure that some of them believe that their actions are motivated by religion, but I think a lot of them are simply looking for an ideology to latch onto. You know, it's sort of like asking, you know, were the Nazis fundamentally motivated by anti-Semitism, or did they just want to kill large numbers of people? Both things were probably true with different parts of the movement, but fundamentally, it attracted the same kind of person, and it developed the same kind of person.

00:25:44 It's not to say that anti-Semitism isn't real, or that we shouldn't tackle it, but we should also consider that maybe we shouldn't give them too much ideological attention, right? Because it's-- I don't think there's a serious ideological motivation behind it. I think there's a moral sickness behind it. And so, the solution to it isn't ideological, it's moral.

- 00:26:02 Clifford Chanin: You know, it's an interesting point you make, because a year ago, 18 months ago, we had Rabbi Sacks here, who's the former chief rabbi of Great Britain. And he made a similar point about, you know, this recourse to the original text by people who were not really capable of undergoing the kind of interpretative efforts that is the basis of that kind of religious scholarship.
- 00:26:26 And he applied it to a number of traditions, not just the Muslim traditions, though it exists, but it brings us back to a point that comes back to your own youth, because you comment quite critically on the religious institutions and the religious education that you had here. That it was a very traditional approach, but traditional in the style of Pakistan or whatever country it came from-- I'll read,
- 00:26:53 "Many of our parents had built many of our first institutions, and we built upon them, but where we had to figure out how to do so, our parents, raised in Muslim circumstances, didn't. They were born into an Islam they carried here, and sometimes, thoughtlessly reproduced. We, on the other hand, were determining what to keep and what to let go of. There were few we could look to. Many who had the religious knowledge lacked the sophistication, generosity, and creativity to deal with a dynamic, progressive student body, while those who could be leaders had no mandate behind them. We had to find an authority to defend the decisions we'd made."
- 00:27:29 So you are facing this dilemma, obviously, under much less dramatic circumstances, as a young man coming up in the Muslim community, but, you know, your book is filled with examples of your frustration with that community. That it is not meeting the needs of the life you had at that time, and this would somehow really become a much greater problem, it seems, in a post-9/11 world, where the essence of Islam was being challenged, whereas before, I don't think the outside world was paying all that much attention to it.

00:28:02 So the structures of what you're talking about don't seem to have been in place for American Muslims from a very early point in your own life, and then this becomes a much bigger problem in a post-9/11 context.

Haroon Moghul: Absolutely. You know, people tend to describe American Muslims as if we're this homogenous population. American Islam is the most... I believe it is either the most or the second-most ethnically diverse religion in the United States, and American Muslims are the most ethnically diverse Muslim nationality in the entire world.

00:28:34 But we're a small population, we're three or four million people out of, you know, 330 million, so it's maybe one percent, two percent of the country, max. And people come from all over the world. And they come from places, many times, where their practice of Islam is the only practice of Islam. And then they're brought together into this place where they're suddenly colliding with each other, and they're trying to figure out what they're supposed to do. They don't have the resources to build, you know, a separate mosque for this population, a separate mosque for this population. They have to kind of find some kind of common ground.

00:29:03 And we experienced this at N.Y.U., where we showed up and, you know, there were a lot of students who wanted some kind of Muslim life on campus and wanted to figure it out. But we had no idea where to start with things. And, you know, when you're younger, you get intimidated by people who are older than yourself, or who have more religious credentials, and they were the ones who kind of told us how things were supposed to be.

And I'm not really sure why, but at some point, our student body decided that we would just figure it out for ourselves, and we kicked out the so-called religious authorities. Primarily because we heard some sermons that were epic in their badness, and I'm happy to relate those terrible sermons to you, if you want.

00:29:40 Clifford Chanin: I don't think we need the full sermon...

Haroon Moghul: You don't need the full sermon, yeah...

Clifford Chanin: But can you give an example of what would be epic in its badness? As a statement from the pulpit?

Haroon Moghul: As a... okay, um... There was one sermon that started with Adam and Eve and went on, I think, pretty much for the length of human history, you know, from that point. Sort of faithfully recounted every moment in human history from Adam and Eve. It was supposed to be a 30-minute sermon, it lasted an hour and a half. That was a mild example.

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There was one sermon by someone who told the congregation that women were basically not supposed to be part of the community in any way beyond, you know, raising kids. And I'm being sort of polite with that. You know, we had preachers who barely spoke English. We had preachers who'd yelled at the congregation for 30 minutes straight. About what, I don't even know, right?

And so, and unfortunately, when you talk to a lot of American Muslims, this is normal, it's not—I mean, it sounds funny, but it's actually deeply frustrating, if not embarrassing or traumatizing when your primary religious experience is like that. And that's not everyone, but that was what we were experiencing, and for wherever it was, we got the courage to say, "Well, that's not who we are or who we want to be."

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And it was a prescient decision, because, you know, after the attacks, we at least had enough confidence that we as a student community could rise to that occasion and speak to that moment, and not have people in positions of power who were completely unprepared for the magnitude and the gravity of the conversations that were to come.

Clifford Chanin: So this is the point, I think, where your initiation into becoming a "professional Muslim"—your term-- begins. And define what you mean by that.

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Haroon Moghul: "Professional Muslim" means that when you see a missed call from CNN on your phone, you realize something awful has happened, and they would like the official Muslim response.

So I get to comment on behalf of one-and-a-half billion people. Which is a deep honor, and I'm proud to speak on behalf of the population of China.

(laughter)

00:31:51

Haroon Moghul: And, so when I say "professional Muslim," I mean, you know, it's almost like, "Well, because they're the same religion as you, you must know why they did it, and you're somehow responsible for it."

And, obviously, you know, any normal person feels an obligation to respond to, you know, to a tragedy, to an act of violence. You've concern for your religious community. But it becomes this kind of ritual where you become trapped by the very logic you're opposing. So you're constantly in "this is not my religion" mode. The mode you never get into, if you're just doing that, is, "Well, what is my religion?" Right?

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So it actually allows the extremist to set the terms of the conversation, where everyone else is basically constantly responding to them.

Clifford Chanin: So you either are or you aren't with the extremist, but it's the extremist who makes the statement about what the religion is. So your own journey into your own definition of Islam for you has a number of detours, shall we say.

Haroon Moghul: Speed bumps.

00:33:01 Clifford Chanin: And we won't necessarily go through all of them, but there was a period where you tried to be an atheist, and you weren't really convinced by that. You, because of the environment and your social interests, had a temptation towards Christianity or Catholicism, and you found great warmth in that community, which you note was not the feeling that you felt from your own community.

00:33:23 But moving through that-- because you're still an adolescent at that point, so maybe we can just attribute it in that direction-- you are adrift and not really connected internally to your faith, even at the point where you are making all kinds of statements on behalf of the population of China. And so there is this inner conflict, and I want you to talk a bit about what was missing, internally, for you from your own sense of your connection to Islam that made you feel like a hypocrite, even though you were making all of these public appearances on behalf of the religion.

00:34:01 Haroon Moghul: I'm sure there's someone watching the live stream who is, now believes that the population of China is Muslim.

(laughter)

Haroon Moghul: So we've used an example that is probably going to trouble some folks tremendously.

Clifford Chanin: That is not the case, for everybody who's watching.

Haroon Moghul: Just in case anyone's watching. Your phone was not made by Muslims.

(laughter)

Haroon Moghul: But... it's true, it's okay. Now, I don't even remember the-- no.

Clifford Chanin: (laughs)

00:34:32 Haroon Moghul: We have a tendency-- you know, so, I'll say this. It felt hypocritical, because... I wanted to change things. Like, I felt like, when I got to N.Y.U., I wanted to build the kind of community someone like me could be part of were I honest about who I really was.

00:34:51 So because of the way I was raised and my own weaknesses and insufficiencies, I pretended to be a certain kind of Muslim, you know, a small "o" orthodox Muslim. That's how I had been raised to practice, that's how I was supposed to practice, and that's how I pretended to practice, but what did I do with that authority that accrued to me is that I tried to create a community where someone like who I secretly was inside could feel comfortable.

00:35:19 And at the time, my assumption was, I was going to do this on a college campus and then move on and become, you know, a lawyer or a doctor or some other suburban immigrant experience profession. And I never imagined that this would become a profession, and after the attacks, it began to seem like this was what I would have to do for the rest of my life, or at a least a good chunk of my life, and suddenly, this act that I had put on had become something far more significant.

00:35:51 And I remember wrestling with it, and I remember telling myself "I'm actually pretty good at this work, I'm probably the only person in the student community who can go on TV and answer these questions, and so, don't I have an obligation to do that?", alongside, "I don't even know what my relationship to my religion is." And so I suppressed this and elevated this because I felt like that was what I was being called to do.

00:36:16 Clifford Chanin: What was missing from your relationship with your religion?

Haroon Moghul: I didn't have a spiritual practice. I think it was all about, you know, being externally who I thought people wanted me to be, and then my Islam was not worshipping God. It was basically worshipping my religious community. It was identity politics. And so there was no spiritual core, I had no personal relationship with God in any meaningful sense, and so I had nothing to go back to except, you know, brief flickers of spiritual life. And it was the contradiction between those two things that basically broke me.

00:36:52 Clifford Chanin: So, skipping ahead, again, your brother is in Saudi Arabia, working. And he invites you, and is bored and lonely, and sends you a ticket. And so, you go and you make the pilgrimage with him to Mecca, and the stirrings begin to attach themselves to something. And I think, in particular, it's at that point that the person of the Prophet Mohammed becomes a critical point in your sense of what your commitment to your community could be, and how that could be actually connected to a more spiritual purpose.

00:37:33 Haroon Moghul: Yeah, I...So I went to Mecca, which is kind of the... The Times Square of Islam. And, if you think about it, it makes sense.

(laughter)

Haroon Moghul: And from there, we went to Medina, which is the city where the Prophet Mohammed lived out the last ten years of his life and where he's buried. And so there's a simply enormous mosque that surrounds his tomb.

00:38:03 And I remember going, it was in August, it was an extremely hot day, obviously, because you can imagine, Saudi Arabia in the summer. I think it was 123 degrees. So it felt like the sun was punching you in the face. It

was not a feeling you will ever forget. A little bit like if you ever turn your oven on and open it, it felt like you were walking through an oven.

00:38:21 And so, you know, after prayers, I walked towards the tomb of the Prophet Mohammed, and there were about 500,000 other people who were doing the exact same thing. And I wanted to have this moment to myself where I could stand before his tomb and reflect on this moment in my life where I had almost become Catholic, and I didn't really know what I wanted out of my religious identity.

00:38:44 And of course, there were half a million people who wanted to have their own, you know, three minutes of reverence, so they just pushed me out on their way in. And, you know, I stumbled onto the plaza outside of the mosque, and I remember finding shade and sitting down, and I had this experience, and I realize now that the experience is actually about something much deeper than the experience itself.

00:39:02 I told myself, you know, if I were to become Christian, then I could have nowhere to put the Prophet Mohammed. That he would then have to be removed from my religious or spiritual practice. But if I stayed Muslim, I would have room for Jesus in my life, and one of the Muslim sort of myths that exists around the tomb of the Prophet Mohammed is that there's actually an empty grave inside the sanctuary that is awaiting Jesus. So when he returns to the Earth, and he lives out the rest of his life and afterlife and he dies, he's supposed to be buried there, that's the sort of legend that some people relate.

00:39:37 But the point being that, you know, I could have both. And, you know, I realized then that I wanted to have both, but I think the greater significance of that moment, especially, you know, as we heard in the beginning, of the politics of today, is that right now, we seem to be caught as a country in this moment of, "You are this or that." You are American or a Muslim, right?

- 00:39:59 You are-- you know, it's this constant disjunction, right? You can only be one thing, and I believe that that moment was important because it was a conjunction. It was my saying, on a... You know, maybe not being fully conscious of it, that there are things I really like about Christianity, and there are things I really like about Islam, and I'm going to find a way to reconcile those parts of myself.
- 00:40:19 I'm not going to buy into the narrative of, "I have to be this or that." I am, instead, going to produce a narrative that says, "I am complicated, I am a human being, and the different parts of me have come together in different ways, and I'm going to pull them all together and become something out of them."
- 00:40:35 Clifford Chanin: You have, in that same trip, you spend some time in the gulf region, living for a while. There's an interaction you have with a cleric in Abu Dhabi who, I think, was more on the Sufi practice of Islam, who also gave you some direction that helped you reconcile part of this inner struggle you were having.
- 00:41:01 Haroon Moghul: Yeah, I met a cleric from Yemen. Probably the Muslims in the audience will know who I'm talking about, but I won't take his name, just so that he doesn't accidentally get associated with me, and then he has to explain, you know, lots of things to people. And, you know, I was at a really low point in my life and I went to see him. And I went to his house for dinner. Dinner didn't end till, like, 2:00 a.m.-- it's a very Muslim thing. If you're ever invited to a Muslim's house for dinner, take a nap beforehand. Nothing starts on time. It'll end tomorrow. Just accept it.
- 00:41:40 And, you know, around 3:00 a.m., he agreed to sit with me. And we had this long conversation, you know, he was speaking Arabic, I was speaking English, we went back and forth. And I remember being struck by his warmth, and I had never encountered a Muslim religious figure of that warmth and kindness. And rather than his language being damning and exclusionary, it was inclusive and inspiring.

- 00:42:12 It wasn't the kind of language that said, "You've done nothing wrong in your life." It was language that said, "Well, you've done some things wrong that have hurt you. Here's how to make yourself a better human being." And the last thing he said to me before he left-- and, probably, I don't know if he went to sleep or pray, it was, like, 5:00 in the morning-- he said, "You have to love yourself."
- 00:42:36 And, you know, I had... On a trip to Israel, around the same time, I heard a rabbi talk about, you know, "You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself." And he had said no one focuses on the "as you love yourself" part. That, you know, to love a neighbor as you love yourself implies that you love yourself. Right? You can't want good for another person if you don't want good for yourself, because at the end of the day, you're a person, too.
- 00:43:02 And it struck me, because I had never heard that kind of language used in an Islamic expression. And once I saw it and heard it, I found it everywhere. But I had never heard that growing up, and that was kind of a revelation for me.
- 00:43:18 Clifford Chanin: The impact of this on you is to send you back to the U.S., and, you know, there's a sort of interesting moment, just want to see if I can find it. Because you alluded to your trip to Israel, but it's, that trip to Israel is part of your association with the Hartman Institute, which is an Israeli Zionist organization, which is, politically speaking, not the line of belief that you follow to a considerable degree, I would say.
- 00:43:50 But yet you took part in this program, which was, I think a pilot at that point, for young leaders of the Muslim American community. And now you work for Hartman as the organizer of these programs. So this notion of reaching across while you're reaching within seems to sort of be proceeding on parallel tracks in your own life.
- 00:44:16 Haroon Moghul: I was invited to go to Israel with a group of Muslim leaders in 2013. I'd never heard of the Hartman Institute. I went on the

recommendation of the person who was directing the program, an imam at Duke University. And, you know, I went with some hesitation. I, you know, to put it mildly, did not identify as a Zionist. You know, I was very harshly critical of Israel and I thought going to Israel would be helpful for my own understanding of the Middle East.

00:44:47

And I remember landing there, and the Israeli co-director of the program was waiting for us outside the bus and gave me a hug. I didn't know who he was, though. I thought that maybe, that, you know, Tel Aviv airport just had, you know, a hugger, right?

(laughter)

Haroon Moghul: Who was apparently some old guy, like a greeter at Walmart, you know, who just, his job is to hug you, right? So I was, like, "I guess I hug him back, right?" Like, I don't know, right? Just... you know, when in Rome... So I hugged him back, and you know, like, "Thank you," you know. Then he was on the bus with us and I was, like, "Wow, this guy is kind of weird."

00:45:19

(laughter)

Haroon Moghul: He's just going everywhere with us. You know, what I'll say about Hartman that's so interesting to me is that Hartman is a Zionist institution. I'm pretty sure most, if not all, of my colleagues believe in a two-state solution. I am not a Zionist. I believe in a one-state solution.

00:45:38

So we have very different politics. But we can have rich and productive conversations and relationships. And I think it's actually a template for something that we in this country need, which is to say, imagine if we had a conversation about, I don't know, healthcare. And someone says, you know, "I believe in a single-payer system," and someone says, "I want the market to decide." And we can actually get to a point where we have a conversation where we don't see each other as enemies, or partisan in

a nasty sense, but as human beings who can come to different conclusions based on common values.

00:46:20 I think what's best for this country is this, and I think what's best for the country is this, and a democracy requires mature adults to function, and it requires trust, and a belief that the person who has a different position than myself nevertheless does not want ill for me. They simply have a different belief about how to bring about a certain outcome. So how do we make America more prosperous? You know, so for me, it's work that resonates deeply as an American, but it also goes back to what you were saying.

00:46:47 I mean, Jewish-Muslim relations are some of the most, one of the most important interfaith relationships in this moment, and speaking of the Muslim community, I mean, there is plenty of anti-Semitism in the Muslim community and then some. And, you know, you get to a point where it's really nice to say, "I condemn terrorism, this is wrong, this is immoral."

00:47:07 That's great. Tell me what you stand for. And when you see a Muslim world where the majority of the leadership seems either incapable of meeting the challenge or actively contributing to the conditions that are creating extremism-- and if you look at the Middle East today, every government after the other is complicit in some kind of moral tragedy, they're all disappointments, they're all embarrassments, they're all failure, broadly speaking-- like, someone has to do something.

00:47:32 And so, you know, to me, this is no different than what happened at N.Y.U. when a bunch of us said, "This is not our religion, this is not our community, we're going to do something better." And so for me, the work for Hartman is ultimately actually about the Muslim community.

I would like to see, in the years to come, a different kind of Islam. An Islam that can relate to difference and to pluralism and to other faith traditions with confidence, with warmth, with generosity. That does not give up on its own convictions and beliefs, but doesn't believe in demonizing other people. And so, you know, people often ask me in the

Muslim community why I do the work I do for Hartman, and there are reasons, such as my appreciation for my colleagues, but there are also very deep personal and spiritual reasons.

00:48:13 Clifford Chanin: Let's go more deeply into them, and by talking a little bit about what the dialogue is, because we had a program here in which two of the participants came to talk about, from a Jewish and Muslim perspective, what that dialogue was. But I want to get your voice on that, too, because it does seem that you're not asking anyone to give up core principles.

00:48:37 In fact, you're trying to wade through the politics in the heat of the moment to get to core principles because getting there gets you to the point of deepest difference, but deepest difference is also the basis for deepest communication. So what is that dialogue like in terms of your own experience of it and then bringing other Muslims into it?

00:49:02 Haroon Moghul: The dialogue is often painful. To bring a group of American Muslim leaders to Israel to talk about, you know, how Hartman scholars see Judaism, see Zionism, see Israel... It's often not pretty. It can be really raw, it can be really painful. People have very different political beliefs. But it forces a conversation with this goal in mind. Our goal is not to fix Israel and Palestine, because we're not-- I mean, I'm not Palestinian, I can't presume to speak for-- even though I speak for all Muslims, I can't speak for Palestinians. You know, because somehow there's a distinction there.

00:49:42 But... It's about changing Jewish-Muslim relations in North America. And how we relate to Israel and Palestine is one of the reasons why our communities' relationships are often so poor, or, if I'm more charitable, just haven't reached their potential, and after Charlottesville, where you had, you know, actual Nazis, okay, talk about burning down synagogues, you know, who have come out into the open while also espousing nakedly anti-Muslim politics and ideologies, this is work that has to be done, and so one of the ways that the dialogue is made a little bit easier, I think, is this recognition that we are in the same boat and that there are

folks who wish not only our communities, but the concept of our democracy, harm.

00:50:34

As for the, you know, the dialogue itself, you know, I can speak to maybe the experience on me personally. So on this sort of intellectual level, what we often do is, we ask participants not to have litmus tests.

So, you know, sometimes people in Muslim communities will say "Well, I'm happy to talk to a Jewish voice as long as they're not a Zionist." And then someone from a Jewish community will say, "Well, I'm happy to talk to a Muslim "as long as they don't support a boycott campaign against Israel," what's called BDS.

00:51:00

And so basically, before you even talk to each other, you've now set conditions for talking. A much more challenging moment is the emotional resonance, so, the last time I was in Israel and Palestine, I went to-- all of my life stories deal with trivialities, it's amazing. I went to a barber shop to get my hair cut, because what else does one do in Ramallah?

So I went to the capital of the Palestinian Authority, and I had an afternoon free, so I went to get a haircut. And I started talking to the barber, you know, he speaks Arabic and I pretend.

00:51:30

(laughter)

Haroon Moghul: And, you know, I was communicating with him, and... He's a very Muslim barber, by the way. Like, you know, I told him that, you know, I wanted this haircut. He told me that was a stupid idea, and it was funny because I didn't even have hair. But, nevertheless, he gave me the haircut he believed I needed, right? Not the haircut I wanted, right? He was, you know, he just... He imposed his interpretation of Islam on my head.

Clifford Chanin: It's nice to find conviction in all circumstances.

00:51:54 Haroon Moghul: It is, yeah, like, believe in yourself, you know? And the customer is just sort of incidental to the conversation. And so he told me that, you know, he's a Palestinian, and he said, "What are you here for?" and I, you know, I said, "I'm here to visit Jerusalem," which was not untrue. And he said, you know, "I live here, I've never been to Jerusalem. I'm not allowed to go." Like, "I can't... It's my land, and I can't go 20 miles away to one of the most... it's like being, like, in a cage." Like, I mean, how do you respond to that?

00:52:29 I mean, that's, like, you know, if you're a New Yorker and you're, like, "I can't go to the Empire State Building. I'm not allowed." And, you know, I didn't really know what to make of it, because, I mean, the perversity of me being an American, being allowed to do that when I don't even come from there, and then, you know, a week later, I was teaching a group of Israeli high school students. A course on Islam. And sometimes the work I do, the professional Muslim stuff, the national security stuff, is really depressing.

00:52:59 Because, you know, it's not a pleasant topic to focus on. And there's nothing like engaging high school or college students, because they're young, they're inspired, they really want to learn, they want to change things. And, you know, I was sitting with these Israeli students, and I thought to myself, like, "I want them to succeed." You know, in the sense that you feel when you're an educator, like, "I want these kids to have great lives."

00:53:20 And to me, that's not the dialogue, per se, but it's the moral outcome of the dialogue that I would like to see that person, that barber, have the right to go to Jerusalem whenever he wants, and to live freely in his land. And I would like those high school students to prosper. And, you know, how we get there is an incredibly complicated question, and I hope it's not your next question. But it's the moral underpinning that I think animates the project. For me.

00:53:50

Clifford Chanin: What-- I think you've had three or four cohorts, so, four?

Haroon Moghul: Five.

Clifford Chanin: Five. So you've had 50 or 60...

Haroon Moghul: It's 100 now.

Clifford Chanin: It's 100, okay, I wasn't sure of the numbers. But how are you tracking the impact of this? I don't mean quantitatively, but, you know, what is your feeling about what's come out of this now extended dialogue over, you know, several groups of people going through it?

Haroon Moghul: I'm always bad at metrics, because I'm a writer, so I just, you know...

Clifford Chanin: You make it up.

00:54:21

Haroon Maghul: I make it up, thank you for saying that. Can I say, the other great thing about being a writer is that you can get away with anything as a writer you could never get away with in any other profession. If I was a doctor, for example, and I said I hear voices, you would be alarmed. Right? If I'm a writer and I say, "Sometimes, you know, I just hear it and I write it down," people are, like, "Wow, that's amazing."

(laughter)

Haroon Moghul: "That's amazing." You can dress however you want. The stranger you are, the more brilliant people think you are. I mean, it's amazing, and then as you ascend as a writer, right, like, this is my own life goal.

00:54:52 Like, as you, you know, tick off certain boxes, like, "Now I wrote for 'The Washington Post,'" right? Then, you know, I'll go from dress shoes to sneakers, right? "I wrote for 'The New York Times.'" I'm just going to show up in shorts, right? Like, it doesn't matter anymore because you're a writer. You can do whatever you want.

Clifford Chanin: So it's a reverse effect on your wardrobe.

Haroon Moghul: It is, yeah. It's like that, you know, that evolution, like, motif, but going backwards. So... Am I allowed to talk about evolution? I don't even know.

(laughter)

00:55:16 Haroon Moghul: I'm not sure what my religion says anymore. So... How do we track metrics? You know, I will say a few things. One is, when we started the program, we had 16 Muslim leaders from the U.S., and now we have 100 who have gone through the program. And the number of people who were interested is rising. So, I mean, that's a good metric for me, is that more and more people want to do this program.

00:55:39 Another is that I've seen more and more interest among-- you know, and I don't want to be too, kind of, judgmental about it-- but I'll say mainstream Muslim and Jewish communities that are sort of... kind of occupy the center of their communities, politically, religiously, culturally, they are interested in hearing from each other in a way that I didn't see four or five years ago. I know a lot of that has to do with the Trump effect, right, where there's a sense, as I've said, of being in the same boat.

00:56:03 But I think it's also building relationships over time, and these relationships, again, not relationships where we're saying that you have to change your opinion, it's that you have to be willing to listen to each

other and hear each other and engage each other. And then what comes out of that, that's not necessarily our business. It's our goal to really open the doors to conversation and let it grow organically from there.

Clifford Chanin: I want to read something that comes from the end of the book, because you make reference, at a number of points... It touches on the political situation of Muslim countries, but it has this broader civilizational impact. "Once Muslims shaped the world. Now we have become afraid of ourselves. We either only apologize, or never apologize. We are spineless and gutless, or harshness and darkness."

00:56:52

And this gets back to the point we were making earlier of the only, sort of, acceptable options that you see presented to you are at the extremes. The movement towards creating your own communities is some way of addressing the authenticity problem inherent in what you've written here. But, you know, I'm rounding back to something we started talking about. There's something that seems fundamentally American about this, because the remaking of a religion is, in the American context, a kind of congregationalism that reaches across into every religious tradition. I mean, is that really where you could go so your community would be comfortable for you, but where it fit into the broader community wouldn't be quite as clear?

00:57:37

Haroon Moghul: American Muslims are a funny beast, right? We're really tiny in terms of the global Muslim population, right? So of the one-and-a-half billion people I represent-- that's a joke-- three or four million are American. So, you know, we're a drop in a vast sea. And so our decisions and practices are almost incidental to the larger Muslim world. But then, we're also, I mean, we're a very well-to-do community, generally speaking, in a very well-to-do country. And so we have outside influence, and that's, you know, that's a privilege, but it's also a responsibility.

00:58:22

Arguably, the most famous American of the 20th century was also the most famous Muslim of the 20th century-- Mohammed Ali. So here is a Muslim who shaped America, and in many cases became an icon and a

symbol for the Muslim world. That a person of color could declare himself beautiful, could speak loudly and proudly about his identity, and to me, that reflects the potential of American Islam.

00:58:53 I don't presume that our particular conditions pertain to any other society, because we have our own specific realities and circumstances, but I do think that we have a platform and we have privilege, and we have a lot of opportunities. But I will also say that I think that this process of remaking religion is actually very Islamic, as well. We don't have a fixed hierarchy, we don't have a centralized church, Islam is meant to be this constant return to the sources in order to renegotiate new circumstances. It's... The stultifying effect, I think, is foreign to the religion and actually a pretty recent development. And so, what I want to do, and it, perhaps, sounds a little bit surprising is, I want to go back to the past to go to the future.

00:59:34 Clifford Chanin: Let's see if we have a couple of questions from the floor. I'll ask you just to stand if you have something to ask. If you don't, I'll ask some more. Please, just stand.

Man: So I have a very difficult question for you.

Haroon Moghul: Awesome.

00:59:56 Man: So I grew up eight miles away from New York City. (inaudible) This is the first time I've ever been here at the new World Trade Center. And so I lived 16 years with the World Trade Center and 16 years without it.

01:00:23 As soon as I got here, I started crying, and what sort of fascinates me about that response is that I've been to the Pentagon memorial and that seemed really peaceful to me and calming. (inaudible) And I certainly don't want to project my trauma onto you.

- 01:00:50 But I would just ask, what do you feel this space means for you as a human being, and then also, since you're a professional Muslim, what does that mean... (inaudible)
- 01:01:06 Haroon Moghul: So I met Cliff shortly before the museum opened, and I was fortunate to be able to see the museum and the memorial before it opened. And, you know, I find the memorial to be a remarkably moving place. You know, I don't envy the person who has to capture an enormity in a physical form. I don't know, you know, how one does that, but some spaces manage to convey the gravity of what has happened in a place, and I do think the memorial does that.
- 01:01:39 The museum was very hard for me on the tour. I, you know, I've asked Cliff this before, I said, you know, "How do you work here?" Because it's not, you know, it's not for me an abstract experience, either. And of course, you know, what I went through on that day does not compare to what many people went through on that day. But it was really raw for me to go through it, because it was like the day was being recreated.
- 01:02:03 And it was surprising, because, obviously, in many ways, like you said, professional Muslim, at some level, many of us, if not all of us-- you know, as Americans, as New Yorkers-- that day continues to impact us on a daily basis. But to actually revisit that day, step by step, and to see what had happened before my eyes was really hard.
- 01:02:28 And... I guess I would say... You know, we don't know quite why we inherit the world we do, but we can frame our response to the things that happen to us. And so when I come down to this space, and you know, I often do, sometimes just because I have colleagues from out of town and they would like to visit the space, I always make it a point to look up at the new World Trade Center.
- 01:02:54 Because it does, you know, alongside some very raw feelings, remind me of the fact that the city was not cowed. Right? That we rebounded. And that doesn't erase the enormity of what happened, and it shouldn't, but

it also reminds us that we have a certain strength and resilience that maybe people didn't realize they had. And those two things coexist with me.

01:03:19 When, you know, as was mentioned earlier, there was some pushback to my event and my speaking here, after that article was published, I got a very long email from a Palestinian-American, not very different in age from yourself, who said that he came here as soon as he could, with friends and volunteers, to try to help people.

01:03:41 And it was such an interesting email, because it came from a really raw place. Like, he felt personally attacked that day as a New Yorker, you know—grew up in Brooklyn, identified very strongly with Brooklyn-- and then, on top of that, he didn't understand what to make of the fact that people couldn't accept a Muslim speaking in that space. And so it's a very loaded feeling, and it's a complicated feeling.

Clifford Chanin: Thank you-- please.

01:04:10 Woman: I have a comment and a question, and tell me if this sounds a little bit familiar. I'm one of the people that sent you an email recently. I'm a 9/11 survivor, and one of the things that I grapple with is, how do we combat hate in the 9/11 community and in the world as far as how do we relate to Muslims.

You know, one of my passions is to educate people and to make people understand that 9/11 was not done by any nationality or religion-- it was done by extremists. And when I saw some of the demonstrations, and some of the opposition to you coming today, quite honestly, it hurts my soul, because it's sort of the polar opposite of what a lot of people are about.

01:04:58

So I guess my question to you, which is sort of a complicated question, is, how do people like me and other people who want to get the message out sort of teach the world and combat those types of feelings?

Haroon Moghul: It's nice to put a face to the Facebook message.

(laughter)

Haroon Moghul: So it's very nice to meet you.

Woman:: Bet you figured that out.

Haroon Moghul: I did, yeah, it's very nice to meet you. I hope I responded to your email in time.

Woman: You did.

01:05:24

Haroon Moghul: Okay, that would have been really awkward...

(laughter)

Haroon Moghul: ...if you totally called me out at the event. You know, I think, you know, I said earlier, you know, the work I do in Muslim-Jewish relations grows out of a very similar sentiment. I don't think any of us can address all of the problems, and probably it would be a bad idea if we tried to, because we would kind of spread ourselves so thin that we would basically accomplish nothing. But there are ways to throw ourselves into, you know, the issues that matter, and there are many issues that matter.

01:05:59 What I would say-- and I see this all the time, you know, in the work I do-- is that, you know, pain is not rational. And it's not supposed to be, right? It's a response to wounds. And so sometimes, people try to argue their way out of intolerance or suspicion or fear, and I don't think that works. And, you know, I mean, this is not obviously related, but it, you know, we live in a very partisan environment right now, and there's this sort of, you know, tendency to, you know, paint the other side as the worst human being on the planet.

01:06:37 And I even saw this statistic that now, like, increasing number of Democrats and Republicans won't allow their kids to marry someone from the other-- or don't want their kids to marry someone from the other party. Which is interesting, because my parents were, like, "You have to marry a doctor," so we were... It's even narrower, right?

01:06:53 But it's interesting, because, you know, when I was thinking about this, have you ever seen the show "Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt"? Yeah? You've seen this show? It's a great show, it's really funny. The only population, or group of people, that gets mocked and never praised are Midwestern white Christians. Everyone else is portrayed with complexity, like goofiness, silliness... Ridiculousness... Passion.

01:07:29 But, if you're, like, a Midwestern white Christian, you're just a joke. And I, you know, when I noticed that, I thought to myself, "Now, how would it feel for me to watch that and think, 'Well, everyone else can be cool, but I'm just a terrible human being'?" So I think, you know, when I say pain isn't rational or that extremism is a moral problem, I don't mean to discount the economic and political and other factors that go into it, but some of it has to do with how we even frame ourselves. And so, you know, in the run up to the election, I think I was one of the most vociferously anti-Trump people you could find.

01:08:05 (audience member sneezes)

Haroon Moghul: That's exactly how I feel.

(laughter)

Haroon Moghul: Captured it better than any words could. And then, you know, after he got elected, it occurred to me that maybe the approach is to embody the opposite, and actually, there was a remark by, you know, one of the guests here at the museum, Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer, who heads the Shalom Hartman Institute, who pointed out in a Facebook post that, you know, at a time of increasing stridency, sometimes we look for our side to be as strident as the other side.

01:08:41

But maybe the model of leadership is to model a different kind of leadership, which is to say, "While you want to be loud and angry and divisive, I will refuse that kind of logic." And I don't-- you know, everyone has a different space to bring that to bear, but I think that's the task.

Clifford Chanin: One more. Brenda, I think you had...

01:09:04

Woman: So, hi.

Haroon Moghul: Hi.

Woman: I'm Brenda Bergman and I'm a retired fire officer. But my question has to deal with, why do you think it is that when an Irish Catholic comes to the United States, and they've been fighting with Irish Protestants over there for loads of years, and then an Irish Protestant comes to the United States, they're Irish, and they're not, you know...

01:09:32

The identity politics is, seems-- about religion, for them, seems to be muted, unlike in their own country that they came from. Do you think-- why, I mean, why are those people, those Protestants and Catholics, not able to see that the same thing happens when Muslims come to the United States from many different countries, and many different

traditions, and they're attempting to find an American identity? So how is it that they, that, you know, that other non-Muslims can't see that about your group of people? Do you have an idea about why that has occurred?

01:10:19

Haroon Moghul: That's a good question. That's a hard question, so I'll try to answer it since...And I like how we saved the hardest question for last.

Brenda Bergman: Sorry.

Haroon Moghul: No, no, not at all, it's a great question. I like good questions. I think part of it has to do with the fact that Muslim communities have themselves not done a lot of work to tell their own stories and say who they are.

01:10:45

Part of it has to do with a media culture that has just become lowest common denominator. You know, nobody wants to read a story about-- you know, I mean, it's not very sexy to read a story about how a rabbi and imam became friends. That's not, like, that's not going to get you a lot of clicks. It's not.

01:11:02

I remember-- does anyone remember Pastor Terry Jones? He was a Christian preacher, kind of a marginal guy. I believe he's Yosemite Sam's identical twin. He planned to burn the Koran. Like, burn a Koran. Which was amazing, because that's actually how Muslims dispose of the Koran. When a Koran is found defective or old, they burn it as a mark of respect. But he didn't know that, but, generally speaking, you know. That's kind of how bigotry works. So, you know, in an attempt to insult Muslims, he did the most respectful thing possible.

(laughter)

01:11:35

Haroon Moghul: Which was, like, "Thanks, man." Right? Like, "I have a few Korans that are a little bit old. Maybe you could burn them, too."

And, you know, I was in Gainesville, Florida, when that was going to take place and I remember being there with other journalists, and all of us were, like, "Why are we here?" Like, this is a-- not only is he, like, a marginal figure, but the story is just going to cause, like, unnecessary trauma around the world, and, like, we're just giving this guy air time.

01:12:01 But the reason was because, you know, journalists are not paid that well. They're not. And the media market is pretty savagely competitive. And if I don't cover that story, someone else will. And if they get the ratings, I get fired. So we have created a media culture where, you know, we value lowest common denominator.

01:12:26 And it's, you know, I think the term is called "rational irrationality." It's like where if, you know... When individual people act rationally, it can still have a collectively irrational outcome, so if the market starts tanking, me taking my money out is rational, but everyone else does it, and the market goes, (whooshes) like, completely, like, falls through the floor, right? So that individual behavior is, like, individually rational, collectively irrational. And this is what's happened to our media and political infrastructure.

01:12:52 That we now-- you know, there's a great "Washington Post" piece today called "Americans Are Addicted to Outrage." And, you know, I think we have a problem in our culture now, and there's also a great Bret Stephens column in the "Times" recently where he talked about, you know, the culture of disagreement and the role played by institutions in moderating that.

And this is a long, roundabout way of saying that some of the problem, I think, has to do with Muslim communities that haven't stepped up. Some of the problem has to do with a media culture that makes people angry, right? That basically fans the flames.

01:13:21 Rather than educate, inform, and sustain dialogue, or just create a more capable citizenry, we just go with whatever, you know, scares people or

gets them riled up. And, you know, part of the fact is lack of exposure. It's very easy to demonize someone that you don't understand.

And I'll give you a simple example, and I can close with this. We talked about China. China is obviously a very important country. It's recently passed our country as the largest economy in the world. I consider myself a reasonably well-read person. If you gave me a book about China, I would have no way to tell you if it's true or false. Right?

01:13:59 I don't-- like, I don't know. Like, I mean, I could give you basic outlines. You'd say, like, "China's in Africa." I'd be, like, "Okay, that's probably not true," right? But, if, you know, you gave me a book, like, literally about something that's happening in China right now, how would I make sense of it? That's the job of a media outlet, right? Like, the job of our Fourth Estate, the press, is to inform and educate the citizenry and create a more responsible democracy. And if you're not doing that, then people who don't know any better are basically, they're not being served democratically.

01:14:27 Clifford Chanin: Let me just take one more. I think you had a question there. Is that you? Yeah? Yeah, just one more.

Haroon Moghul: You have to make it an awesome question.

Man: Oh, it is an awesome question for everybody here. Everybody, it's an excellent, excellent question. You said something about, "Somebody has to do something." Now, I'm a new writer, so, but anyway, I'm Hindu, but I was confused with Muslim, Christian, Jew, a lot of different things—I love all groups.

01:49:49 Now, we've talked about different things that have happened around the world, and I've seen the solution that, since you have a larger fan base, or whatever, than me, I'm hoping that you could let me know if you wanted to act on it. It's just very simple. We talk about hate and crimes and

murder and all these different things, and in my eyes, they come from one place, they come from the hate and murder that's in people's hearts from eating meat and destroying animals, which are God's children.

01:15:12

And something can unite all religions and all people is working together to stop eating meat, because that caused natural disasters, murders, diseases, and everything in our world, and I'm trying to talk about this everywhere that I go, because there's no excuse for it, and it causes every problem that people complain about, so I'd like to know if you're willing to get on board with what I'm talking about.

Haroon Moghul: That's intense.

Man: That's the truth.

Haroon Moghul: I have an autoimmune disease, so I basically can't eat most food, anyway, so I'm kind of with you on that.

01:15:42

Clifford Chanin: Maybe one more, quick.

Woman: So I wondered, when you were talking about the worst policy ever, the Iraq War, which I think is a horrible policy-- I'm sure Native Americans don't think that is the worst policy. But you said if Iraq could get back to where it was, what about the Sunni-Shia conflict, and how does that contribute to the problems we see in the Muslim community? And how tall are you?

(laughter)

01:16:10

Haroon Moghul: I liked the meat question. That was, like, that was, you know, that was easier.

Woman: And...

Haroon Moghul: That's, like, four questions now.

Woman: ... so, that is comparable, I think.

Haroon Moghul: It is, you know, the heartland, yeah, I get that's true. Look, you know, what I said about Iraq, I think, you know, ultimately we're supposed to be a democracy, right? Which means the military doesn't decide policy, it implements policy, right?

Woman: I agree with you...

01:16:34 Haroon Moghul: So what I-- no, but, I guess what I'm saying is, you know, that made a complicated situation a lot worse. You know, I don't think there's a simple solution to sectarianism. I don't think there's an easy solution. I do think, you know, something that gives me hope-- and perhaps, it's a good place to end on-- you know, a lot of these identities that are, literally, today, can cause people to die, didn't have the same salience 30 or 40 years ago. Many American Muslims, you know, before the Iraq War kind of spiraled into a very sectarian conflict, had no idea if they were even Sunni or Shia. You know?

01:17:15 And so, you know, I think sometimes when you're in the middle of something really depressing, you think to yourself, like, "It's this bad, it's only going to get worse." I also think it's worth pointing out that, you know, there were times when things were better, and societies have gone through crises, you know, on many occasions. We have gone through far greater crises than the present moment as a country and come out far stronger for it.

01:17:37 And so, you know, rather than focus on the immediate-- and sometimes, I think that's what happens, when we're constantly consumed by a certain

news media environment-- we can focus on, you know, the fact that people have gone through worse. And I think in Muslim communities, too, one thing that gives me hope is that the overwhelming majority of people are disgusted by what they see. They just need to find a way to transform that into an actual outcome. So, "I feel this way, show me how to change it." Right now, we're in between those two things, but I think we're moving in the right direction.

01:18:06

Clifford Chanin Thank you, Haroon. You know, we have run many programs here on a very wide range of subjects, and it's really an evening that, in my mind, reinforces the approach that we have to take here to our programming. I do want to say that copies of "How To Be A Muslim: An American Story" are available outside, and Haroon will sign them. And I want to say to you, Haroon, that, you know, with the publication of this book, next time I see you, I want you to be in sneakers and a T-shirt.

(laughter)

01:18:34

Clifford Chanin: Because you're moving up the writing hierarchy here, so please dress accordingly. In any case, join me, please, in thanking Haroon Moghul.

Haroon Moghul: Thank you.

(applause)