

# HUFFPOST RELIGION

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## **The Power of Muslim-Jewish Musical Bridges**



*By Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf*

Last Thursday, our organization, The Cordoba Initiative, had the unique opportunity to co-sponsor with The Brotherhood Synagogue a special interfaith event which was led by the world famous Farid Ayaz and the Abu Muhammad Qawwals and the popular Jewish folk singer Basya Schechter. In contrast to the global media's nearly exclusive coverage of conflict between Muslims and Jews, it was so refreshing to sit in The Brotherhood's beautiful chapel alongside Rabbi Daniel Adler and Cantor Michael Weis and be part of this transformative event where Muslims and Jews came together to celebrate their musical heritages.

As a universal language, music has a unique ability to gather and unite people. Since tunes and lyrics can directly tap into our hearts, music is often the most powerful vehicle for spiritual communication. In fact, both Islam and Judaism assign music a central role in spiritual devotion. Islamic Sufism and Jewish Hassidism both emphasize the importance of music and music is central to Islamic and Jewish lifecycle events. Aside from the distinctive music of the adhan (the Muslim call to prayer) and the Torah reading, both Islamic and Jewish births, weddings, and funerals are known for their special liturgical music.

Over two hundred Jews, Sunni and Shia Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Christians came together at our event "Qawwali and the Spiritual Alchemy of Music" to celebrate the role of music in spiritual devotion and interfaith dialogue. Our overall message was of Divine love and love of our common humanity. Displaying their highly rhythmic and energetic music and singing in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Punjabi (a language spoken by Sikhs) and other local Indian dialects, the

Qawwals beautifully displayed the rich cultural intermingling that defines Islamic history in the Indian subcontinent. Meanwhile, Basya Schechter's elegant and melodic songs in Hebrew, Aramaic (a Semitic language used during the rabbinical period and spoken by Jesus), English, Yiddish, and Ladino (a Jewish dialect of Spanish) highlighted the different Jewish diasporic musical cultures that developed and continue to flourish.

The highlight of the evening occurred when the Qawwals and Basya joined together to sing a version of the song "Allah-Hu." Uniting to praise God in both Arabic and Hebrew, the Qawwals and Basya alternated between chanting Allah, Adonai and Eloheim. These talented musicians beautifully collaborated to create a truly interfaith work of music. As the audience joined in to sing and chant God's name, I experienced a powerful and deeply needed spiritual moment. In spite of the violence and difficulties marking many present Muslim-Jewish relations, the voices of Farid and Abu Mohammed Qawwals combined with Basya, along with the audience reminded me of the beautiful and powerful potential in continued interfaith activity. Looking around the room, I felt that many others certainly shared similar feelings and were invigorated by the music to double our efforts to pursue Muslim-Jewish dialogue and understanding. In fact, at the end of the evening a Muslim member of my community approached me and shared that this experience had positively changed her perception of Jews.

In addition to being integral to many spiritual and religious practices throughout human history, music has served successfully as a rallying cry for social movements and cultural blossoming. As Pete Seeger's song "We Shall Overcome" demonstrated throughout the 1960s civil rights movement, our words and music are vehicles for change. This is even truer at present, since we live in a highly interconnected era in American history, in which social media has made it so very easy to widely disseminate our words and music. And, so as I heard the Qawwals and Basya sing together, I could not stop myself from dreaming of an interfaith movement where thousands of American Muslims and Jews joining together to make our country and possibly the world a better place. Our hope is that this dream will become a reality.