



Come and Pray in our Mosque

By David J. Goa

Tragedy sometimes brings out the best in us. In mid-February 1980 the Edmonton Fire Department (EFD) was reeling from a sequence of fires that burned Beth Shalom Synagogue, Saint Joseph's Roman Catholic Cathedral and the Church of the Nazarene on the Southside of Edmonton. Other fires followed. Officials with the EFD noted similarities in the way the fires were started by a man whom I came to call the "ecumenical arsonist". After the third fire religious communities began to organize watch committees and negotiate for twenty-four hour security.

I remember hearing the early morning news broadcast of the first fires at Beth Shalom and Saint Joseph's Cathedral. My thought immediately turned to Rabbi Hyman, whom I had come to know through my work at the museum and who graciously helped me in preparing the first museum exhibition in Canada on living religious traditions. I had attended services at Beth Shalom along with Eve Pascoe, who worked for the Jewish Historical and Archive Committee which partnered with me at the Provincial Museum of Alberta to develop a Judaica collection which included a large body of artifacts, photographs, ephemera and field notes documenting the life of a number of the Jewish communities in Alberta. I normally rode my bike from my home in Old Strathcona, across the High Level Bridge and through back lanes and side streets, to the Museum. Beth Shalom was on my way and that morning I rode to the Rabbi's home next to the shul. The fire trucks were still on the scene when I knocked at the door. In a few moments Rabbi Hyman came and opened the door. He was deeply distressed by the fire and it showed in the whole of his demeanour. The burning of synagogues calls to mind a long history of horrors for Jewish communities. The Rabbi put his arms around me and wept and wept, trying to control his tears without avail. After a time his tears and sobs abated, and he stood back and spoke. Here is my memory of that moment. "But, David, something extraordinary has happened. A couple of hours ago, when the firemen were just getting the blaze under control, there was a knock at the door and I answered it expecting the fire chief or an investigator. There, standing right where you are, were Imam Chebli and Imam Saleem Ganam. I had not seen them since you introduced me to them in the Spiritual Life – Sacred Ritual Gallery at the Museum a few years ago. The Imam put his arms around me, David, and said, 'We have come to offer the condolences of Dar al-Islam [the House of Islam], for a house of God has been destroyed. Come and bring your people and meet in the basement of our mosque.'"



Later that week I visited Imam Chebli at Al-Rashid Mosque. Just as I had come to know and cherish my friendship with Rabbi Hyman through my museum-based work, I had come to know and cherish my friendship with Imam Chebli. I wanted to tell him how much it meant to so many of us that he had gone to the Rabbi's home and spoken those words, and how touched I was by it, and that our life together in Edmonton was enriched that morning in the face of a trauma. Al-Rashid Mosque stood on 111th Avenue by the Royal Alexander Hospital but the community was planning what we have come to know as the Canadian Islamic Centre in north Edmonton. On greeting the Imam I was immediately ushered downstairs to see the model the architects had developed for the new mosque and Islamic centre. He was so excited by the prospects of the new building that it took some time before I could get a word in edgewise and express my appreciation for his visit to the Rabbi's home a few days before. He then told me how he and Imam Ganam had spoken to the congregation in the Mosque at the Friday noon prayer about their visit to the Rabbi's home and about their expressions of condolences on behalf of Dar al-Islam. He described in detail the responses of the congregation, which included some strong protest. But in the face of that protest young Palestinian men had come forward to stand with the Imam. They said to the gathered community that they not only understood the Imam's action but lauded it, because they had lived with the trauma of the terror of history in Palestine/Israel. This was the only kind of action that made sense to them. "In Canada, this is what we must do! We Palestinians know the pain of communal hostility."

In the early morning of that winter day in February two Imams stood in the entryway of the Rabbi's home. They had responded to a neighbour out of the teaching, sensibility, and courage born of the Glorious Qur'an and the struggles for faithfulness. We are all richer for it.