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An imam at Auschwitz: Local Muslim cleric joins Jewish leaders on Holocaust journey

by [dan pine](#), staff writer

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Suhaib Webb can't stop thinking about what he saw at Auschwitz-Birkenau last month: piles of discarded shoes, ghoulish fluffs of human hair, train tracks that once led to death and incineration for a million Jews.

The memories make him cry out to Allah.

Last month Webb, who is an imam in Santa Clara, and seven other Muslim clerics joined Jewish leaders on a journey to the death camps at Dachau and Auschwitz-Birkenau. The experience seared him.

"I have trouble even visiting it in my mind," he said. "When I was there I was trying to see the wisdom of God in all that happened. My conclusion was what was written: 'Never again.' I will never be able to understand how someone does that to someone else."

The Aug. 10 to 12 trip was the brainchild of Rabbi Jack Bemporad, director of the Center for Interreligious Understanding, and Marshall Breger, an Orthodox Jew and former Reagan administration official who teaches law at Catholic University and organizes interfaith dialogue programs.



Suhaib Webb (right) guides professor Marshall Breger through Dachau. photo/suhail a. kahn Webb saw the trip as an opportunity for self-education and more. "To visit a place like that is definitely very important to bridge some of the growing divide among religious communities," he said.

That matters to him. Muslim Americans have come under attack recently, most notably over the so-called "ground zero mosque," as well as violent incidents such as the hate-fueled stabbing of a Muslim taxi driver in New York two weeks ago.

But Webb is also troubled by anti-Jewish attitudes he has seen in some quarters of the Muslim community, and beyond.

"There is a rhetoric that permeates not just the Muslim community, of the evil Jew trying to take over the world," Webb said. "It's very hurtful. I was talking

to my Jewish brothers and sisters [on the trip], realizing how hurtful that kind of discourse can be.”

On his website (<http://www.suhaibwebb.com>), the 38-year-old Webb described his trip and its significance. While many Muslim commenters thanked Webb for going, others cited Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians as a reason for Muslims not to make such a trip. Some cited Koranic verses, interpreting them as forbidding Muslims to befriend Jews.

Webb was having none of it.

“I’m a big boy,” he said. “I have been trying to explain to people that the relationship is much more nuanced between our two communities. I came away [from the trip] thinking how similar we are.”

Born in Oklahoma and raised in a Christian home, Webb discovered Islam during his college days and converted in 1992 (he says his parents were “pretty terrified”). He studied with local sheiks, memorizing the Koran. He taught in a Muslim school in Oklahoma City for a while before moving to Cairo in 2004 to study at Al-Azhar University. He has made the pilgrimage to Mecca twice.

Living in the Bay Area since 2002, he serves as imam for the Muslim American Society in Santa Clara. With improved interfaith relations high on his agenda, he hopes to welcome Bemporad as a guest speaker at the Muslim American Society later this year.

Webb admits strong disagreements exist between Jews and Muslims, especially regarding Middle East politics. But his is clearly a moderate voice. He supports a two-state solution and strongly opposes terrorism.

“Just as I would condemn innocent Palestinians being harmed, I would condemn the tactics of Hamas unquestionably,” Webb said. “I do not believe in harming anyone in the name of religion or politics. The children in Israel are just as valuable to us as children in Palestine.”

After visiting Auschwitz, Webb also acknowledges the impetus for Jews to seek a safe homeland.

“I’m not a fan of Zionism,” he said, “but I can understand the importance of wanting to get out of Europe. If I had the chance to get out and live in my own state, I’d hightail it out of there.”