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Response to Rabbi Michael Marmor
Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, Monday March 22, 2021 @930am
“Lens or Blindfold? Religious Faith and The Challenges of Our Time

Good morning everyone. First, I would like to express my thanks to the Women of Baltimore Hebrew Congregation who are hosting the Interfaith Institute and Rabbi Andrew Busch for inviting me to respond to today’s lecture. I feel honored to join this virtual dialogue with such a distinct audience, and around such an important topic.

I am grateful to Rabbi Dr. Marmor for considering the possibility that those of us who are rooted in a religious tradition and make truth claims can do so while still engaging different perspectives. In fact, it is out of my commitment and conviction in my own Muslim tradition that I have been passionate about interreligious dialogue. It is undeniable, though, as Rabbi Dr. Marmor has noted, that at times those who proclaim a certain Truth have done so by becoming arrogant, harsh, demeaning and even violent towards others who do not share their views. I believe that we are collectively called to cultivate a social climate that encourages rich intellectual and spiritual exchanges that are marked by an attitude of compassion, humility and hospitality. If you are confident and firm in your Truth, you will not feel threatened by views that differ from your own.

So, how do I, as an observant Turkish-Kurdish Muslim woman, who grew up in Germany – a country that prides itself with a healthy dose of criticism and suspicion towards all public religious expressions and religious truth claims - how do I engage with the mainstream community that does not subscribe to my Truth? Growing up, I felt I embody the conversation between the sacred and the secular, the East and the West, and had to constantly question whether my religious lifestyle is grounded in knowledge and certainty or blind imitation? I would like to offer a few reflections from the Qur’an that have guided me in how to engage with difference. A very prominent passage in the Islamic Scripture states:

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp, the lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire. Light upon light. God guides to His light whom He wills. And God presents examples for the people, and God is Knowing of all things. (Qur'an 24:35)

Based on this verse, I understand that God's light is present everywhere. Neither of the East nor the West. God's light is not confined to a certain territory or group. God's light is always accessible as long our eyes, minds and hearts are open.

The Qur'an stresses the fundamental notion that all beautiful qualities that we encounter in the creation and within human beings through their character, personality and good actions belong to God and that He is the ultimate source of beauty, perfection and goodness. Every human being – no exceptions - is created by God and equipped with the divine spirit (the *ruh*). Every individual is sacred on account of being a manifestation of God's most beautiful names and attributes. The Qur'an employs this concept several times and no matter what the discussion is, almost every verse refers the conversation back to God by mentioning a pair of the divine attributes. God is the Most Compassionate, Generous, Loving, Kind, Forgiving, Beautiful, Gentle, Artistic, Knowledgeable, Wise...the list is endless because God is Eternal.

The theology of the divine names is a major theme in the Qur'anic world. With respect to that, every person is a reflection of God's qualities and a unique combination of these divine characteristics. Even a person who does not embrace faith in God, continues to mirror and display God's names. A crime against such an individual would ultimately mean a denial and rejection of God's beautiful art and beauty.

These manifestations of the names of God – His power, goodness, kindness, generosity, wisdom, justice, mercy and many other divine qualities – are displayed throughout the entire cosmos or the so-called "Book of the Universe" (*kitāb al-kā'ināt*) in the form of signs (*āyāt*) pointing to God. God reveals and displays His most beautiful attributes in the creation. The natural world is therefore full of God's signs (*āyāt Allāh*) which can be read and identified by divine guidance. These attributes of God are accessible and visible anywhere and at any moment. They are not limited to a certain spatial reality and it is for this reason that the Qur'an considers the entire universe a sacred place. Following passage states,

"The East and the West belong to God: wherever you turn, there is His Face. God is all pervading and all knowing." Q 2:115,

If the universe then is a cosmic symphony of the divine names and human beings carry those divine sparks also in their innate nature, an organic link and familiarity with the cosmos can be established. If these common identity factors are read and identified by

people, they will not feel alienated, estranged or threatened in the universe because God's sacred presence is partially manifest everywhere. A believer is therefore able to transcend borders, ethnic, racial and tribal divisions and engage with every human being on the basis of the divine names. Throughout my own life, I was able to engage with people, communities and countries on the basis of the divine names. Because every human being and every community has the potential to mirror goodness, beauty and wisdom. Every encounter can be an opportunity for growth and deepening one's relationship with God. The believer gains proximity to God through His creation.

I would like to invite you to reflect on following passages from the Qur'an that remind us all that difference and diversity is willed and desired by God and thus should be embraced by us as well.

And if your Lord had willed, He could have made [all] humankind one community; but they will not cease to differ. (Q 11:118)

O humankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you into diverse nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you (Q 49:13)

Again, looking at these verses one can see that God in fact wills humankind to be diverse including differences in beliefs. I personally find this extremely important. Yet, the Qur'an invites humanity to engage with these differences constructively and respectfully and defer the final judgment to God as noted in the following verse:

Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best. Indeed, your Lord is most knowing of who has strayed from His way, and He is most knowing of who is guided. (Qur'an 16:124)

I would like to close with another verse from the Qur'an that has inspired me throughout my journey and has enabled to me to see the sacred value in difference:

Another of His signs is the creation of the heavens and earth, and the diversity of your languages and colors. There truly are signs in this for those who know. Qur'an 30:22