

Reading

Excerpt from the May 25, 2011 Huffington Post blog titled “Thanks to the Imam, My Little Son Got Serious About Synagogue” by Rabbi Marc Gopin.

It was three days before Rosh Hashanah, and I was predictably anxious about my identity, my life, about my family’s Jewish future. As a good and fractious Jew, I was somewhat ambivalent about which synagogue I would go to: The one I sometimes go to? The one I would never step foot in? The one that I really should create on my own, maybe?

This Rosh Hashanah was different for two reasons. My 87-year old mother, who lives alone 400 miles away in Boston, had pneumonia. So we were on our way to Boston, but I had to honor a commitment to my dear friend Yahya Hendi, who is an imam. **He wanted the whole family, the whole world, it seems**, but especially Jews and Christians, for an iftar, a very sacred celebration as a part of Ramadan. He wanted us all to share in every aspect of the evening, and so made his backyard into a center of prayer and his house into a feast.

My son Isaac is so attached to baseball that he brings his glove and ball *everywhere*, just in case: you never know when you might meet another seven-year-old in search of round objects to bat, pound, throw and kick. Sure enough, Imam Hendi’s young son was outside pounding a soccer ball, furiously, back and forth, by himself! **Ah, a delicious sight for my son**, all the right signals of a fellow juvenile madman in motion, a mark of the truly committed, those who play even by themselves!

So Isaac lunged toward the boy, but what is this? A soccer ball?! Where is the baseball? And so I witnessed a moment of cultural crisis, that great Atlantic Ocean divide between **the obsession with soccer and the obsession with baseball**. Not to worry, I turned away for just a few minutes, and they were tossing the baseball. Peace on earth, goodwill toward mankind, Arab/Jewish conflict resolved, game, set, match.

Then something strange happened to my son. The crowds parted on the grass, the Muslims came to the center and lined up precisely, and Imam

Hendi called his boy to the front. The imam then gave an impassioned speech on the intense love he felt for everyone there, for all Jews and all Christians, and on how indeed there was no proper way to be a Muslim other than through love.

My boy was watching all these men and women gather. Then Yahya's boy led the call to prayer, and my son's face was aglow with his beautiful eyes full of wonder. **I stared at Isaac staring at Yahya's boy in reverence, and I, on the side, in the cool of the night, underneath brilliant stars, prayed that maybe we should just stay in that moment.**

You see, Imam Hendi felt especially motivated to gather everyone because we were days away from the spectacle of an American Quran burning. He was on television, and I was being called for a television spot that night. So here we were, Yahya and a hundred guests, prayers and blessings, my girls and his girls, my boy and his boy, **and also a world gone mad.**

I noticed a change in Isaac after that night. He came to Synagogue with me, with the glove, as usual, but I caught him watching and listening intently to ceremony, mouthing many of the words he did not know yet. I saw him begin to explore his identity as a spiritual being.

I watched a second birth, **the birth of a human being who seeks out what is beyond**, at first through the worship practices of the fathers and the mothers, through the ceremonies of the ancients, through engaging what has come before.

For that second birth of my son, I have Imam Yahya Hendi to thank, a Palestinian who just buried his father back home in bad circumstances, who is fatherless now, just like me, trying to make the world safe for his beloved children.