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Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2010

Author finds common ground between Islam and Judaism

by Brooke Kenny | Staff Writer



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Tom Block now can add "author" to his other titles.

The Silver Spring resident already is a well-known artist and activist. Matters of social justice fuel Block's paintings, as well his first book, "Shalom/Salaam: A Story of a Mystical Fraternity."

At a time when violence, hatred and malcontent

dominated news reports about the Middle East, Block has chosen to write a book that indicates an ancient connection between Islam and Judaism. Block writes about the connection between each faith's mysticism. Mysticism, as Block uses the term, is the search for a personal relationship with God or a divine spirit. He says the need to develop such an inner connection with the divine is as basic as the need to eat.

Block contends there was a time when Jewish spiritual leaders incorporated some Muslim Sufi ideas, worship practices and meditation methods into Jewish mysticism. This happened, he says, because at the time, these leaders wanted to bring Jews back to a more spiritually centered worship routine. Specifically, Islamic mysticism, known as Sufism, influenced medieval Jewish mysticism.

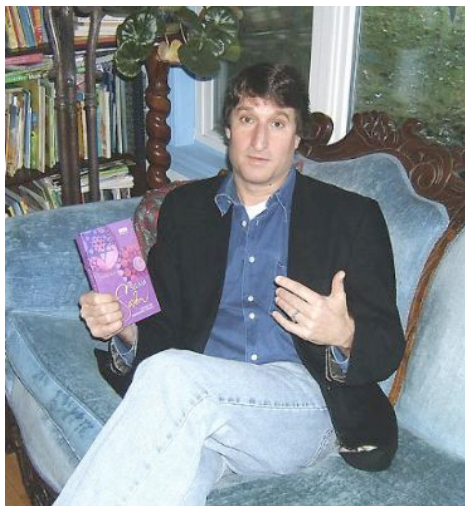


Photo from Tom Block
Tom Block holds the Turkish edition of his book "Shalom/Salaam: A Story of a Mystical Fraternity."

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Block admits it's a far-reaching thesis, but evidence of a connection is nonetheless there and it's important to point out commonalities between two faiths that have a troubled relationship.

"I came at it from an activist's view," he says.

An academic, he says, would be unlikely to broach this topic.

"Academics want to be very air tight and very certain," he says.

Block says he hopes the ideas in his book, which is intended for a popular audience, can build bridges and perhaps even open pathways to peace.

When he's not writing, Block is a painter and visual artist. He is an activist in that arena, too. In 2002, he began the Human Rights Painting Project and, as part of that endeavor, he has painted more than 100 portraits of some 45 human rights activists. He donates half of what he makes on each portrait to Amnesty International.

Block, who is Jewish, spent more than 10 years researching this book. He began at the Library of Congress and, as often happens in research, one discovery on the topic led to another. He eventually found a professor at The Sorbonne in Paris who had written a fair amount about the connection between Sufism and Jewish mysticism.

The book has afforded Block the opportunity to be a "citizen diplomat" in discussing relations between Jews and Muslims. He landed interviews with right-wing Muslim newspapers as a result of its being published in Turkey. Question as to whether Kabbalists could kill him for divulging the secrets of their religious practices, he is more than happy to explain why not.

Although he is not Israeli, he has been given the opportunity to clear up misconceptions about Israel in these interviews, and has served as a de facto spokesman, or as he likes to call it, a "citizen diplomat."

"I'm comfortable in that role," he says.

In discussing his book, Block frequently is asked how Islam could have influenced Judaism, because Judaism has been around longer. That's when he explains that Jewish mystic leaders incorporated some Islamic Sufi practices to re-engage their constituents rather than to engage them for the first time.

And the connection goes both ways.

"There is a lot of Jewish influence on Sufism," he says.

Above all, Block wants his readers to garner "a deep appreciation for how intertwined Islam and Judaism are at the core."

"Shalom/Salaam: A Story of a Mystical Fraternity" is available for purchase at www.amazon.com.

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