

Pluralism Project and Andover Newton Theological School Co-Host Interfaith
Leadership Seminar, June 2012 | Site Visits

Student Reflection: Temple Beth Zion



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Najira Ahmed is a rising senior at Wellesley College where she is pursuing a BA in Religion and a minor in Biological Sciences. Her academic interests include pluralism in South Asia and the U.S., as well as microbiology. She is an active member of the Multifaith Council at Wellesley and 2012 Pluralism Project summer intern.

In this excerpt Najira draws connections between visiting Temple Beth Zion (TBZ) for Shabbat, the cohort's recent visit to the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center (ISBCC), and her own experience of Islam. Her reflection also notes TBZ's support for the state of Israel and asks if it impacts the community's relationship with Christian and Muslim groups, as in the Pluralism Project case study "A Sign of Division."

Our visit to Temple Beth Zion today was a great experience for me, as I had never been to a synagogue before. I loved that when many of us arrived, we were able to observe the Torah study group as they were discussing the verses about a husband overcome with jealousy and suspicion about his wife's possible infidelity, and the ritual that was to be performed to ascertain her innocence or guilt. The way in which the Rabbi who led the study group was so full of energy and enthusiasm in her speech really created a welcoming environment for questions and comments by those who were present. I was glad to hear her acknowledgement of the historical context of the text, the patriarchal society in which it was written, and the struggle there is in dealing with that context. For me this was reminiscent of the idea of dealing with tradition and present realities, or Imam Webb's idea of "orthodox progressive." Perhaps I am using that term in a way that encompasses more than it was meant to, or I am using it to apply to an idea that I cannot name, but I see it as a struggle for many communities to find truth in their texts and religious histories and finding ways to apply these truths to our present day, a time so different from when many of our faiths emerged. In both TBZ and the ISBCC, they maintain many traditional practices but they have not closed their minds to change and adaptation to present circumstances in their communities. Personally, as a Muslim first-generation American, I struggle with finding that balance of traditional and contemporary practices, values and ideals, and it's always intriguing to see how religious communities approach this issue. Especially when it comes to laws and interpretation of texts, it has always been important to me that leaders acknowledge the historical context of these derivations and interpretations, especially with regards to the fact that these were often made by men. Within Islam, while there are female scholars, they are not as well known and often are not given as much credit or value as their male counterparts, and thus their interpretations of texts are not as popularized and made visible in the Muslim community. I wonder if other religious communities face similar struggles with regard to patriarchal/draconian interpretation of texts, and how open they are to reinterpretation.