

## Sarah Chapple Sokol – 2016 High Holidays Dvar

Good morning! I am so very honored (and a bit nervous, to be honest) to be standing in front of you today. I was surprised when Riva called me up a few months ago to ask me to give the dvar this year, because I am a relatively new member of the community. Though I've been attending Gragger for years, I only became an official Workmen's Circle member and attended my first HiHos two years ago. One year ago, I joined the Jewish-Muslim Relations Committee, where I finally found an outlet for the work that I've been interested in doing for years. And this year, I joined the board of the Boston Workmen's Circle—a commitment to helping to build this community that I am excited to fulfill.

I mentioned that I had been attending Gragger, Workmen's Circle's radical Purim party, for several years. My favorite part of this \*very\* fun party has always been the *shpiel*. For those of you who have not attended this annual celebration, every year the young adults put on a Purim *shpiel* with a social justice theme, telling the story of Esther through the lens of the issues of the day. Recent *shpiels* have focused on Palestinian water rights and the Fight for \$15. Every year while watching the *shpiel*, I have the distinct sense that our grandparents and great-grandparents are there in spirit, *kvelling* at the good work we're doing. I like to imagine that they know, somehow, that we're carrying on the work they began fifty or one hundred years ago. As the great-granddaughter of a Boston Workmen's Circle member, I am proud and excited to be carrying on the traditions of social justice and activism and cultural Judaism as a member of this community. Incidentally, did anyone ever know my great-grandmother, Bertha Kohn? If so, please come talk to me and my dad—hi, dad!—after services!

I have been engaged in social justice work for many years; for the last three I worked at an immigrant services agency helping new immigrants learn English and integrate into American society. In my work and my personal life, I have often felt that one of my *raison d'être* is to help people from different backgrounds get to know and understand each other. I have always been inspired by my great-grandparents, who came to the United States as immigrants one hundred years ago, and my beloved Grandma Edna, who grew up speaking Yiddish on Blue Hill Avenue. My Grandma Edna, whose *yartzheit* was yesterday, was the definition of kindness and compassion for others. She was a selfless listener, a gentle soul who made those around her feel special in her kind and focused attention.

I've focused much of my work at the Boston Workmen's Circle around building relationships with Muslims and supporting the Muslim community. One of my best friends—a sister to me, really—converted to Islam eight years ago, and I have learned so much from her: what it means to be Muslim, how it feels to wear Hijab, and what it is like to be harassed on the street. It is because of her—and her two sons, who are like nephews to me—that it is so important to me to challenge Islamophobia. I want them to feel as safe and comfortable in their community as I do, to never have to fear being called names, or worse.

Today I want to bring up two issues that are dear to my heart: challenging Islamophobia and welcoming refugees and immigrants. Although these issues are certainly related, they are not the same. While many immigrants and refugees arriving in the US are Muslim, there are many who are not, but who still need our support. And, of course, there are countless American Muslims who were born here and whose families have lived here for generations. Did you know

that about 15% of American slaves brought over from Africa were Muslim? Did you know that, while many people equate Muslims and Arabs, fewer than 20% of Muslims worldwide are Arab? Our Muslim sisters and brothers come from as many different backgrounds, language groups, ethnicities, and nationalities, as any other group. One cannot make broad generalizations about such a large and diverse group.

However, one thing that many people from this background share in the U.S.—one that might seem familiar to anyone who has experienced anti-Semitism, or whose parents or grandparents had to suffer this sort of discrimination—is having to face Islamophobia. Words make a difference, and hateful political rhetoric can lead to discrimination and violence. In recent months, we have heard of instances of Muslims—or those mistaken for being Muslim—being killed, of women having their hijabs ripped off their heads, of people being yelled and cursed at by passing motorists. I am horrified and heartbroken when I hear stories like this, because I think of my dear friend Lisa, and others I know and don't know, and I don't want to believe that this could happen to them.

One of the things that I admired the most about my Grandma Edna was her sense of empathy: her sensitivity around the feelings of those around her. As we enter this New Year and reflect on the past one, my appeal to you is one of empathy. Empathy—being able to understand and share another person's feelings or experience—is a vital first step to taking action. You can start small, with the people around you. When you encounter a neighbor or the cashier at your grocery store, stop and think about what their day might be like. In a difficult moment with a child or parent or partner, try to see the world through their eyes. Doing this will help you to step back and understand another person's experience, and may help you relate to them better.

To me, the best way to build empathy—to understand the experience of others—is to get to know them. How often have we heard stories about people changing their views on marriage equality because of a family member or friend who came out as gay, lesbian, or transgender? How many of you have been inspired to take action against some injustice or oppression because you knew someone who was personally affected by it? For me, I have been inspired to challenge Islamophobia—and to work for immigrant and refugee rights—by getting to know people who have suffered—or are at the risk of suffering—injustice and oppression. Empathy is what lets us recognize that those who may appear to be different may be more like us than we know. Empathy allows us to see ourselves in others and take action because we know that unless everyone is free, no one is free.

Earlier today we asked ourselves some questions: *Did we see injustice when done and oppose it, or were our eyes clouded by fear? Did we feel the suffering of the oppressed, or did we let our privilege protect our hearts? Did we allow the oppression of others? Did we live up to our Jewish values and heritage, and regard all oppressed peoples as our brothers and sisters? Can we feel the heartbreak of others? Did we raise our voices and speak out, or did we let others speak for us?*

So how do we take action—both in challenging Islamophobia, and in making our communities a welcoming place for new refugees and immigrants from all over the world? Because, of course, challenging Islamophobia is part of a larger fight against oppression and for social justice; all of these oppressions are tied up together. It has to begin on an individual level, in each one of us. Islamophobia is about fear—fear that leads us to think about and treat others differently. Take a moment to examine your own assumptions, your own responses. Do you have

particular associations with the word “terrorist”? What was your response when you heard about the recent bombing in New York? Did it make you look at the Muslims around you any differently? If these concepts are associated in your head, take some time to ask yourself why. Empathy is work, but it is worth it.

There are many ways to challenge Islamophobia in our communities. Become part of an intersectional movement: know that forces that attack Muslims on a structural level also attack African Americans, workers, women, the LGBTQ community and immigrants. Anti-Muslim rhetoric is used to demonize immigrants and refugees from all backgrounds. Help support the movements against wars and domestic oppression. Take action that targets the roots of racism and Islamophobia and commit to challenging it in your community on a daily basis.

Last weekend, the Workmen’s Circle partnered with several other local and national organizations to provide a “Challenging Islamophobia” workshop, in which 60 people participated, some of them here today. The goal is for these 60 people to offer workshops in their own communities over the next year on challenging Islamophobia. At the Boston Workmen’s Circle, we plan to host trainings for adults as well as for our group of Teens Acting for Social Change, who in turn will train our *shule* children. Please attend one of these trainings and bring your friends and family members. Also, you can join the “No Islamophobia Boston” listserv, a growing group of people who want to fight Islamophobia locally, to keep updated on goings-on in Boston and hear about upcoming events. Be an upstander, not a bystander: if you see or hear harassment or hateful language, say something. Take a “Stop Profiling Muslims” poster on your way out, and ask a local business to put it up in their window. Educate yourself and your friends. When you see a woman in hijab on the bus, smile at her. During the Muslim holiday of Eid, say “Ramadan Mubarak” to Muslims you see in your community. Join one of the Boston Workmen’s Circle’s social justice committees: Jewish-Muslim Relations, the Middle East Working Group, or Acting for Racial and Economic Justice. Extending ourselves with empathy and compassion is one way that we can make this a *shenere un besere velt*—a more beautiful and better world.

For many years, I have had a print hanging behind my desk at work that says, “If roads are unconnected we must make a path.” This is what I ask of you today. Make an effort to understand others’ experiences, and then build paths. Make connections. Make people feel welcome. Speak up when you see or hear injustice. Reach out to those who might seem different from you. You might just find out that they’re not so different, after all.

Thank you, and a Happy and Sweet New Year: *l’shona tovah!*