

Ethics without borders: solidarity and difference in inter-community dialogue

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The article offers an ethnographically embedded analysis of a UK-based Jewish-Muslim inter-community network to contribute to anthropological research into the ethical efforts that groups seen as polarized invest in negotiating boundaries of difference. The article makes two sets of arguments. First, it suggests that sometimes such groups have to negotiate not one but several ‘borders across difference’ and follow diverse ethical routes to navigate them depending upon how they conceptualize these borders. Second, it shows that in negotiating different sets of boundaries, network members often use techniques that at first glance appear to be artificial or even superficial in that they build on formal rules and/or contain no promise of achieving a consensus on issues important for the participants. However, I argue that these seemingly superficial efforts could still be seen as ethical endeavours underpinned by a strong commitment to inter-group solidarity and that they could be best understood as what Ruth Sheldon has described in her recent intervention in the ethics of Jewish ethnography as the movement between surface and depth.

We are here today to talk about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and we have three speakers. Each speaker will focus on one of these religions, and this is not going to be the religion that they themselves belong to. We will then open the discussion to the floor, where you can say what you like about a religion, but not about your own religion. But let me first mention the ground rule, and it is that in this session we only talk about what we see as positive in other religions, so you can only talk about what you like about the religion you want to speak about and not about what you dislike about it.

This is how Karim introduced one of the Jewish-Muslim inter-community network’s meetings, which was dedicated to the celebration of the inter-faith week in the United Kingdom.¹ The topic of the meeting was ‘This is what I like about this religion’, and Karim’s words succinctly summarized the agenda of the session. The speakers and other participants were invited to talk about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, highlighting those dimensions of these traditions that they thought particularly spoke to them.

Karim’s call to talk only about the positive dimensions of the ‘other’ religion did not surprise me. I had been attending the meetings of the network for eight years and knew

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that its members would often endeavour to focus on the affinities of Judaism and Islam and the common challenges that Jews and Muslims faced as minority groups in the United Kingdom. Talking about issues that could be seen as divisive for group members was often gently (though very clearly) discouraged.

The network brings together Jewish and Muslim British citizens² based in one UK city. Practically all sessions have a more formal dimension, as they often revolve around a specific theme and require advanced planning; however, they also allow plenty of space for informal socializing. The network would normally meet once every six to eight weeks to share a meal, attend a cultural event, celebrate a festival, go on a trip together, or hold a more formal meeting to discuss a specific topic. 'This is what I like about this religion' was one of them.

By the time the session took place, the network had existed for fifteen years. It was originally started by a group of four professionals who felt that there was a need to create an initiative that would bring together Jewish and Muslim residents from local communities in their city. In fifteen years, the network grew, and at the time of writing had over three hundred members on its mailing list. The actual meetings of the network would normally attract between twenty to forty participants, male and female, with a core group of about ten to fifteen persons attending most events, including the Jewish and Muslim co-convenors of the network. The participants coming to the meetings regularly tended to be either professionals in middle to later stages of their careers or retired professionals, though younger participants would also occasionally join the sessions.

From 2014 to 2021, I was attending the meetings of the network on a semi-regular basis and conducting interviews with its members, and in the period from 2020 to 2022, when, owing to the conditions of the pandemic, the meetings were conducted mostly online, I attended every single meeting of the network, as well as other online and in-person inter-community events organized by individual members of this group. Material presented in this article is based on the observations of the meetings of the network which I attended from 2014 to 2022³ and on interviews and more informal conversations, which were conducted not only with the core members of the network, but also with those who were associated with it only loosely: for instance, people who were on the mailing list of the network and agreed to be interviewed for my study, but who were not normally attending the meetings, or who attended the meetings only very occasionally when invited by a friend.

The article thus strongly centres on one particular inter-group initiative, but it will also attempt to contribute to the growing fields of the study of Jewish-Muslim interactions and of the two communities' overlapping histories. The past decade has seen the emergence of a significant body of literature in anthropology and other social sciences which has challenged narratives prominent in different domains of public and political discourse that construct European Jewish and Muslim communities in opposition to each other. Researchers have pointed out that their relationship has been strongly mediated by the broader context of marginalization and minoritization of Jewish and Muslim populations in European societies (see, e.g., Atshan & Galor 2020; Egorova & Ahmed 2017; Kasstan 2022; Katz 2015; Mandel 2016; Özyürek 2018; 2023). They have also highlighted everyday conviviality in the interactions between the two groups (Everett 2020; Gidley & Everett 2022), explored the intertwined trajectories of anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim prejudice (Egorova 2022; Everett & Vince 2020; Judaken 2018; Klug 2014; Meer 2013; Meer & Noorani 2008; Renton & Gidley 2017;

Romeyn 2017), and questioned the very assumption that Jewish-Muslim relations should be used as a category of analysis rather than purely as a category of practice (Egorova 2018; Everett & Gidley 2018).

A number of important studies have focused specifically on organized Jewish-Muslim inter-group initiatives in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe, examining the broader political context of European inter-faith work and the particularities of the techniques and strategies that such initiatives have used in enacting inter-community dialogue. For instance, Susanne Van Esdonk and Gerard Wiegers (2019) have examined the type of 'bilateral' Jewish-Muslim inter-religious exchange in the context of what became known as Scriptural Reasoning; Fiona Hurst and colleagues have offered a classification of different types of what they describe as 'categories of contact' in formalized Jewish-Muslim interactions in the United Kingdom (Hurst, Nisar, Berliner, Khan & Sharkey 2005); and Susanne Roggeveen, Sipco Vellenga, and Gerard Wiegers (2017) have discussed how Jewish and Muslim activists in Amsterdam have devised a range of strategies that allowed them to co-operate during times seen as difficult for the relationship between their respective communities.

In this article, I hope to contribute to research on Jewish-Muslim dialogue and engage the problematics of Jewish-Muslim encounters⁴ more broadly by offering an ethnographically embedded analysis of the way members of the Jewish-Muslim network that I have been following conceptualize what they themselves and/or dominant European public discourses thematize as divides between Jewish and Muslim populations, and of the way they develop different ethical avenues to negotiate these divides depending upon how they conceptualize them.

On a broader theoretical plane, in considering the processes through which my interlocutors navigate these tortuous terrains, I will attempt to build upon and theoretically extend anthropological research which explores ethical practices that underpin encounters between groups seen as socially or politically divided. Central to the theoretical part of my analysis are anthropological interventions that have formed the framework of research into 'ethics across borders': studies which have explored contexts where individuals, groups, and communities belonging to different ethical traditions recognize their differences and attempt to construct bridges between them. As Jonathan Mair and Nicholas Evans point out in the introduction to an edited collection of contributions exploring this problematic ethnographically, two areas of concern can be broadly delineated in anthropological discussions of ethics across borders which have been widely theorized in relation to anthropologists' own practice and could also be applied to ethnographic study of the way anthropologists' interlocutors negotiate ethical borders among themselves. These are questions exploring, first, how borders are understood by our interlocutors and, second, what affinities allow for the borders to be bridged (Mair & Evans 2015: 203).

In this article, I hope to build upon and extend this body of work by proposing two sets of arguments. First, I will suggest that communities sometimes grapple with multiple sets of borders across difference and display diverse modes of negotiating them depending upon how they conceptualize them. I will suggest that through participating in the network, my interlocutors engage in ethical dialogue across more than one set of 'units of difference' (Mair & Evans 2015), navigating the border between the doctrinal traditions of Judaism and Islam, the divides brought about by the conflict in the Middle East,⁵ and the perceived differences in some areas of the lived experiences of the two groups that they represent. I will argue that network members thematize these borders

differently, seeing some of them as more tangible (such as the conceptual borders brought about through their membership in the traditions of Judaism and Islam and the division in views about the conflict in the Middle East) and others as ephemeral (such as the perceived border stemming from what they see as external constructions of Jewish and Muslim experience in the United Kingdom). I will demonstrate how in negotiating these differing boundaries, network members productively pursue what scholars of Jewish-Muslim dialogue have described as strategies of 'avoidance' and 'searching for similarities' (Roggeveen *et al.* 2017). At the same time, I will also argue that these strategies – which indeed range from the avoidance of topics that are seen as divisive for Jewish and Muslim participants and focusing on the challenges facing the two groups in the United Kingdom, to a conscious cultivation of a commitment to solidarity through learning about the tradition of the other group and seeking out similarities between Judaism and Islam – could also be understood as ethical routes.

As far as the border of perceived differences in the lived experiences of their communities is concerned, I suggest that my interlocutors outright conceptually erase this very boundary by adopting a theorization of the two groups' positionalities in the United Kingdom that sees them as experiencing the minority condition in equal measures and in similar terms. In this respect, I will also argue that this shared perception of the positionalities of the two groups has allowed the network to generate an environment that provides its members with further ethical avenues for negotiating the borders that divide them on account of differing positions on the conflict in the Middle East. Such avenues have included creating a social space where, on occasion, members would feel comfortable to discuss this issue openly or to develop a conceptualization of the relationship between the topic of Israel-Palestine and Jewish-Muslim interactions which involves feeling ethically comfortable to 'agree to disagree' on this issue and not to see it as defining the relationship either between them and their counterparts from the other group in the network or between Jewish and Muslim communities more broadly.

Second, I will suggest that in engaging these differing ethical processes, the members of the network often use techniques that at first glance appear to be superficial in that they build on formal rules that might go against the immediate aspirations of the participants and/or contain no promise of achieving a future consensus on certain issues that are important for them. Indeed, some of the steps that they take, such as explicitly discouraging their members from making critical comments about the 'other' tradition, or avoiding topics that are seen as politically divisive specifically for Jews and Muslims, at first blush may appear to be artificial, particularly when compared to some other types of initiatives described by scholars of inter-faith dialogue in the context of the United Kingdom and in Europe: for instance, Scriptural Reasoning (Van Esdonk & Wiegers 2019). The latter practice focuses around an inter-group study of religious texts, which can potentially involve open disagreement between participants belonging to different communities. These initiatives, similarly to the one that I describe, allow the participants to agree to disagree, but, in contrast to the case discussed here, they do not try to prevent their members from doing so overtly. Moreover, their activists have even suggested that it is these 'risky' types of inter-faith exercises that are most likely to meet the challenge of building long-term dialogue between communities (Van Esdonk & Wiegers 2019).

On further reading, however, the practices that I describe in this article, which politically might look to be all too congruent with governance demands of social

cohesion that have also been explored in-depth by scholars of diversity and inter-community work in Europe (Vollebergh 2016), reveal themselves to constitute genuine ethical effort⁶ and to be underpinned by significant emotional labour and a commitment to solidarity between Jewish and Muslim British citizens that may lead to the creation of a deeper connection between the participants.

In making this argument, I will propose that these efforts can be understood as an ethical practice that Ruth Sheldon (2022) theorized in her ethnographic account of the Jewish communities of Stamford Hill as the movement between surface and depth. In discussing the process of conducting ethnographic research among the Haredi⁷ groups in this inner London area, Sheldon reflects on how fieldwork for her would start with adopting the sartorial code of her research participants, a practice which, at first reading, may appear to be 'superficial', as it would only be performed by the ethnographer 'in the field' rather than in other domains of her life. However, putting on the clothes that accorded more with the dress code of her Haredi interlocutors allowed the author to establish a deeper relationship with those from whom and about whom she thought to learn, turning research into an iterative process which brought to the surface the shared histories of vulnerability, assimilation, and exclusion of Jewish British citizens.

I will explore these sets of problematics ethnographically in the following three sections, where I will first focus on the way the members of the network negotiate the boundaries of difference that they recognize as tangible and then discuss their engagement with the topic of the societal experiences of the two groups and how their conceptualization of these experiences assists them also in navigating the former set of boundaries.

'This is what I like about this religion'

Let me now return to the episode with which I started the article. At the beginning of the meeting, two invited speakers shared their reflections on the religion that they were asked to focus on. They talked about their experiences of interactions with the practitioners of that tradition, encounters with its spaces, their personal research into its history and doctrines, and those of its features that they particularly liked. For instance, Karim, who was nominated to talk about Judaism from the perspective of a practitioner of Islam, talked about the similarities that he saw between the two religions.

There is a simple underlying message throughout the Torah. If I were to try and summarize the key message of the theology of Judaism, I would say it is that God tells you how to be a good person, your duty is to fulfil that. When attending Jewish religious services, I have never found anything in the prayers that I could not support with all my heart. And I don't see any meaningful distinction between how Islam understands God and how Judaism understands God. This is what I like about Judaism.

Emma, a secular Jewish participant, who knew Karim well and worked closely with him in the network, complimented him for his knowledge of Jewish doctrine and the significant amount of effort that he had made to learn about it. After Karim's presentation, she thanked him and said that she could vouch for the fact that he knew more about Judaism than she did. 'We have been to a synagogue together and I could see him pray in Hebrew', she said.

Karim's presentation and Emma's words cast light on an important dimension of the ethical work that network participants engage in to reach out to the other community. This work involves active learning, which includes personal study and research (in Karim's case, to the extent of learning the language of the other religion's scripture),

making visits to the places of worship of Judaism and Islam in different parts of the United Kingdom, and attending joint events to celebrate Jewish and Muslim festivals, where network participants and invited speakers talk about what these festivals mean to them and how they are celebrated in their families.

At the same time, it appears that while for Karim the starting point for a more involved engagement with Judaism was a conclusion based on personal research that the two religions were in important ways similar, even if this conclusion itself was a result of a significant ethical effort that he made to learn about Judaism, for other participants focusing specifically on the similarities between the two religions required pursuing a more self-conscious ethical investigation in which they also encouraged others to engage. For instance, Edith, a Jewish participant, after listening to the presentations on Judaism and Islam, said that there was indeed a lot of similarity between them, and that this was what the communities and commentators writing about their traditions should be focusing on instead of differences.

Commitment to avoiding talking about differences that could be seen as divisive strongly transpires also in another important principle of the network: avoiding discussions on the topic of the conflict in the Middle East. As Karim explained to me in our first conversation,

We [founding conveners] realized from the very beginning of the formation of this network that if we spent time discussing the Middle East, first of all it would be immensely divisive, it would be very time consuming, and it would also be very unproductive. Because it doesn't matter what we agree here as a group of Muslims and Jews of our city, it would make no difference to what happens in the Middle East. We simply ruled it out of scope.

At the same time, later he pointed out that as time went by and network members got to know each other better, they would sometimes (cautiously) touch upon the topic in their conversations. Faris, another key participant of the network, shared with me that on one occasion, after an episode of escalation in the conflict, the conveners felt that they needed to organize a meeting for all to discuss the situation, and the event was a success. (I will discuss this in more detail in the concluding section of the article.)

Mair and Evans point out that although anthropologists have historically tended to view constructed borders as detrimental to the emergence of ethically positive relationships, some of their interventions have complicated this approach (2015: 215). Matei Candea and colleagues have demonstrated how some modalities of ethically positive relations can be brought about through efforts aimed at distancing and detachment rather than engagement (Candea, Cook, Trundle & Yarrow 2015). Jan Lorenz has shown how incommensurability between ethical traditions may be a given, but it may not necessarily always be preventing people belonging to these traditions from relating to one another in an ethical way. Thus in his ethnography of a contemporary Jewish congregation in Poland, Lorenz (2015) explores ethics in the context of divergent relationalities of affinity, with different synagogue attendees espousing differing (halakhic and vernacular) conceptualizations of what it means to be Jewish. He argues that while the standpoints of his interlocutors appear to be incommensurable and the consensus on Jewish belonging suspended indefinitely, in a moment of family tragedy the group managed to come together putting their differences aside in order to support a grieving congregant.

To return to our material, it may be suggested in seeking out similarities between Judaism and Islam, avoiding talking about the differences, and ignoring those

dimensions of the 'other' tradition that may not be congruent with the tradition of one's own, the efforts of network members exhibit conscious distancing and an abandonment of attempts to overcome incommensurability (Mair & Evans 2015). Moreover, these efforts may not seem to evolve organically from the diverse interests of network members, who on some occasions probably have to self-censor to abide by the 'rules' of avoiding talking about divisive issues. However, I suggest that, similarly to the example discussed by Lorenz (2015), the indefinite suspension of commensurability that some interactions between my interlocutors display contains productive ethical potential, which could be best understood as an example of ethical work that Sheldon (2022) has theorized as the movement between surface and depth.

The case discussed in this article offers a different context from the one presented by Sheldon, who has focused on the relationship between the ethnographer and her research participants. Nevertheless, I suggest that Sheldon's theoretical insight can be usefully applied to elucidate the scope for ethical dialogue in the efforts of my interlocutors, as I shall discuss below.

As the meeting progressed, far from being a superficial act, instructing meeting participants to speak only about what they liked about the other religion and consciously to avoid making any criticisms produced a deep engagement in inter-community dialogue. A congruent observation was also made to me by Karim in relation to the broader history of the network and the deepening of the ties between its members:

Initially, when we just set up the network, I think we took a slightly instrumental approach to how we are going to bring people together and get them to engage with each other. We identified very quickly the issues which mattered to both Muslims and Jews here in our city and more broadly in the UK: circumcision, dietary laws, post-mortems ... But the important thing is that as time passes, people that were originally complete strangers are now friends. So, initially you're also walking on eggshells, you're being very careful what you say so you don't upset people ... but as the years go by it changes steadily. So, you become more relaxed, people become friends, and you're able to then make a beginning and go more in-depth and even approach topics that you wouldn't dare to approach at an earlier stage. It's a very different kind of relationship now than when we first started ten years ago as complete strangers.

To return to Sheldon's analysis, the 'instrumental approach' that, according to Karim, the network adopted in the initial stages of their activities could be seen as the beginning of a process which started by engaging with the issues that ostensibly comprised the most immediately visible facets of Jewish-Muslim dialogue. However, as I will discuss in the final section of the article, through years of committed endeavour to bridging the borders of difference that network members themselves conceptualize as tangible, this process led to a deeper ethical connection between the two constituencies of the network. This brought back to the surface of their encounters trust based on their experiences, which, as I will argue in the following section, my interlocutors see as shared, contrary to dominant societal narratives that inscribe Jews and Muslims as different groups on account of their broader community history.

Ethics without borders

One of the meetings of the network focused on the question of ethical approaches to organ donation in Judaism and Islam. The event involved three invited speakers: a consultant surgeon from the transplant unit of a UK-based hospital; an imam involved in research on Islamic biomedical ethics; and a rabbi. The first speaker was

tasked with introducing the topic and talking about the challenges of securing organ donations, while the remaining two presenters were invited to explore the issue from the perspective of their faith communities.

The surgeon briefly outlined his area of specialization, which was kidney transplantation, and proceeded to describe the challenges that hospitals in the United Kingdom faced obtaining organs, noting the length of waiting times that patients who needed kidney transplants had to endure. He explained that there were two types of donors: live and deceased. In kidney transplants, live donations accounted for only 30 per cent of the total, with donors normally donating their kidney to friends and relatives, while the rest had to be obtained from deceased donors. 'What we are desperately trying to do in the country is increase the amount of deceased donations,' the surgeon said, 'but at the moment they are nowhere near enough.'

Donations from deceased donors, he went on to explain, are categorized into two groups, in ways that are important in terms of their ethical and religious implications: donations after brain death, when brain function was irrecoverable, but the body could be kept alive on life support; and donations after circulatory death, where life support was futile. The surgeon then noted that in May 2020 the donation law in England changed from 'opt in' to 'opt out'. However, he immediately pointed out that, contrary to the popular perception, it was still the family that had the final say in deciding whether organs could be collected from eligible organ donors.⁸

When talking about family involvement in the process of organ transplantation from deceased donors, the surgeon approached the problematic of working with groups from a minoritized background. He said that the hospital where he was based had a large patient community whom he described as 'South Asian' and 'BAME', and explained that this fact placed heavy demands upon the transplant unit due to a wide occurrence of diabetes and hypotension among these populations – illnesses which made patients prone to kidney failure requiring kidney transplantation. He also noted that these communities were largely reluctant to agree to organ donation from deceased family members. 'If somebody passes away, and they are an eligible organ donor,' he said,

a specialist nurse will very gently approach their family, and some families say no. And we know that within the BAME communities, the likelihood of us receiving the answer of 'no' is much higher than in others. That is why evenings like this are so crucial in trying to increase the number of organs for our patients.

This narrative raises a number of important points in relation to the minority groups' relationship with the state in the arena of healthcare.⁹ However, I would like to engage with this episode here for the way it illustrates how the members of the network theorize the status of their respective constituencies in the United Kingdom in terms that see the two groups as one. As I will attempt to show in this section, when presented with a discourse that constructs Jewish and Muslim communities as two 'units of difference' on account of their experiences, and, arguably, also on account of their physicality, as was done in the narrative presented above, my interlocutors offer a discussion that entirely (even if implicitly) erases these borders.

The surgeon mentioned the abbreviation BAME a number of times during his talk, and one time he spelled it out as Black *and* Asian Minority Ethnic communities (as opposed to Black, Asian, *and* Minority Ethnic), possibly congruently with the way at the beginning of the talk he referred to the patients of his hospital as constitutive of large 'South Asian' and 'BAME' populations. It thus appears that the first speaker drew on a

particular conceptualization of BAME groups that arguably excluded a large proportion of Jewish British citizens.

It is important to note that Jewish communities in the United Kingdom are diverse in terms of the regions of the world where they originate, with a proportion of Jewish British citizens and residents being persons of Asian and Afro-Caribbean descent (Kasstan 2022).¹⁰ Moreover, the assumption of whether Jewish people of any background, including European, could be subsumed under the rubric of white Europeans has been usefully challenged in academic literature and broader public discourse (Gilman 1991; Goldstein 2006; Lentin 2020). Nevertheless, it may be argued that in the context of specifically BAME identification, most Jewish citizens of European descent would probably identify as persons of minority ethnic background rather than as Black or Asian. It therefore appears that when the first speaker of the session spelt out BAME as 'Black and Asian Minority Ethnic', he inadvertently engaged a framework of appellation that most Jewish participants in the audience would not have necessarily identified with, as to the best of my knowledge their ancestry derived predominantly from different parts of Europe. At the same time, a much larger proportion of Muslim British citizens can trace their ancestry to different parts of Asia and Africa and therefore might still identify with the term BAME even if spelt as 'Black and Asian Minority Ethnic', though Muslims of European descent are also present both in the United Kingdom and among the members of the network.

It is not at all my contention that the surgeon intentionally tried to differentiate between Jews and Muslims as either two separate communities in the United Kingdom or two distinct groups of the network. Indeed, there was nothing in what he said either in his presentation or in his answers to the questions that followed to suggest that he was directing his concerns specifically at the Muslim participants. In fact, at the end of the event, the surgeon said he was encouraged by what turned out to be mostly positive responses from both other speakers and the audience. What I suggest is highlighted by his usage and definition of BAME in the context of an event that was aimed at both Jewish and Muslim audiences is the ambiguities associated with the term in the dominant public and political discourse and the liminality of the position of Jewish communities in relation to their minority status in the United Kingdom in the perception of broader publics – a perception which also thus constructs the Jewish population of the United Kingdom in opposition to Black and Asian communities. As I will now attempt to demonstrate, however, the two presentations that followed the surgeon's talk eliminated this perceived divide between the two groups, erasing the differences that were implicitly (and no doubt inadvertently) construed by the first talk.

The second speaker, an imam, explored organ donation from the perspective of the Islamic tradition, presenting a conclusion that in Islam this issue was a matter of choice owing to the diversity of interpretations of passages in the Islamic sources that could be seen as relevant to this debate. The imam briefly introduced the audience to a number of interpretive positions on the matter, without either endorsing or rejecting any one of them, leaving the choice with the audience:

In my view, all of these opinions are valid Islamic opinions. We cannot say that this or that opinion is dominant for the very fact that we don't have clear guidance in the Qur'an and in the Prophetic tradition on this issue. What we do have is abstract concepts, for example concepts related to the dignity of the human being ... Therefore, when faced with this dilemma, individuals need to talk to their families, to their GPs, to their chaplains, and come up with the decision that is the best for them.

As far as the religion is concerned, whichever position you take there will not be any moral culpability on that person.

At the end of the talk, the chair of the meeting, who on this occasion was the Jewish co-convenor of the network, thanked the speaker and made a comment which momentarily bridged the lifeworlds of the network's two main constituencies: 'This was an extremely interesting presentation on the diversity of Islamic views on this matter and it certainly reminds me of the diversity of views that rabbinic authorities often have on a range of matters'. She then introduced the third speaker, a rabbi, who, like the previous presenter, had an academic and a theological interest in the topic of organ donation.

The rabbi started his presentation by thanking the two commentators who spoke before him, making a special note of the talk by the imam: 'What I am going to say is going to strongly map onto the previous contribution. Obviously, I will be talking about a different religion, but there are interesting similarities in terms of how we deal with a situation in law where you have multiple opinions'. The speaker then introduced a range of possible approaches to the issue of organ donation in Judaism, noting again that, like in Islam, in his tradition, legal specialists had to negotiate a number of concepts and interpret precedents mentioned in religious sources that could be relevant to the question of death and organ donation.

The question about how network members engage with their respective religions and conceptualize the doctrinal relationship between Judaism and Islam is significant in its own right, and I have attempted to examine it in a separate publication (Egorova 2023). Here, what I suggest is important to note in a discussion of the ethical avenues that my interlocutors pursue in order to bridge the boundaries of their traditions is that on this and other similar occasions that I have observed, the organizers' choice of speakers appeared to be congruent with the implicit goal of seeking out and emphasizing the commonalities between the two religions, which in the speeches of the presenters was achieved through an exploration of the internal diversity of approaches to organ donation in Judaism and Islam. Indeed, the presentations of the imam and the rabbi were full of specific detail of different theological positions on organ donation in their traditions, but ended on a similar note: there was room in each religion for a positive view of different types of organ donation, and individual community members were free to choose which approach to follow. Importantly, the second speaker not only arrived at a conclusion similar to the one proposed by his Muslim counterpart, but also started his presentation by explicitly stating that his talk was going to map very strongly onto what the previous speaker had said, and that while he was 'obviously' going to talk about a different tradition, there were similarities in their approaches to the matter in question.

It is also noteworthy that although the meetings of the network often had a theological angle to them, its members displayed a diversity of modalities of religiosity and included participants who identified as completely secular. On the one hand, this dimension of the meetings highlights the fuzziness of the conceptual divide between the notions of race, ethnicity, and religion that has been productively explored in anthropology and other social sciences (Anidjar 2008; Arkin 2013; Egorova 2015; Goldschmidt 2006; Kirtsoglou & Tsimouris 2018; Moosavi 2015; Özyürek 2014). However, this focus also meant that some participants had temporarily to silence their secularity, which casts further light on the ethical efforts its members made to maintain dialogue 'across borders'. Indeed, I noticed that there were participants among the

Jewish members of the audience who I knew would have described themselves as only 'culturally' Jewish and who had shared with me that they were not religious at all and only started learning about Judaism as a religious tradition when they joined the network, as they felt that a significant amount of discussion in the meetings revolved around questions of faith and religious practice.

I suggest that, similarly to the cases discussed in the previous section, this dimension of the network's meetings unmask some of the hidden emotional and intellectual work that participants were prepared to undertake in order to underscore the commonality of the two groups.

To return to Sheldon's theoretical observation about ethical work sometimes taking the shape of an iterative process of movement between surface and depth, it may also be seen as an example of movement between the surface and the seeming artificiality of the formal structure and the organization of the session and the depth of the opportunities to reflect on what most members appeared to see as commonalities of Jewish and Muslim traditions and experiences that the session provided. This conceptualization of the shared nature specifically of the experiences of the two groups was also strongly evident in the session that I will now discuss.

Of all the meetings of the network that I have attended, the organ donation event particularly stood out for me in terms of how clearly (even though subtly and in an entirely non-confrontational way) it challenged the theorization of the minority status of the two groups that differentiated between British Jews and British Muslims. However, it was not by any means the only meeting that addressed a topic which could be seen as more relevant to the experiences of one group than of the other but nevertheless brought the two constituencies together and presented their experiences as similar. On another occasion, the network organized a meeting to discuss and celebrate the linguistic diversity of their city, a topic which again may have been seen as being more relevant for the Muslim participants of the meeting, as both nation-wide, and among the members of the network, a larger proportion of Muslim rather than Jewish British citizens were born outside the United Kingdom and could be expected to have a good knowledge of a language other than English. Nevertheless, the organizers, as usual, invited a number of speakers from both groups, and each selected presenter was either bilingual or not a native speaker of English. In the question-and-answer session that followed, different audience members shared their experiences of grappling with a linguistic environment that was not that of their mother tongue. Some of the Jewish participants who grew up in the United Kingdom and spoke only English as their first language talked about the experiences of their parents and grandparents who were bilingual, thus obliterating the differences between the broader linguistic backgrounds of the two groups and constructing them as one minoritized community facing the challenge of having to operate in a foreign language. The event thus conceptually erased the difference between the linguistic affiliations of the majorities of Jewish and Muslim British citizens by re-inscribing it as a statistical fact of minor significance and rendering obsolete the border between the histories of the two groups as units of difference.

As I will now discuss in the concluding section, this thematization of the histories of Jewish and Muslim populations in the United Kingdom not only challenges dominant societal narratives that portray the experiences of the two groups as 'units of difference', but also shapes the routes that network members pursue in order to construct ethical bridges across the divides that they see as tangible, such as those brought about by the conflict in the Middle East.

‘Making Britain a better place’

I never witnessed any open tension between network members in the meetings which would have divided the group along community lines, even though I have certainly observed quite a few dynamic, though amicable, debates with Jewish and Muslim members being on both sides of the argument.¹¹ However, I would often hear conveners and participants make remarks about the importance of spreading the message of the network to their congregations, remarks that testified to their awareness of the challenges of Jewish-Muslim dialogue and put into relief the depth and the extent of the endeavour behind the formalized routines of the meetings. In my one-to-one conversations with network members, some of them would occasionally speak about the challenges that they personally had experienced in their inter-community work which revealed the emotional labour that they invested in maintaining these seemingly staged forms of dialogue. For instance, Zahra, a Muslim participant, shared with me that she once visited Israel and Palestine, but decided not to talk about the trip with the Jewish counterparts in the network. Daud, another Muslim interlocutor, like Karim in the quote I presented in the second section, pointed out that it was hard for him to address the topic of the conflict in the Middle East with his Jewish friends in the network in the earlier years of its existence, but after several years he became more comfortable talking about it with them.¹²

The way my interlocutors articulated this dimension of their inter-community involvement unmask the emotional costs that participants were prepared to pay to maintain it, and, I suggest, further highlights the significance of the ethical effort that they invested in it. At the same time, I would also argue that this balance is much more robust than it may appear to be at first glance, and what accounts for this is that, as was discussed in the previous section, Jewish and Muslim participants of the network strongly identified with each other through their experiences of being part of minoritized groups, and that focusing first and foremost on these experiences allowed the group to create a socially comfortable space for all its members. Moreover, I suggest that, as transpires in my interviews with the participants, this space also in fact offered its members further opportunities to negotiate the border of divergent views on Israel-Palestine and did so in two ways: it allowed them to feel empowered to have productive discussions on this issue on some occasions after all, and to see this border as less critical both for their interactions with members belonging to the other group and for the overall context of what they thematized as Jewish-Muslim relations. For instance, at a dinner organized by the network, Aisha, a Muslim interlocutor, described to me how she felt regarding network members talking about the conflict:

I feel safe when I come here because I know I won't be judged the way I feel I may be judged in other places. I can just be myself here. I feel that I am accepted and that nobody here thinks that I am somehow different from them ... Yes, different members of the network have very different views on the conflict in the Middle East. But once you have got to know somebody and can trust them, you can talk to them about it. So yes, in this group we just know when it is not appropriate to talk extensively about this issue – for instance, it would not be a focus of a meeting like this dinner – and when and how to give people a chance to talk about it. What I have come to understand is that the divisions brought about by the conflict do not have to define the relationship between Jews and Muslims.

A similar observation was also shared with me by Faris, who, as I mentioned above, once participated in the organization of an event for network members that focused specifically on a discussion of Israel-Palestine:

The relationship between Jews and Muslims is coloured by the Israel-Palestine conflict. Those who work to build a close relationship between the two groups appreciate the differences, but they equally understand there is actually a lot more that pulls us together. There are a lot of values, shared faith backgrounds, shared cultural ideas with which we can enrich one another, strengthen one another, and *quietly* [his emphasis] make Britain a better place. My approach would be, 'look, it's a big elephant', you know you can't totally ignore it, but the best thing to do is to agree to disagree on it, and then work on the relationship. And once it's strengthened then start working at the issue of the conflict as well ... One of the things we did once was, when there was a flare-up in the situation in the Middle East, we felt we couldn't ignore it, we needed to address it, so we agreed to hold a session on it and properly talked about it ... It was absolutely amazing listening to different people, how it had affected them. It was so emotionally charged on both sides ... By having that session and talking, you could see the general passion, and the pain these people were feeling from both sides; and that had a huge impact on both sides. I genuinely thought it was one of the best sessions we ever did.

I propose that Aisha's and Faris's words suggest that for the participants in the activities of the network its meetings provide a space which they experience as safe to the extent that it allows them to navigate the divides between their divergent positions on the conflict in the Middle East as two 'units of difference' (Mair & Evans 2015), developing new ethical routes for bridging them, such as organizing a special session to discuss this topic or simply finding ways to not allow this question to affect their inter-community work.

When I suggest that network members appear to be experiencing this space as 'safe', I use Matthew Shahin Richardson's theorization of perceptions of the relationship between space and security in a study of queer Jewish selfhood in the United Kingdom (Richardson 2023). The study explores how in some spaces participants' selves are rendered as 'other' through their differentiation from the perceived heterosexual and White Anglo-Saxon Protestant norm in processes which build upon implicit logics of power and surveillance rather than rely on overt violence. Richardson describes as 'the sixth sense for safety' (2023: chap. 5) his research participants' perception of the power dynamics of space as a social and material construct to assay the power relations that they and others may be subjected to in its confines and to establish whether they may need to alter their self-representation to be safely incorporated into what the space designates as a normative self.

I argue that the members of the network experience its meetings as social and material space where they can stay safe from the surveillance regimes that see Jews and Muslims as other and where they can 'be themselves' and not feel judged, as Aisha put it. Importantly, what to a significant degree facilitates the emergence of this space is a set of rules that govern the way the participants have to present themselves when discussing issues seen as divisive specifically for Jewish and Muslim audiences, but I suggest this is another example of my interlocutors moving from the surface of following formal regulations to the depth of finding new ethical avenues for working across multiple borders across difference, including those that in their own conceptualization require making an extra effort to navigate. These efforts also demonstrate how ethical work aimed at negotiating borders across difference can not only bridge but also challenge them.

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NOTES

¹ For the purposes of protecting my research participants' anonymity, all their names have been changed in the article and so have some of the details of the events that I describe. I have also chosen not to identify the network as doing so might de-anonymize some of its participants.

² In using the term 'Jewish and Muslim British citizens', I draw inspiration from Mayanthi Fernando's theorization of the concept of 'Muslim French' which she coined to describe her interlocutors in France: 'women and men committed to practicing Islam as French citizens and to practicing French citizenship as pious Muslims' (2014: 13) and who 'define their Muslimness as always already French' (2014: 37). My usage of the term 'Jewish and Muslim British citizens' is probably broader than that of Fernando's use of Muslim French, in the sense that it covers all British citizens who identify as Jewish or Muslim irrespective of the way they theorize their citizenship. I use this term for the productive potential that it carries for disrupting narratives that construct Jewish, Muslim, as well as other minority identities in opposition to British citizenship, which is where again I draw parallels with Fernando's theorization of Muslim French (2014: 37).

³ I would normally attend the meetings as an observer, but not take part in the discussions, mindful of my positionality as an outsider to both Jewish and Muslim communities.

⁴ Following Ben Gidley and Sami Everett's (2022) analysis, I use 'encounters' as a theoretical term to describe interactions between Jewish and Muslim spaces, organizations, and individuals.

⁵ I use the expression 'conflict in the Middle East' following the terminology often used by my research participants; however, it is important to acknowledge that it carries specific political connotations. For an important in-depth discussion of this question, see Sheldon (2016: 36–8).

⁶ A similar observation is made by Vollebergh, who discusses how urban residents may draw on social cohesion policies to express what she terms as 'a sincere and also ethical desire' (2016: 131) to establish relationships with their neighbours from other cultural groups.

⁷ The Haredi (Hebrew for God-fearing) form of Judaism consists of a number of groups whose practice is characterized by a strict adherence to *halakhah* (the laws and ordinances regulating Jewish religious observances). For an in-depth discussion of the diversity of the Haredi traditions, see Kasstan (2019) and Munro (2021).

⁸ Under the law, which is also known as 'Max and Keira's Law', named after a child recipient and donor, all adults in England are considered as having agreed to donate their organs when they die unless they record a decision not to donate or are in one of the excluded groups (<https://www.organdonation.nhs.uk/get-involved/news/max-and-keira-s-law-comes-into-effect-in-england/>).

⁹ For an in-depth discussion of this problematic, see Kasstan (2019; 2021), Qureishi (2019), and Taragin-Zeller, Rozenblum & Baram-Tsabari (2020). For an analysis of public health policy debates specifically in relation to Jewish and Muslim populations in the United Kingdom, see Kasstan (2022).

¹⁰ See also <https://www.sephardivoices.org.uk/sephardi-mizrahi>. For a discussion of the historical and cultural divides between Jewish communities of Ashkenazi and non-Ashkenazi descent in twentieth- and twenty-first-century history, see, for instance, Cooper (2012).

¹¹ For instance, on one occasion, the group was discussing the question of Islamophobia and Muslim participants were divided in their opinions about how it should be defined. On another occasion, the meeting was invited to discuss whether UK hate crime laws were effective as they were or needed amending and there were both Jewish and Muslim members on each side of the argument.

¹² It is outside the scope of this article to reflect on the way the members of the network relate to the conflict in the Middle East. However, it is important to note that both Jewish and Muslim participants have displayed a range of approaches to political viewpoints on this issue.

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Éthique sans frontières : solidarité et différence dans le dialogue intercommunautaire

Résumé

Cet article présente une analyse fondée sur l'ethnographie d'un réseau intercommunautaire judéo-musulman au Royaume-Uni. Son but est de contribuer à la recherche anthropologique sur les efforts éthiques consentis par des groupes considérés comme polarisés pour négocier les frontières de leurs différences, en présentant deux faisceaux d'arguments : d'une part, l'article suggère que ces groupes doivent parfois négocier le franchissement non pas d'une « frontière de différences » mais de plusieurs, et suivre pour cela des chemins éthiques différents, selon la manière dont ils conceptualisent ces frontières. D'autre part, il montre qu'en négociant différentes frontières, les membres des réseaux emploient souvent des techniques qui peuvent sembler, au premier abord, artificielles voire superficielles car elles s'appuient sur des règles formelles et/ou ne sont pas susceptibles de mener à un consensus sur des questions importantes pour les participants. L'autrice avance toutefois que ces efforts, si superficiels qu'ils paraissent, pourraient néanmoins être compris comme des tentatives éthiques, sous-tendues par une volonté forte de solidarité entre les groupes, et que le meilleur moyen de les comprendre pourrait être ce « mouvement entre la surface et la profondeur » que Ruth Sheldon décrivait récemment dans son intervention sur l'éthique de l'ethnographie juive.

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