

## Redbridge Faith Forum Women's Workshop 9<sup>th</sup> May 2017

Thirty women from different backgrounds and faiths met together at the Ilford Islamic Centre, Albert Road on Tuesday afternoon for a very informative and friendly workshop addressing the questions 'Praying: How? Why? When? To Whom?' This was the fourth of a series of workshops on the topic of prayer and featured presentations from the Muslim and Jewish faith. The first workshop in June had featured the Buddhist and Hindu faiths, the second in November featuring Sikh and Bahai faiths and the third workshop featured contributions from different Christian denominations.



The event started with all women receiving a warm welcome and an invitation to help themselves to the light lunch provided. Once everyone was settled Jacquie Grieve, Chair of Redbridge Faith Forum welcomed all the women and introduced the first speaker, Mrs Rukhsana Zafar from the QMT, South Woodford Mosque.

Rukhsana started by saying the greeting which Muslims use to greet each other which means "May God's peace and blessings be upon you" and explained that Muslims believe that Mohammed is the final prophet with none to come after him.

*To whom* - Muslims pray to God, whom they call Allah (Arabic) and believe is their commander, the creator of everything who asks them to worship him alone.

*Why?* - Muslims pray because their Holy Book, the Koran teaches that Allah loves individuals with a love greater than 70 mothers.

*How?* – Muslims start their time of prayer with ablutions – wash hands 3 times, then mouth, face, over head and around ears, wash arms up to the elbows and wash feet. Also the place



where they are praying should be clean – Muslims don't wear outdoor shoes in the home to keep floor coverings clean. A prayer mat is not essential but it is essential to face Quibla which is in Mecca (Saudi Arabia). Mohammed's companions wrote down how he prayed and this is what is done still – first raise 2 hands near ears to indicate God is great, (iqama). Clasp hands across chest and recite a prayer 3 times, stand up, go down on knees putting palms down on the floor and head

and nose down to the ground so you are prostrate on the ground. Get up and repeat the practice and complete by turning head to from side to side.

*When?* – There are compulsory and non-compulsory prayers and the times for prayers are indicated by the moon and sun. There are 5 compulsory prayers to be made through the day. A dawn prayer fajar, prayer on awakening, the two afternoon prayers Dohar and Asar are silent prayers.

Prayers can be shortened if you are away – if you are sick you still need to pray but can use signs instead of speaking aloud.

There is a call to prayer in the mosque and in Muslim countries it is broadcast

Units of prayer – fajar 4, Dohar 12, Asar is 8, Maghrib and Esha 17

Most prayers are learnt off by heart – children learn to recite from the Koran and the first page of the Koran (surat Fatiha) must be memorised. New Muslims are allowed to read from text.

Jacque thanked Rukhsana. Women in the group asked questions of Rukhsana which she and other Muslim women answered. Women of all faiths remarked on particular similarities between faith practices with regards to prayer. Jacque then introduced the second speaker, Mitzi Kalinsky from the Sukkat Shalom Synagogue in Wanstead. Mitzi explained that Jews do not usually memorise the Torah but do know the Sabbath prayers off by heart which are said each week at dusk on Friday evenings at the start of the Jewish Shabbat.

*How?* – Jews aim to face the direction of Jerusalem which is their Holy City when praying but there is not any particular body position to adopt. Jewish prayers are mainly in praise of God but not many personal prayers. Some prayers are sang rather than spoken.

*To Whom?* – Jews pray to Elah which is the Aramaic name for God (whereas Allah is Arabic) which means The Eternal – “God is”, “The everlasting” “The creator”. At the time of the Torah people were worshipping other gods but it is now forbidden for Jews who should worship only the one God. Mitzi explained that Hebrew is a gender language and there has been a lot of discussion around the fact that God had been often referred to as being male but now he is called Eternal with a tetragram of YHWH.

*When?* – There are 3 prayers to be said each day – morning afternoon and evening. The shema prayer is said in the morning and the evening. It is a prayer of blessing acknowledging the power and wonder of God. Jews look on sleep as a form of death so on



awakening say a prayer of thanks for living. Jews are supposed to say 100 blessings a day and there are blessings for almost everything in life including blessings for bread, wine, for the new moon. The Sabbath prayers are said whilst lighting a candle at the start of the Shabbat on Friday evenings – this is a prayer that even very non-observant Jews will often practice. There are different Shabbat prayers

to be said at the time of a new moon and there are other specific prayers to be said at the

time of different festivals. Kaddish is a prayer of praise magnifying God's name. It is said at times of death and repeated many times during the following year.. It is a prayer that is learnt by heart from an early age.

Mitzi sang a beautiful prayer "Eli Eli" that had been written by poet Hannah Senesh who was executed by the Nazis in 1944 at the age of 43. The women all agreed that the melody was soulful and evocative and the words very poignant "*Eli, Eli I pray that it never will end; The sand and the sea and the waves breaking and sighing and high over the water the wind blowing free. The lightning and rain and the darkness descending and ever and ever the nature of man*"

A time of questions and answers followed including an interesting discussion about the Jewish tradition of sitting shivvah after a Jewish person dies. Mitzi explained that shivvah means 7 and the practice is that for a week after burial each evening the immediate relatives of the deceased sit on low chairs at home each and other family and friends come to visit to support those who are grieving. Sitting Shivah does not take place on the Sabbath though. If several members of a synagogue have died then sitting shivah can take place at the synagogue for all of them instead of at individual homes.

As in previous workshops all present, felt they had learnt something new and had gained more understanding from the workshop. Many identified some common strands with their own faith teachings and practice. The overall evaluation was that it was an excellent workshop and very worthwhile as it gave the opportunity to ask questions in a friendly and non-threatening environment where people were prepared to listen to each other's views.