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UNITY MOSQUE



How one Muslim Lebanese found HOME in a queer-friendly Friday prayer, reconnecting with her faith and other Muslim Lebanese in the diaspora along the way.

Live to you from Toronto, but still carrying a piece of Lebanon with me. The first month in the diaspora was unkind, started with a brutal flu and ached with unforgiving isolation. Three weeks in, the counselor I started seeing after my anxiety sky-rocketed and my faith trembled, suggested I check out Unity Mosque.

Created in May 2009, Unity Mosque describes itself as “a compassionate, focused, inclusive, LGBTQ+ affirming, Islamic mosque space.” From the website alone, I found myself thrilled to attend their weekly *juma* circle; a weekly Friday prayer and community-building gathering.

Equipped with Google Maps and a sense of wonder, I prepared to leave my apartment. It was the first time I ventured beyond campus territory, and the buzzing streets reminded me of staying at my grandparents’ in Dahyia: constant traffic, honks and people moving with direction. Finally, I walked into the Women’s Health in Women’s Hands Center flustered and anxious. The congregation was held in a spacious, repurposed boardroom, prayer mats hugging each other on one half and a table with coffee, tea and snacks on the other.

I had never gone to a Friday prayer by myself before, let alone one where

everybody sat in a circle regardless of their gender or sexual identity; a true depiction of the celebration of diversity in Islam. I found my way to a spot by the window, sat square-legged and open-eyed, observing, listening and noting in my journal. The session began when Yasmin, a regular attendee at Unity Mosque, stood and recited the call for prayer. Everything but her voice fell silent in the room. I transcended space and time into a serenity I hadn’t felt since walking along Tyre’s corniche early one morning, just a few months ago.

The *khutbah* was hosted by El-Farouk, one of the co-founders of Unity Mosque. It revolved around Allah being closer to us than our jugular vein, and by extension the only One capable of knowing us or making decrees on us. As I listened, I embraced my nature as a writer and academic by taking notes throughout the preaching. I could sense my anxiety dissolve as his words hit HOME. He concluded his *khutbah* and we began to form prayer lines for Friday prayer. Right then, I overheard a man talking in soft Lebanese Arabic, and we shared a split-second smile as we recognized our roots are from the same olive tree.

Jamaa prayer—or group prayer—always brings serenity to my heart as we all become one, moving in sync; a choreographed act of kindness. We

said our *salaams* and reassembled in a circle, introducing ourselves by name and sharing what we’d like to pray for in that moment. Hastily and low-voiced, I announced “Da... Dana, ah, I pray for the loneliness to leave...” and began to tear up despite myself. The woman next to me put her hand over mine and squeezed it. It struck me how such a small act of affection could be so generous.

The circle kept going, introducing people from all over the world and all across the spectrum, with prayers that ranged from large-scale asks of wars to end, to personal and pivotal ones like the man across from me who said: “I pray my husband arrives safely tonight.” To this day, that remains one of my most mind-altering moments. Previously, all my conversations with queer Muslims were held in hushed closets, but here I was in daylight, sitting on a spring-colored prayer mat, holding hands with a kind woman and praying for a Muslim man’s husband to get HOME safe, as though it were the most ordinary thing ever.

We prayed, talked, drank tea and felt the world slowly breathe in and out. My experience at Unity Mosque has felt like listening to intersecting *athans* in Beirut, and has become a stepping stone into the path of making Toronto HOME.

By Dana Seif



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The Soul of Lebanon

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