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Crossing Borders with Tzedakah and Sadaqah

Becki Marcus ('15) | BronfmanTorah | Shelach Lecha

We are pleased to bring you the second in our series of pieces written by some of this year's Alumni Venture Fund grantees. Becki Marcus' ('15) AVF-sponsored project is [Building Relationships: Islam and Judaism](#) (BRIJ), which brings together 5th graders from The Jewish Community Day School and the Islamic School of Rhode Island to Brown University's campus for dynamic inter-religious learning experience.

***Becki Marcus ('15)** is a rising Junior at Brown University, passionate about transforming the justice system. This summer she is working with the Women's Community Justice Association, gathering the stories of justice-impacted women and participating in a committee focused on closing the women's jail on Riker's Island by 2020. She will be going to Havana, Cuba in the fall, if anyone has any recommendations!*

I didn't get to see the inside of many other schools growing up, and I don't think many kids do. Generally, we grow up aware of the different schools around us but have little access to other school buildings, let alone getting to know the feeling in

another school's classrooms or the culture of the students that learn in them each day. But in Rhode Island, two fifth grade classes experience each other's school every week—one a Jewish day school and the other an Islamic day school. Students alternate hosting and entering the other school as they come together for a class on the intersections of Judaism and Islam. The curriculum is rooted in the ideas of tzedakah and sadaqah—what it means to act with justice or sincerity. The program, [Building Relationships: Islam and Judaism](#) (BRIJ) is taught by Brown University Students who created its curriculum with the help of Brown professors and teachers from both day schools.

Sulayman from the Islamic School of Rhode Island was one of the students who was often more difficult to engage in the classroom. Yet when students from the Jewish Community Day School asked about the plates on the wall above the blackboard, painted with beautiful Arabic calligraphy, Sulayman proudly raised his hand to explain that those were the names of God, and that in Islam, God has ninety-nine different names. From the first lesson focusing on parallels of each of the Five Pillars of Islam to components of Judaism, to the lesson on welcoming the stranger, the students raised their hands to recount portions of sacred text or describe religious practice taught in class. I and the three other student leaders (two Jewish and two Muslim) learned so much from the lived experience and analysis of both religions from the fifth-grade students.

More than sharing religious knowledge, students navigated sharing religious space. The first time the students from the Islamic School of Rhode Island (ISRI) entered The Jewish Community Day School (JCDS), the Muslim students prayed Dhuhur in the hallway of the Jewish day school. The principal Andrea Katzman came into the room and said in a deeply sincere voice, "Those students are praying in the hallway—this is unacceptable. We wouldn't ask you to do tefillah in the hallway." Then she asked the students, "What should we do about it?" I believe it was Ivy who had the idea that we move the chairs and tables in the teachers' lounge, where we

had our classes, so that the ISRI students could pray in the classroom while the JCDS students waited in the hall. And this the students graciously did every other Thursday before we would come together to bless the snack in both Arabic and in Hebrew.

Parashah Sh'lach Lchah also deals with crossing borders into another's space. As the Israelites wait in the wilderness, Moses sends scouts to enter the land of Canaan. The land is immensely lush and plentiful, and the first scouts return with humungous grapes, pomegranates, and figs. One scout, Caleb urges the Israelites to conquer this great land. Others are overcome with fear. These scouts proclaim that the people of Canaan would surely devour them because they appeared so huge that in comparison the Israelites felt like grasshoppers. In the face of a new group of people, the Israelites respond with both military aggression and fear which lead them to demonize those they do not know. In the end, the Israelites must wander in the desert for forty years, for only their children will be ready to enter the foreign land.

Through BRIJ, we've seen what happens when we encourage children to cross borders and enter into each other's spaces—they come with minds perhaps more open than our own. In learning together, children can reveal such richness in their differences that the land overflows with milk and honey.

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