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In the Wake of Hate: 
Rebuilding Religion, Place, and Community in Sacramento and Joplin

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ABSTRACT

In the Wake of Hate:
Rebuilding Religion, Place, and Community in Sacramento and Joplin

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This dissertation examines the lived experiences of hate crimes committed against religious minority groups in the United States in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Focused on arsons of places of worship, it is based on a comparative study of two distinct religious communities affected by such violence: Congregation B’nai Israel in Sacramento, California and the Islamic Society of Joplin, Missouri. Although the dissertation takes as its starting point the arsons of the synagogue and mosque, it is concerned primarily with what happens in their wake. I argue that the arsons and their aftermath compelled both communities to reevaluate their collective identities and priorities, including their relationships to their religious ideologies and practices, to one another, and to their neighbors. By attending to the ramifications of arsons of religious places, this work offers insight into religious communities’ experiences of hate crimes, their navigations of structural and psychological repair, and their evolving relationships to community and place.

The first and second chapters delve into the relationships between people and place. They demonstrate how B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society are shaped by their respective cities and religious spaces, particularly in their reactions to the hate crimes. These chapters also parse the ways in which the destruction of these places fragmented and unsettled the religious communities. The third and fourth chapters move from physical structures to structures of memory. While the third chapter investigates the frameworks that guide religious adherents’
collective memories of the arsons, the fourth chapter evaluates their collective memories of the
post-arson unity rallies and reflects on how American religious pluralism is constructed in the
wake of hate.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, Henry Miller wrote that “one’s destination is never a place, but a new way of looking at things.” My new ways of looking at things are almost always thanks to the people who made possible the journeys to these destinations. I am unspeakably grateful to those who have guided and supported me.

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For my great-grandmothers Gussie Baum and Gussie Doniger,

for whom I am named
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INTRODUCTION

That thing we call a place is the intersection of many changing forces passing through, whirling around, mixing, dissolving, and exploding in a fixed location. To write about a place is to acknowledge that phenomena often treated separately—energy, democracy, culture, storytelling, urban design, individual life histories and collective endeavors—coexist. They coexist geographically, spatially, in place, and to understand a place is to engage with braided narratives and sui generis explorations.

— Rebecca Solnit, *The Encyclopedia of Trouble and Spaciousness*¹

What follows is a study of the things we call religious places—and what happens when they are burned deliberately to the ground. Arsons become threaded into the braided narratives of those spaces, of course. But what of the individual lives and ordinary practices, the collective memories and political enterprises? When religious spaces are intentionally destroyed, what becomes of the coexisting phenomena that intersect in place?

This dissertation offers a fine-grained study of the lived experiences and consequences of hate crimes committed against American religious minorities. The attacks initiate rather than occupy the narrative. Shifting focus from the hate crimes to those subject to them, this story chronicles two religious groups targeted by violence: a large Renewal Reform Jewish congregation whose synagogue in Sacramento, California was burned in 1999 and a small primarily-immigrant Muslim community whose mosque in Joplin, Missouri was burned in 2012.² Despite the numerous differences between Congregation B’nai Israel and the Islamic

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² B’nai Israel is affiliated with the Union for Reform Judaism but considers itself a “Jewish Renewal” congregation. The Jewish Renewal movement is a contemporary movement that aims to reinvigorate Judaism with Kabbalistic,
Society of Joplin — among them religion, geography, politics, and history — they endured attacks on their places of worship. As such, they were forced to grapple with reconstructions both of place and of people. The arsons were catalytic moments of violence that required these religious minority groups to rebuild their religious spaces and by extension compelled them to re-evaluate themselves, their shared religious priorities, their collective aspirations, and their relationships to their local communities.

The hate crimes have settled into the historical pasts of Congregation B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society of Joplin. Yet community members’ recollections of violence and the subsequent processes of repair continue to shift and evolve. The narrative thus interweaves living experiences of the attacks and their aftermath to examine how victimized religious minorities negotiate past and present, arson and reconstruction, place and people. It also attends to the affective impacts of violence to places of worship, tracing the ways in which emotions, thoughts, and behaviors remake place, collective memory, and communal identity. Above all, the narrative turns from intentional violence to religious places to explore what happens to places, and the worlds that inhabit them, in the wake of hate.

As the sun rose on June 18, 1999, clouds of smoke lingered heavily, seemingly motionless. Blackened scraps of paper floated through warm stilled summer air. Among the charred pillars and piled debris, pulpy sodden mounds revealed tatters of fabric and matted pages of sacred script. Congregation B’nai Israel was one of three synagogues in the Sacramento, California area left smoldering that Friday morning before preparations for the Sabbath. The hardest hit of the attacked communities, it sustained almost a million dollars in heavy damages to its sanctuary, along with the total destruction of its library. No people were injured, but the community lost over five thousand books, some hundreds of years old, along with more than three hundred videotapes about Jewish history and recordings of Holocaust survivors.

Because the three fires took place nearly simultaneously, officers deduced these were cases of arson. Seventy agents of the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) and thirty agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) were dispatched to lead the investigation. The ATF sent its National Response Team to Sacramento County, and California Governor Gray Davis ordered all law enforcement officials in the area to assist federal efforts. Investigations found that the three synagogue attacks occurred within a thirty-five-minute time span, leading officials to suspect the involvement of more than one individual in the crime. Less than a month later, in July 1999, officers arrested two brothers – both white supremacists – in

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3 The other congregations targeted by the arsonists were Congregation Beth Shalom and Knesset Israel Torah Center.
connection with the arsons of the Sacramento synagogues, in addition to the attempted arson of a local women’s health clinic and the murder of a gay couple in Redding, California.\

While the perpetrators were apprehended – and subsequently sentenced to a collective fifty years in prison for their crimes – communal recovery from the fires had barely begun. The synagogues needed to be rebuilt; the B’nai Israel library was decimated; and the congregations required money to fund both efforts. Yet many viewed these as relatively minor setbacks compared to the loss articulated by a Sacramento Jewish leader in an article in the Los Angeles Times. “What can’t be replaced,” he lamented, “is peace of mind.” Arson was not new to the B’nai Israel community. In 1993, the congregation had been targeted in a series of fire bombings that also struck the offices of African-American and Japanese-American organizations and the home of a Chinese-American city councilman. The repeated arsons served as reminders that although buildings can be reconstructed and libraries can be replenished, acts of hatred leave indelible marks.

The Islamic Society of Joplin
Joplin, Missouri
Monday, August 6, 2012

On August 6, 2012, Imam Lahmuddin, the imam of the Islamic Society of Joplin, Missouri, left early for the *fajr* morning prayer at the community’s mosque on Black Cat Road. On this

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4 Because I am concerned with the victims of crimes, rather than their perpetrators, I deliberately omitted their names from the story. However, in the interest of factual disclosure, the criminals in Sacramento were Matthew and Tyler Williams (ages thirty-one and twenty-nine, respectively, at the time of the crimes). Though not officially affiliated with any particular hate groups, they were influenced by World Church of the Creator and Aryan Nations.

morning of Ramadan, he faced the flaming wreckage of the Islamic Society’s mosque as the Carl Junction fire department persisted in fighting the blaze. By eight in the morning, fire crews began to leave. The mosque had been leveled. Charred remains of prayer rugs and copies of the Qu’ran still smoked amidst the blackened skeleton of the building. Although community members often stay overnight at the mosque during the holy month of Ramadan, no one was in the building during the fire. According to Archie Dunn, the Jasper County sheriff at the time, there were no injuries, but “the building was a total loss.”

Agents from the ATF and the FBI found the fire suspicious and commenced an investigation. However, despite an attempted arson of the mosque only a few weeks earlier, law enforcement officials did not initially declare the August fire an arson. The perpetrator remained unidentified until October 2013. More than a year after the arsons and the total destruction of the mosque, an Iraq War veteran was arrested for two attempts to burn down the Joplin Planned Parenthood. Once in custody, the arsonist confessed to setting both fires at the mosque.

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6 While preparing his breakfast that day, Imam Lahmuddin missed a phone call about the mosque burning. Even when he saw that the missed call was from the sheriff’s office, he thought little of it, as he received calls from the alarm company and the sheriff whenever anything tripped the alarm at the mosque. He tried to reach the sheriff, but there was no answer, so he went to the mosque early to check on it. He remembered driving down 20th Street toward the mosque and seeing smoke in the distance. “I knew the mosque was burned,” he said. The imam later surmised that the alarm company had not called him because the arson must have burned the alarm’s wiring, causing it to malfunction. Imam Lahmuddin, interview with author, 4/16/2014.

7 Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, observed by Muslims as a month of fasting, introspection, and prayer to commemorate the first revelation of the Qur’an.


9 In July, the mosque’s surveillance cameras captured images of a man throwing an incendiary device onto the roof of the mosque. However, the August fire damaged the mosque’s cameras, leaving no evidence of a perpetrator. The July arson caused only minor damages to the mosque’s roof, and repairs were quick.

10 The arsonist was Jedediah Stout, then thirty years old. He served as a combat engineer from October 2002 to July 2005, and he was deployed for a year in Iraq beginning September 2003.
The Joplin arsonist has pled guilty to a four-count indictment, but as of this work’s publication (May 6, 2016), he has yet to be sentenced. Nonetheless, the local Joplin community and the Islamic Society have taken strides to restore religious space and communal cohesion. Soon after the August 2012 arson, St. Philip’s Episcopal Church hosted the Islamic Society for an *iftar* dinner to end the day’s Ramadan fast. At the end of the same month, Joplin citizens gathered together for an interfaith rally to support their Muslim neighbors. The Islamic Society took up occupancy in a former Thai restaurant in a strip mall for almost two years, while the community raised enough money to rebuild its mosque in a new location. Quoted in an August 2012 local news story about the mosque arson, Imam Lahmuddin said, “It is hard, but we survive.”

**FIXED LOCATIONS**

Although “hate crimes” were not designated as such until the 1980s, and the FBI did not begin collecting hate crime statistics until the early 1990s, American religious minorities have long endured bias-motivated violence. Catholics, Mormons, Native Americans, Jehovah’s *Witness.*

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13 Per the FBI’s definition, a hate crime, also called a “bias crime,” is a “criminal offense against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by an offender’s bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity.” The FBI serves as a “backstop to investigations conducted by state and local law enforcement agencies, which handle the vast majority of bias crime investigations throughout the country.” In 1990, the Hate Crime Statistics Act was passed, requiring the Attorney General to gather data on hate crimes committed due to the victim’s race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or ethnicity. The bill was expanded to
Witnesses, and Jews, among many other religious minority groups, have faced hostility and aggression propelled by rampant nativism and religious intolerance. This antagonism shifted focus to American Muslims in the decades after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and rose dramatically after the September 11, 2001 attacks against the World Trade Center and Pentagon buildings. Given that the crimes at the center of this dissertation added to America’s ever-mounting tally of anti-religion violence, why focus on these two attacks?

In part, the answer is personal. When I was twelve years old, early in the summer of my Bat Mitzvah, I read about the Sacramento arsons in the newspaper. I was deeply unnerved by the intentional violence and especially distressed by pictures of burned books and thoughts of destroyed libraries and sanctuaries. After collecting books from local synagogues, libraries, Jewish community centers, and schools, my mother and I meticulously glued book plates into each before shipping the boxes to California. A decade later, when my interests in religion, violence, space, and place began to cohere into a dissertation proposal, there was no question that include gender and gender identity in 2009, through the Matthew Shepherd and James Byrd, Jr Hate Crimes Prevention Act. The most recent hate crime statistics indicate that 18.6 percent of almost 5,500 hate crimes committed in 2014 involved anti-religious biases. “Hate Crimes — Overview,” Civil Rights, Federal Bureau of Investigation, https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/civilrights/hate_crimes/overview.


16 On my first research trip to Sacramento, I wandered around the B’nai Israel library, looking at various book plates to see from whom and from where each book had been donated. I opened a copy of one of my favorite books, Leon Uris’ Exodus, and discovered my own book plate glued inside of the front cover. Moreover, as B’nai Israel prepared for the fifteenth-anniversary commemoration of the arson, the congregation’s archivist came across the short typewritten letter, inscribed with my twelve-year-old signature, that I sent with the book donation in 1999. She then included the letter in a display case she curated for the commemoration event. These material artifacts evidence the extent to which my own history has become intertwined with B’nai Israel’s history. The addition of this dissertation to B’nai Israel’s library, and to that of the Islamic Society of Joplin, will be another.
the project would involve the arson, the place, and the community that led me to my studies. However, the project needed to be a comparative one.

For much of religious studies’ history as a discipline, comparative religions had been a principal methodology. However, in the past few decades, religion scholars have called comparative study into question. Many view comparativist approaches as inescapably tethered to the field’s own emergence from imperial colonialism, its power, and its disciplinary strategies. Others indict comparative religions for promoting a universal and acontextual *sui generis* religion. In contrast, this project joins other contemporary efforts to revise comparative religions as a practice of religious studies. As religion scholar Jonathan Z. Smith points out, “there is nothing ‘given’ or ‘natural’ in those elements selected for comparison.” Rather, similarities and differences are the “result of mental operations undertaken by scholars in the interest of their intellectual goals.”

The intellectual goal of the project is to discern the effects of anti-religion bias crimes on American religious communities, not solely the consequences of anti-Semitic attacks. Jewish communities are only one of many American minority religious populations routinely targeted.

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by discrimination and violence. With this in mind, I sought out a second case study to bring into comparison with B’nai Israel: a religious minority group also targeted by arson but of a different religious tradition, in a different geographic and socio-political location, with a different history. On August 6, 2012, I was formulating a long list of arsons committed against American religious places, brainstorming possible additions to my study. I paused to read the news and discovered stories about the Islamic Society’s mosque-burning. Underscoring the unfortunate continuing relevance of arsons committed against religious others, the Islamic Society’s tragedy provided a compelling juxtaposition with that of B’nai Israel.

The communities share several similar experiences that readily bring them into parallel in pursuit of understanding the ramifications of violence committed against religious minority communities in the contemporary United States. Both suffered multiple arsons (attempted and successful) to their places of worship. B’nai Israel’s synagogue was firebombed in 1993 and again in 1999, while the Islamic Society’s mosque was firebombed in July 2012 only to be demolished by another arson in August of the same summer. In each case, other groups – Planned Parenthood, Asian Americans, African Americans, members of the LGBTQ community – were also targeted. Local, state, and federal officials responded to both arsons, conducted investigations, and ultimately apprehended the perpetrators. Such shared courses of events prompt comparative analyses of experiences of violence to religious places and formations of collective memory.

While the dissertation addresses at length the ways in which the two communities overlap in their lived experiences of violence and repair, it also attends to the differences between them. B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society are distinct in their religious traditions, communal histories, political positionalities, regional distinctions, and time lapsed between their arsons and the
present. The religious difference is most explicit: a Jewish community and a Muslim community. However, the distinction moves beyond basic religious affiliation to each group’s relationship to the American religious landscape. Like many American Jewish communities, B’nai Israel has an extended history in the United States; the congregation dates back to the mid-nineteenth-century California Gold Rush. In contrast, the Islamic Society did not establish its first community space until 2006. The communities’ divergent historical lineages in Sacramento and Joplin contribute to the differences in their socio-political statuses. While B’nai Israel members retain the high levels of political involvement and public visibility initiated in the congregation’s early days, Islamic Society members tend to be disengaged from local and state politics and reserved in their public presence.

The congregations’ home cities provide another contrasting variable. While they are both cities, Sacramento and Joplin differ drastically in size and composition, and of course, geographic region. With an estimated population of 485,200 people, Sacramento is the sixth-largest city in California; more importantly, it is the state capital. Less than half of the community is white, with substantial populations of Hispanics (26.9%), African Americans (14.6%), and Asian Americans (18.3%). Almost a quarter (22.1%) of Sacramento’s citizens are foreign-born. Little information about the religious make-up of Sacramento is available, but state-wide numbers show that approximately sixty-three percent of the population consider themselves Christian, almost evenly split between Protestants and Catholics, while the

21 Chapter one addresses in great detail how each community establishes itself in relation to its city and to its religious space.

religiously unaffiliated, or the religious “nones,” account for twenty percent. Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus each comprise two percent and Muslims only one percent of the California population.

By contrast, Joplin is a small city located just off of Interstate 44 in southwestern Missouri. Joplin is home to some 50,800 people, eighty-eight percent of whom are white. A mere 2.5% of the population is foreign-born. My observations of religious spaces in Joplin confirm that Joplin’s religious population is reflective of the state’s religious demographics. More than three-quarters (77%) of the population are Christian, predominantly affiliated with various Protestant denominations (58%). Less than one percent of Missouri residents are Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu. Though both Sacramento and Joplin are largely Protestant, Joplin displays significantly less racial, religious, and ethnic diversity. Joplin’s relative homogeneity accentuates Islamic Society members’ differences, thereby shaping their responses to the arson and accounting for their concerted efforts to integrate into the larger Joplin community.

To a certain extent, Joplin and Sacramento share similar historical backgrounds. Both cities date from the mid-nineteenth century, when they became hub towns for miners extracting nearby

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25 A history of Joplin notes: “No offensive foreign element has ever afflicted itself upon Joplin. It has always retained a midwest atmosphere. A desirable class of Irish and Germans became citizens in the [1870s] and [1880s].” As of the late nineteenth century, the foreign-born population has shifted only slightly. Dolph Shaner, *The Story of Joplin* (New York: Stratford House, 1948), 75.


27 Throughout the dissertation, I attempt to highlight the ways in which the Islamic Society’s particular location in Joplin, set in a country plagued by rabid anti-Muslim sentiment, inflects community members’ experiences of and responses to the arson.
natural resources. In the late 1840s, the California Gold Rush led droves of prospectors to Sutter’s Mill and the Sacramento Valley. However, by the 1850s, when Congregation B’nai Israel was founded, the city had outgrown its boomtown status and diversified its economy. By 1854, it had been selected as the permanent state capital. Development in Joplin began some twenty years later, after the Civil War, when miners were drawn to lead ore in Joplin Creek Valley. Established in 1873, Joplin quickly flourished through both lead and zinc mining and, with the sprawling expansion of the railroads, became the center of the “Tri-State district.”

Both Sacramento and Joplin were established through their proximity to raw materials and grew into thriving metropolises during the course of the twentieth century. However, by World War Two, many of Joplin’s mines had closed, and highways soon overtook railroads. Joplin became a thoroughfare rather than a destination, with travelers often passing through town via Joplin’s main road, the famous Route 66. Today, the main employers in Joplin are the Freeman and Mercy hospitals that service the “Four States” region, Con-Way Trucking, and Walmart.

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30 The “Tri-State district” refers specifically to the lead-zinc mining district in southwest Missouri, southeast Kansas, and northeast Oklahoma. For further detail on the Tri-State mining district, see Arrell M. Gibson, Wilderness Bonanza: The Tri-State District of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma (University of Oklahoma Press, 1972) and David Robertson, Hard as the Rock Itself: Place and Identity in the American Mining Town (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2006).

31 The “Four States,” or Quad States, region is where Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma meet. Dolph Shaner’s history of Joplin refers to the region as the “Empire District” (Shaner, 115). Joplin is the most centrally located city in the Four States area. For the most recently available information on Joplin’s industries and finances, see the “Comprehensive Annual Financial Report for the year ended October 31, 2013,” City of Joplin, Missouri, http://www.joplinmo.org/ArchiveCenter/ViewFile/Item/4793.
By contrast, Sacramento’s proximity to the San Francisco Bay area and the Sacramento and American rivers sustained the city’s growth, while the city’s status as state capital maintained its stability. To date, the State of California and Sacramento County remain Sacramento’s largest employers. Sacramento and Joplin are also distinct from one another in their geographic locations and landscapes. Sacramento is in northern California, just about a two-hour drive east of San Francisco, along a naked highway directly exposed to an often-glaring sun. It sits at the confluence of the Sacramento and American rivers, which have deluged the city several times in Sacramento’s history. Its suburbs — winding circles of mostly ranch-style homes on streets lined with leafy trees — nestle in neat pockets, primarily to the north, east, and south of downtown Sacramento. The dry, flat terrain of Joplin is comparatively stark: crooked trees dot the landscape, tacked down next to worn split-level homes and bungalows. When I visited, large dry patches of land absent of shrubbery and buildings harbored yellows cranes, orange cones, and workmen in neon vests, residual evidence of the 2011 EF5 tornado that razed half of the city and killed 161 people. Beyond the strip malls and drive-through liquor stores at the city center, brand-new subdivisions of grand two-story neocolonial houses rest in quiet culs-de-sac.

While the cities’ histories and landscapes are integral to the story’s contexts, the relative economic and educational differences between both religious minority groups and their neighbors are perhaps more instructive in situating the communities. Both Sacramento and Joplin

32 Castaneda and Simpson.
34 EF5 designates that the Joplin tornado registered as a five on the Enhanced Fujita tornado scale of 0-6. EF5 tornadoes typically experience winds over 200 miles per hour and cause extensive damage and destruction.
share similar percentages of citizens below the poverty lines, and their average household incomes differ only marginally, given slightly higher costs of living in Sacramento (Joplin averages around $37,900, and Sacramento averages about $50,000).\footnote{City of Joplin, Missouri, Comprehensive Annual Financial Report for the year ended October 31, 2013 (most recently available). City of Sacramento, California, Comprehensive Annual Financial Report, fiscal year ended June 30, 2014.} In both cities, less than thirty percent of adults (at least twenty-five years old) hold a bachelor’s degree or higher.\footnote{See “Joplin Quick Facts,” U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts, last modified June 27, 2013, http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/29/2937592.html and “Sacramento Quick Facts,” U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts, last modified June 27, 2013, http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/0664000.html.} Comparatively, the religious communities at the center of this story are situated in higher educational and financial brackets than their neighbors. Many Islamic Society members are physicians who live in sizable homes in the more upscale neighborhoods outside of downtown Joplin. More varied in career composition than the Islamic Society, a number of B’nai Israel members work as politicians, state employees, and lawyers.\footnote{While it is unclear whether or not congregants’ socio-economic positions contributed to the arsonists’ motives, the dissertation considers the ways in which the religious communities’ financial and political statuses influenced their own reactions, as well as their neighbors’ responses, to the crimes.} While the Islamic Society maintains relative economic capital, B’nai Israel possesses significant political and social capital.

**COEXISTING PHENOMENA**

This work emerges from a concerned curiosity about what happens to religious communities subjected to violence. In what ways do religious adherents cope with losing their places of worship? How do they choose to rebuild, or not? Years later, what do they remember of the attacks and their aftermath? While extensive scrutiny often befalls the crimes’ perpetrators, little attention has been paid to the people directly affected by the violence. After news networks
and the general public have turned their gazes to the next tragedy, it is left to scholars to discern the extraordinary and ordinary consequences of hate crimes for their targets.

Although scholars of sociology, criminology, and law have investigated anti-religious hate crimes in the United States, relatively few religion scholars place the issue at the center of their research. In doing just that, this dissertation bridges four key focal areas of study to explore the lived ramifications of hate crimes committed against American religious minorities’ places of worship. First, it engages with an extensive and diverse body of work on religion and violence, suggesting new paths for examining their intersection. Second, it sheds light on the relationships between people and place by adopting certain theoretical underpinnings provided by human geographers and the developing sub-field of emotional geography. Third, by examining the complicated tangles of emotions, memories, and actions, this work builds on analyses of collective memory and trauma. Finally, it engages with various instantiations of the political, from internal community politics and the politics of place and memory to civic engagement and the politics of normalcy.

Inverting Religious Violence

Much of the literature on religion and violence takes a global scope, with some scholars focusing on religion as the cause of violence and others considering religion a tool for resolving conflicts.

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conflict. Such broad-reaching studies tend to essentialize religion and violence and reinscribe the disciplinary study of these areas as the analysis of “religious violence,” in other words, as violence executed by religious actors. My work approaches the intersection of religion and violence in a very different way. Rather than studying violence committed by religious people or motivated by religious rationales, this work intimately examines the ramifications of violence committed against religious adherents. It shifts from the global to the local and from the perpetrators of violence to its victims, and in so doing, widens the disciplinary focus of “religious violence” to address the religious communities affected by violence.

This project also speaks to the many American religious histories in which violence against religious groups is endemic to a nation caught between manyness and oneness. In this view, hostility toward religious communities is an inevitable feature of a country struggling to establish religious liberty and pluralism. American religious historians Catherine Albanese, Edwin Gaustad, and Leigh Schmidt focus on this tension. Albanese emphasizes the struggle between balancing America’s diverse religious groups and its shared civil religion. Gaustad and Schmidt

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40 Though little scholarship has focused on the effects of violence against religious communities, some works address violence against women or children within religious traditions or anti-religious violence in the context of larger-scale political, nationalist violence. For example, see Chad M. Bauman, Pentecostals, Proselytization, and Anti-Christian Violence in Contemporary India (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

describe America’s historic pluralism as simultaneously exhibiting a “colourful display” and “heightened anxieties.”

Diana Eck and William Hutchison also join this argument, likening American religious pluralism to a symphony orchestra that must “play together through dissonant moments.”

Although the stories of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society encapsulate the struggles of American pluralism, they do not culminate in harmonious resolution. Rather, this project understands violence against religious others as continued materializations of America’s xenophobic past, as discussed by historians John Higham, Sylvester A. Johnson, John D. Carlson, and Jonathan Ebel. The arsons that initiate this story are consistent with America’s national tradition of nativism. Stemming from deep anti-Catholic roots, rampant anti-immigrant sentiment and action rejected difference and blurred the lines between religion and race. While the American motto, E pluribus unum, praises the country’s plurality and unity, American history demonstrates a deep suspicion of diversity and a glorification of fusion. As Carlson and Ebel assert, “discord within and among religious communities in North America is as old as religious diversity itself.” Joining these scholars, this study offers a close-grained analysis of the experiences and lived consequences of violence against contemporary American religious

42 Gaustad and Schmidt, 209.
43 Eck, 59.

45 Higham, 20.
46 Carlson and Ebel, 15.
groups. As much as this is an intimate story about explicitly anti-religious violence, it likewise unveils subversive violences intrinsic to American religious pluralism: the normalized responses to hate crimes, the language of tolerance, and the expectations of adaptation and participation placed on religious others.

The Intimacy of Place

Studies of religion and space or place largely fall into three distinct categories: the manifestations and makings of “sacred space”; the architectures of religious places; and the politics of religious sites. “Sacred space” as its own distinct category in religious studies emerged largely as the preoccupation of phenomenologists of religion. These scholars strove to construct objective taxonomies of religious phenomena by observing, classifying, and evaluating religious practices, materials, and places. Through such “scientific” means, they endeavored to systematize religion’s “ideal types,” thereby improving their overall comprehension of religion as a phenomenon. As one such type, “sacred space” was understood to be the materialization of religion’s essence; spaces reveal themselves to people as sacred. Later theorists of sacred space amended these phenomenologies of sacred space by integrating the ways in which sacred spaces are also man-made.

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48 Notable phenomenologists of religion include Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye, Gerardus van der Leeuw, and Mircea Eliade.

49 Significant social constructionists include David Chidester, Edward Linenthal, and Jonathan Z. Smith.
A second branch of religion, space, and place studies examines the architectural characteristics of religious places, considering their design features in light of religious communities’ philosophies and practices.\textsuperscript{50} This literature comes from architects, scholars of architecture, and scholars of religion. Concerned with religious places’ architectural elements, these works explain how and why the places were drafted and built as they were. The intent is, as Richard Kieckhefer writes, “to suggest how one might go about reading a church,” to delve into the purposes behind its construction, and to articulate its experiential effects.\textsuperscript{51} Finally, still other scholars turn their analyses to the politics of religious sites. Though it is of course not only sacred spaces or religious places that may be contested, some scholars see these sites as unique due to their “sacrality.” Belonging to a particular religious community, a sacred space is an owned property, a bounded territory, a source of conflict.\textsuperscript{52}

While my dissertation touches on each of these areas of study, it privileges relationships and affect. As theologian Belden Lane asserts, “who we are…is inseparably a part of where we are.”\textsuperscript{53} In other words, people and place are inextricably linked and mutually constitutive. Subsequently, like Louis Nelson’s work in \textit{American Sanctuary}, the aim of this project is to assess what religious “spaces mean to the people who construct and inhabit them.”\textsuperscript{54} Yet this

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{50} Such scholars include Richard Kieckhefer, Jeanne Halgren Kilde, and Peter Williams.
\item\textsuperscript{52} Among these scholars are David Chidester, Edward Linenthal, Roger Stump, and Ron Hassner.
\item\textsuperscript{53} Belden Lane, \textit{Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 5 and 6. Lane sees placed-ness as the cornerstone of existence, human and otherwise. His concept of sacred space derives from Yi-Fu Tuan’s “topophilia,” John K. Wright’s “geopiety,” and Heidegger’s \textit{dasein}.
\item\textsuperscript{54} Lewis Nelson, ed., \textit{American Sanctuary: Understanding Sacred Spaces} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), x.
\end{itemize}
story contends with certain kinds of religious places: those destroyed by violent acts of hatred. Thus, it is about what past, present, and future religious places mean for religious communities grappling with unexpected loss, with vulnerability, with fear.

People and their environments — physical, historical, political, and social — are interrelated. Through the human geography sub-discipline of “emotional geography,” this project attends to the poetics and politics of religious places. By engaging affect, “the how of emotion,” this work investigates how emotions and intersubjective relationships with destroyed place drive actions. The religious spaces of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society are dynamic and lived ones. They are sometimes sacred, often mundane. They are created and colored by mixed emotions and fraught negotiations. They cultivate memory and craft communal identity. They are shaped by and shapers of the religious communities central to the narrative. They are not only characters in the stories but also members of the religious communities themselves.

*Memory: Material, Sensorial, Collective*

A vast body of academic work spanning diverse disciplines addresses memory both as an individual and a social faculty. The research tends to be not only multi-disciplinary but interdisciplinary, particularly when the scope is limited to memories of trauma or violence.

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56 Paul Ricoeur, Jeffrey K. Olick, Maurice Halbwachs, and Pierre Nora are some of the most significant scholars who have shaped the field of memory studies.

Scholars of psychology, cognitive science, critical theory, sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies take on trauma as an often nebulously defined but individually embodied and collectively carried experience. Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman assert that where trauma was once a suspect condition, over time it has become a “legitimate status.” The category of trauma gives a name to the painful links between past and present, links that “may even require immediate treatment in order to ensure that they do not burden the future.”

This dissertation examines memories of violence in their individual and collective manifestations. Through analyzing the narratives of B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members, it addresses how these communities contend with traumatic pasts. It examines the ways in which people negotiate conscious remembering and subconscious forgetting, as well as personal suffering and communal experience. It delves into sensorial memories, joining conversations about the significance of affect for memory. Moreover, it explores the construction of collective memories as productive modalities, disciplining technologies. Finally, it understands these memories as located, centered on and situated in physical, material spaces.

Echoing memory scholars like Paul Ricoeur, Pierre Nora, and James Young, who discuss “sites of memory,” Oren Baruch Stier and J. Shawn Landres underscore that emplaced memory

59 Ibid., 277.
61 According to Foucault, technologies of the self “permit individuals by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.” Michel Foucault, Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth (New Press, 2006), 225.
is an essential dimension of religious communities. In the introduction to their edited volume *Religion, Violence, Memory, and Place*, they write that memory is “a cultural product emerging from the negotiation and contestation of meaning within religious frameworks at specific sites marked by violent histories” that “surrounds and defines us.” Louis Nelson similarly articulates that religious places “enlist memory in the construction and reconstruction of identity.” In other words, though “provisional, hybrid, always evolving,” religious places and collectives memories together craft identities and shape religious communities.

**Remapping the Political**

Politics are often identified with the state, its institutions, and its processes. As a project about the ramifications of hate crimes committed against religious communities, this dissertation addresses the American government’s classification and regulation of anti-religion bias crimes. In particular, chapter four peripherally examine the effects of “hate crime” as a technical designation and tangentially reflects upon how victims experience the prosecution and sentencing of the crimes’ perpetrators. However, throughout the dissertation, I primarily engage politics beyond governance and legislation.

Scholars have extended the political as a category, taking as their objects of study not only individuals and organizations but also activities: disagreement, struggle, consensus, negotiation,

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63 Stier and Landres, 6.
64 Nelson, 9.
65 Stier and Landres, 179.
civic participation, even “the allocation of values for a society.” In its diverse manifestations, the political contends with the exercise and mitigation of power. As such, this project considers the politics internal to Congregation B’nai Israel and to the Islamic Society. The arsons of their religious places exposed fraught relationships and elevated conflicting aspirations within each religious community. In order to rebuild, both groups were forced to reconcile tensions, patching fissures in the service of progress and in pursuit of a return to normalcy.

This dissertation likewise contends with fragmentations between the religious minorities victim to the arsons and their neighbors in Sacramento and Joplin. Religious freedom and religious pluralism as shared American values hover over these interactions. The United States government, its citizens, and even some scholars of religion presume the universality and untouchability of religious freedom and religious pluralism. Yet some scholars of secularism and pluralism scrutinize the constructions, intentions, and implications of these ideologies. Courtney Bender and Pamela Klassen are two such scholars who reevaluate the “hegemonic unity” of religious pluralism as an American ideal. Through analyzing the impact of these anti-religious hate crimes, this project joins them in questioning how American pluralism might carry with it “undisclosed assumptions about what religion is and what the nation should be.”

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Finally, the politics of place, memory, and normalcy overarch the dissertation. Stier and Landres assert that questions of whether to remember, how and where to remember, and the living significance of the memories are always contested.\textsuperscript{70} Emergent from the arsons that initiate this story, disputes about memory, place, and routine are threaded throughout the narrative. Subsequently, “politics” also entails the assumptions and principles that govern the rebuilding of religious places, the construction and reconstruction of traumatic memories, and struggles to reestablish normality — or at least, to construct a new normal. Ultimately, the burned religious places lie at the intersection of persecuted religious groups, reformulated routines, memories of violence, local citizenship, national ideals, and persistent political negotiations.

**SUI GENERIS EXPLORATIONS**

Absent of attention to time, analyses of place are shallow; sites are hollowed out by ahistoricity. Although the dissertation deals substantively with the passage of time and subsequent formations of memory as they relate to the mosque and synagogue arsons, broader historical and political events frame and inform the story’s characters and circumstances. Among these, the most notable are the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the expanding scope of the surveillance state, escalating Islamophobia and Islamophobic violence, and inflamed relations between Israel and Palestine. These distinct moments in recent history envelop the hate crimes at the center of this work, bringing them into contextual relief. Where I can, I draw explicit connections and flesh out their meaning. Yet even when the global happenings do not

\textsuperscript{70} Stier and Landres, 9.
relate directly to the more ordinary affairs of post-arson communal restructuring, their shadows hover in the backdrop.

*September 11, 2001*

On September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four passenger airliners and rerouted them toward symbolic U.S. landmarks: the World Trade Center complex in New York City, the Pentagon, and Washington D.C. While United Airlines Flight 93 crashed into a field in Pennsylvania after passengers attempted to overcome the hijackers, the other flights wrought destruction on their targets. Both the north and south towers of the World Trade Center collapsed, as did a segment of the Pentagon’s western side. Almost three-thousand people were killed that day, while upwards of eighteen-thousand people later suffered chronic and fatal illnesses from exposure to carcinogens from the debris.

Even as the attacks devastated America, they compelled both virulent anxiety and zealous patriotism. Only days after the attacks, President George W. Bush declared a “War on Terror,” a series of international military campaigns that continued for over a decade and were eventually tapered, though not terminated, by President Barack Obama in 2013. A parallel but alternately executed War on Terror took place domestically. In October 2001, President Bush signed into law the USA Patriot Act, “Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism,” and the Aviation and Transportation Security Act, which created the Transportation Security Administration (TSA). Early 2002 saw the establishment of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, where suspected terrorists were detained, interrogated, and prosecuted. Later that fall, President Bush sanctioned the Homeland Security
Act, creating the Department of Homeland Security to oversee and coordinate American anti-terrorism efforts. The Homeland Security Act also disbanded the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), instead allocating border patrol and immigration matters to Immigrations and Customs Enforcement and lawful immigration and naturalization to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. The changes largely deflected rather than welcomed immigrants and contributed to mounting anti-immigrant sentiments among American citizens.

The terrorist attacks of September 11 have become central to America’s current collective memory and self-identity. While countless Americans can recall specificities around their individual experiences of that day, Americans as a civic community preserve a solemn reverence for the date, which is matched by devout nationalism and fearful paranoia. For a time, Ground Zero, the space where the World Trade Center once stood, honored the personal and symbolic losses suffered. In a sense, violence made Ground Zero into a sacred space. Confirming the area’s sacrality, controversy erupted when developers planned to construct a thirteen-story Islamic community center – originally named Cordoba House, later called Park 51 – only two blocks away from Ground Zero at 45-51 Park Place. Opponents argued that erecting a mosque so close to Ground Zero was not only a sign of disrespect to those who lost loved ones but also desecrated the space. Consequently, the Islamic center at Park 51 was never built. The Park 51

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dispute manifests public concerns with sacred space, as well as the “denial of ‘American-ness’ to non-hegemonic (usually non-Christian) religious groups.”

Ten years after the attacks, on September 11, 2011, an on-site memorial opened to the victims’ families, honoring those murdered and designating the place as one made sacred through tragedy. In May 2014, the adjacent museum opened its doors; the entry quoting Virgil, “No day shall erase you from the memory of time.” Such modes of memorialization reveal American orientations toward places marked by trauma and the importance of preserving productive and cohesive memory. Indeed, these themes carry throughout the stories of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society, and to an extent, inspired the questions and concerns of the dissertation itself.

*The Surveillance State*

The violence of September 11, 2001 initiated a period of American history marked by heightened and expanded surveillance. While the country’s history of surveillance dates back to both World Wars, and the National Security Agency (NSA) was officially established in 1952, domestic surveillance increased drastically after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Fervent efforts to prevent future attacks led to the instatement of the Patriot Act. This law not only authorized indefinite detentions of immigrants and enabled law-enforcement searches of homes and businesses without occupants’ consent or knowledge but also expanded government searches of telephone, e-mail, and financial records. In February 2003, the Information Awareness Office

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established a Total Information Awareness program to gather extensive information on domestic and international figures in the name of anticipating and preventing crimes. Later renamed the Terrorism Information Awareness Program (TIA), the project was suspended in late 2003. However, its legacy prevails; other government agencies adopted TIA’s data-mining software, while the NSA has preserved its aims.

With opposition and support coming from both sides of the political aisle, the American surveillance state remains under debate. Yet its positive effects have been widely contested by scholars, who question the broader social impact of such a regime. Where the government once targeted select individuals, it now collects masses of metadata from the general public, a tactic that has normalized suspicion and fear. In an age when electronic and Internet technologies permeate society, independent citizens work digitally to take on the federal responsibility of domestic defense. This pseudo-vigilante, “see something, say something,” lateral surveillance reinforces rather than replaces government efforts. Moreover, the government and ordinary

75 Critics denounced the TIA for its widespread public surveillance domestically, considering it a violation of individual privacy civil liberties.


citizens have a long history of hyper-focusing their surveillance on racial and religious minorities, under the guise of protecting America from those perceived as threats to the nation.\textsuperscript{79}

September 11, 2001 amplified a national tradition of consistently expanding surveillance of its own citizens. Consequently, a culture of suspicion pervades twenty-first-century America. As such, it is a current that ripples throughout the dissertation. The Islamic Society alternately gazes and is gazed upon in the name of safety. Both B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members deal directly with the tensions between sequestered security and cautious exposure, anxious suspicions and desired connections. While in many ways the events of September 11, 2001 brought Americans together, they also significantly magnified generalized feelings of fear and mistrust and rendered the panopticon the new normal.

\textit{Islamophobia}

Due in part to the religious affiliations of the airplane hijackers, the weeks, months, and years after September 11, 2001 saw a definitive rise in anti-Muslim sentiment, scrutiny, and attacks.\textsuperscript{80} Law enforcement officers, notably the New York Police Department, infiltrated Muslim communities, spying on tens of thousands of innocent Americans at mosques, businesses, and colleges.\textsuperscript{81} American citizens were asked to report fellow citizens’ suspicious

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\textsuperscript{81} “Mapping Muslims: NYPD Spying and Its Impact on American Muslims,” co-authored report by the Muslim American Civil Liberties Coalition, the Creating Law Enforcement Accountability and Responsibility project, and the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund,
\end{footnotesize}
behaviors. The state “interviewed,” imprisoned, tortured, and/or deported thousands of Muslim Americans. Even before September 11, 2001, the government persecuted Arabs and Muslims, viewing them as potential terrorists. The events of September 11 began to couple the word “terrorist” with “Muslim” or “Islamic.” Years of mounting violence carried out by radical Islamist groups, including al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, the Taliban, and the Islamic State (or Daesh), secured the connection.

Moreover, crimes against Muslim Americans increased dramatically after the September 11, 2001 attacks. Before 2001, the FBI reported between twenty and thirty anti-Muslim hate crimes each year. In 2001, however, the number rose to almost five hundred. Since 2002, between one hundred and one hundred fifty have taken place each year.82 Muslim Americans endure not only ethnic slurs, hateful language, and accusations of being terrorists but also physical assaults, vandalisms and arsons, and symbolic aggressions, such as a severed pig’s head left at the entrance to a Philadelphia mosque.83 They also contend with regular micro-aggressions, prejudicial treatment, and general marginalization in American society.

While the glut of anti-Islam hate crimes ebbed somewhat during the Obama presidency, hate crimes against Muslim Americans tripled after the November 2015 coordinated Paris attacks.

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82 The numbers are almost undoubtedly higher, given that the FBI’s hate crime statistics reports are based on voluntary participation, and some police departments are better than others at collecting such data. Christopher Ingraham, “Anti-Muslim hate crimes are still five times more common today than before 9/11,” Washington Post, February 11, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/02/11/anti-muslim-hate-crimes-are-still-five-times-more-common-today-than-before-911/.

and the December 2015 shooting spree in San Bernardino. The hate-crime surge coincides with politicians’ public defamations of Muslims, including presidential campaign promises to ban Muslim refugees from entering the country. As Deepa Kumar points out in her book *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, the political system is one part of the “matrix of Islamophobia,” building on anti-Muslim sentiment in order to construct the American empire. Although the matrix allows the federal government to justify its imperial projects, it splinters Americans domestically.

In the post-9/11 era, much attention has been focused on violence perpetrated by Muslims, rather than the reactionary violence against Muslims. This dissertation counters dominant conversations around religion and violence by attending to religious practitioners subject to violence rather than perpetrators of it. Americans’ complicated, often fraught, relationships with Islam have left Muslim Americans feeling isolated and alienated. Commensurate with Japanese internment during World War Two, today’s rampant Islamophobia has segregated a portion of the American population. Thus, while the dissertation intervenes by exploring a single anti-Muslim hate crime, this attack is one among many explicit violent acts and micro-aggressive behaviors that highlight and punish Muslim Otherness in twenty-first-century America.

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The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Interwoven throughout the above micro-histories, and underpinning the events of the dissertation, is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a protracted nationalist struggle between Jews and Arabs. The conflict spans centuries, dating back to the late nineteenth century (though some would argue longer), and involves a series of unresolved disputes and violent interludes. As early as the 1920s, members of the Palestinian nationalist movement attacked Jewish settlers, viewing them, and the broader Jewish nationalist movement, as their chief adversaries. World War Two and the Holocaust elevated tensions, which escalated monumentally after the November 29, 1947 United Nations Resolution partitioning the land into a Jewish state, an Arab state, and a divided Jerusalem.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, wars erupted between the new Israeli state and Palestinian leadership. International entities endeavored to settle the conflict in the early years of the 1990s and in 1993 and 1995 signed the Oslo Accords, permitting the Palestinian National Authority to inhabit the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The peace process, however, resulted in significant opposition from radical Islamist Palestinian groups like Hamas. The early 2000s initiated the Second Intifada and more than a decade of continuing official and vigilante violence.

Global interventions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have been led in large part by the United States. The U.S. government sees Israel as its key political and economic ally in the

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88 Eve Spangler, Understanding Israel/Palestine: Race, Nation, and Human Rights in the Conflict (Sense Publishing, 2015).

89 For more information on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, see James L. Gelvin, The Israel-Palestine Conflict: One Hundred Years of War (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014) and Ilan Pappe, A History of Modern Palestine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
Middle East and subsequently has provided the state with extensive financial and military assistance. For many, such aid reflects support for the Israeli oppression of the Palestinian people and an implicit defense of its violations of international human rights standards. American support of Israel, in addition to the United States’ other oil-driven maneuvers and general interference in the Middle East, has contributed to rising anti-American sentiment among large numbers of Arabs and Muslims globally.  

Recent years have seen increasing numbers of Americans, including American Jews, recognizing and protesting Israeli injustices against Palestinians. Yet global perceptions of a staunch divide between the United States, Israel, and Jews on one side and on the other side, Palestine, other Arab countries, and Muslims, persist. To many, Judaism is synonymous with Zionism, as Islam is with pan-Arabism and political Islam. Subsequently, although neither B’nai Israel nor Islamic Society members discussed Israel or Palestine at length with me, Jews and Muslims are nonetheless entangled in the Israeli-Palestinian nationalist conflict.

INTERSECTIONS

In Sacramento and in Joplin, minority religious groups suffered arsons to their spaces; government agencies took up investigations; eventually, perpetrators were apprehended and

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92 As chapter one demonstrates, B’nai Israel maintains strong symbolic connections to Israel as the Holy Land, and many of its members are “very Zionistic,” as the head rabbi told me. However, people infrequently discussed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or its effects, either in formal interviews with me or in casual conversations.
charged for their crimes. Congregations and their neighbors organized rallies and fundraising events. Media outlets cited community members’ expressions of interfaith unity and highlighted their positive attitudes. Yet leaders of both religious communities expressed that the acts of hate generated lasting effects on their congregants. This dissertation explores how the congregants of B’nai Israel and the members of the Islamic Society of Joplin remember the hate crimes targeting their communities, how they recount their experiences of rebuilding, and how they live in the wake of hate.

In pursuit of parsing congregants’ memories and the living effects of the arsons, I relied upon multiple methods for my project, the primary of which involved ethnographic research and semi-structured interviews. I visited Sacramento for the month of February in 2014, then returned for two weeks that June, when B’nai Israel held a special interfaith event to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of its arson. I spent the month of April 2014 in Joplin, returning for two weeks a little over a year later, in July 2015, to spend the end of Ramadan with the Islamic Society. I took two trips to each site, toggling back and forth between the two congregations, for three key reasons. First, in order to initiate my comparative study, I felt it important to experience Sacramento and Joplin in turn, digesting my findings and delineating the next steps of research before revisiting B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society. Each site visit recalibrated the subsequent research trip. Likewise, alternating trips to B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society helped me to adjust my lines of inquiry during my conversations with congregants. Finally, my initial trips allowed me to observe and experience the communities during their regular operations, while my subsequent visits provided opportunities to engage with the Islamic Society during Ramadan and with B’nai Israel during its interfaith event commemorating the arson.
During my visits to B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society, I observed the places of worship, as well as individuals’ interactions with one another and with the spaces. I attended religious services, celebratory events, Sunday school, study groups, and guest lectures. I helped set up receptions, arranging colored plastic tablecloths and unwrapping trays of cookies. I cleared chairs and helped carry leftovers to cars. I watched small children when their parents were preoccupied. My intention was not to endear myself disingenuously to anyone. Rather, I wanted to be as much an integral part of each community as I was able and as much of a regular presence as possible. This included accompanying community members to events outside of the synagogue and mosque. I went to an interfaith ladies’ lunch in Joplin. I drove to Miami, Oklahoma to help a member of the Islamic Society bake date cookies for a bake sale.\(^93\) I led a discussion about hate crimes for B’nai Israel’s weekly class on “Religious Ethics in the 21st Century” at a downtown Sacramento law office.

I also experienced the daily goings-on (or lack thereof) of each religious community. When not interviewing community members, I spent my days in the rooms and halls of the synagogue, the temporary mosque, and on my second visit, the new permanent mosque. At B’nai Israel, I alternated between poring over archives in the library and visiting with office staff while helping them stamp envelopes and fold brochures. Congregants often wandered into the office in the later afternoons and evenings, which allowed me to meet new members. Subsequently, when I visited Joplin, I was surprised to find far less activity at the Islamic Society’s temporary and permanent spaces. With only the imam as full-time staff, the Islamic Society tended to be relatively or

\(^{93}\) Well, I went to spend time with the baker and to learn how to bake the cookies. The Islamic Society member said I helped!
entirely empty but for prayer times, when people would arrive for prayers and leave almost immediately afterward.

During the unoccupied hours of my days at the synagogue and mosque, I consulted various archival sources, exploring the constellations of conversations around the communities and the arsons. Newspapers, journals, pamphlets, newsletters, sermons, speeches, online journals, blogs, Facebook posts, Reddit threads, and Tweets informed my understanding of both communities. They also illustrated alternate narratives of the hate crimes and their aftermath. However, there were discrepancies between the two communities in terms of my access to these materials. As an older community with a long history, B’nai Israel houses an archive room with materials dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. In contrast, I had trouble finding an Islamic Society member to supply me with the community’s constitution and by-laws, let alone any architectural blueprints or community bulletins from the past. But, given the time difference between their arsons, the Islamic Society had a bigger digital footprint around the arson than did B’nai Israel.

While observation, participation, and archives were pivotal to my research, interviews with members of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society were essential to my efforts to glean individuals’ memories and personal experiences of the hate crimes. I spoke at length (averaging two hours per conversation) with approximately fifty members of B’nai Israel and almost twenty members of the Islamic Society. I also engaged in numerous informal conversations with these and other members of both communities during my time in Sacramento and Joplin. I spoke with clergy, lay people, members of administrative board, staff, and other employees of the religious centers. Although I did not interview children, many of whom were not yet born when the arsons occurred, I did ask parents how they discussed the hate crimes with their families. I asked community members to recall the arsons: how they learned about the crime, the course of events
that day and in the weeks after, and their involvement in those events. They described their religious places before the hate crimes, and they talked about the features of the spaces after their reconstructions. They also discussed their relationships to their co-religionists and their neighbors, preceding and following the arsons. The appendix to this dissertation includes the full set of questions upon which my interviews were based.

The processes of gathering religious communities’ experiences and memories and any and all available documentation around the arsons were necessarily uneven. Though I came into each congregation as an outside researcher, it was natural that I would have discernibly different relationships and experiences with these two quite distinct religious groups. From the first e-mails I exchanged with each community, that point was clear. To a certain extent, my name communicates my Jewish background, which translated to B’nai Israel my place as an accepted member of a larger Jewish community and for the Islamic Society underscored my role as a non-Muslim outsider. My fluency in Jewish practices and texts emerged during B’nai Israel’s prayer services and study groups and vividly contrasted with my tentative participation in prayer services and Sunday school classes at the Islamic Society.

Moreover, I gained access to and interviewed members of each community in different ways. B’nai Israel helped to orchestrate many meetings via e-mail before my visit. They sent out several e-mail blasts to the community to announce my visit and request participants, and they then arranged dates and times for a number of interviews, often reserving the conference room for my use. A few congregants felt less comfortable meeting at the synagogue, and we arranged to meet elsewhere, at coffeeshops, over dinners, and at their residences. My initial experiences with the Islamic Society of Joplin diverged from B’nai Israel’s facilitation of my research. Although I had received permission to work with Islamic Society members, I had trouble
reaching them by e-mail in order to set up meetings before going to Joplin, and midway through my trip, I realized that I was handing out business cards and receiving no calls. After I divulged my struggle to one Islamic Society member, she explained that community members usually communicate through text messages, and she helped to connect me with other members.

My interactions with individual B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members also differed significantly. Many B’nai Israel members with whom I spoke were in their late fifties and sixties at the time of our conversations. They mostly have grown children and were retired, or moving toward retirement, and subsequently, they had time to share with me and tell me detailed stories about their lives and experiences. Many of these individuals also served on the synagogue board or in other key positions at the synagogue at the time of the 1999 arson. Similarly, many of the Islamic Society members with whom I spoke currently hold central roles at the mosque. However, unlike the B’nai Israel members with whom I spoke, most were in their early forties and fifties, with school-age children and in the busy middle stage of their careers as physicians. These factors perhaps help to explain my difficulty in setting meetings and delving into details of the arsons.

An Islamic Society member who is a first-generation American (and an undergraduate college student when we spoke) hypothesized that my trouble connecting with other Islamic Society members might extend to reasons beyond their full schedules. She suggested that they might feel less comfortable speaking with me than she did. Due to their first-generation status, she pointed out, they not only might feel self-conscious about their English-language abilities but also might be uncertain about my intentions and therefore feel anxious about collaborating with me. This conversation served as a critical reminder that my ethnographic positionality and people’s unique backgrounds and life experiences influence our interactions, the nature of our
relationships, and the answers to the questions at the center of my research. Working with and through these circumstances, this dissertation strives to allow B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members to voice their untold stories. Unless otherwise noted, all names herein are pseudonyms.

**BRAIDED NARRATIVES**

The dissertation is segmented into two parts. The first half focuses on physical spaces, the material structures of geography and of architecture, while the latter half turns to spaces of memory, the often-invisible infrastructures built to house the stories of the arsons and their aftermaths. Part one roots B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society to local place and religious space. By situating these religious communities in Sacramento and Joplin, in the synagogue and the mosque, this section reveals how people and places shape one another. The second half shifts to the domain of memory but likewise conveys how modes of remembering shape B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society as distinct religious communities and as American citizens. Although place and memory each take turns at the center of these stories, the narratives are braided ones; communal places, collective memories, acts of violence, and identity formations interweave throughout.

Chapter One, “A Place From Where I Could Spring,” provides historical and spatial mappings of Sacramento’s Congregation B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society of Joplin. Following an exploration of each community’s connections to its city and to its place of worship, the chapter unveils the ways in which places – and memories of places – influence individual

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94 The title of the first chapter derives from a conversation with a B’nai Israel member. Debbie, interview with author, 2/11/2014.
practitioners and their relationships to their communities. It also reviews the literature on religion, spatiality, and emotionality, thereby demonstrating the grave effects of violence committed against religious spaces for the congregations that inhabit them.

Chapter Two, “Clearing Religious Rubble: Crafting Home and Fortress,” examines the processes of reconstruction following the arsons. Where the first chapter discusses places as dynamic sites of community, memory, and identity, the second explores how B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society undertook repairing the damages inflicted by the hate crimes. It shows that when their places of worship burned, their religious communities fractured. Rebuilding religious community necessitated rebuilding religious places. Violence to each place of worship seismically ruptured practitioners’ worlds and compelled them to rebuild their religious spaces; in the process, they remade themselves.

Chapter Three, “Trial by Fire: Contextualizing Arson,” analyzes community members’ memories of the hate crimes to their religious places. While spaces locate people physically, narratives of trauma situate religious communities as collectives and re-outline their priorities and religious convictions. This chapter reveals that B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society recount their experiences of violence in distinctly structured ways, articulating their religious obligations in response to the arsons. In so doing, they both cohere their religious communities and reassert the agency they lost in the fires. Collective memories effectively help B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members to make meaning of traumatic encounters with violence.
Chapter Four, “In the Darkness, There is Light,” concerns religious practitioners’ memories of their neighbors’ responses to the arsons.\textsuperscript{95} This chapter describes how members of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society emphasized the financial and emotional support of the broader Sacramento and Joplin communities. They particularly highlighted the unity rallies convened after the attacks. These modes of remembering underscore congregants’ senses of belonging in their cities and confirm solidarity with their neighbors. Yet members of both religious minority groups also take it upon themselves to embody and enact longer-lasting forms of unity amidst America’s religious diversity.

The conclusion evaluates the cumulative effect of the arsons on religious adherents: in their religious principles, practices, and communities and in their relationships to sacred space, local place, and the nation. It assesses how these arsons specifically, and hate crimes in general, affect religious minorities in the United States. Finally, it underscores the importance of reevaluating interfaith unity efforts in the wake of hate, with particular attention to “post-difference” as a philosophy, discourse, and practice.

\textsuperscript{95} The title of the fourth chapter derives from a conversation with the rabbi who served as the senior rabbi of B’nai Israel at the time of the arson. Rabbi Brad Bloom, phone interview with author, 8/27/2014.
CHAPTER ONE

“A Place From Where I Could Spring”

“Places of worship have vibrations,” Rida told me. “I think places do have vibrations.” I asked her what she meant, and she gave me an example. She experienced particularly “sad vibrations” when she visited Anne Frank’s house, in Joplin after the tornado, at the mosque’s site after the arson. These were places where people once laughed, played, ate, prayed, and lived. Now, she said, “all of that is gone,” and those places retain both good feelings and bad feelings.

Originally from Pakistan, Rida is a practicing psychiatrist, a mother of two grown women, and a self-described Sufi. “But I can’t just follow what one teacher says,” she clarified. “I am a very independent person.” In our conversations, she frequently referenced Muhammad Iqbal, a poet-philosopher, as well as the Jewish-born Austro-Hungarian intellectual Muhammad Asad. She once referred to Oprah as “like my therapist.” Though she used to wear hijab and pray five times each day, she now leaves her hair uncovered and said that “dhikr is my prayer,” as is “trying to do my job right.” Rida is the first to admit that her version of Islam differs from that of other Islamic Society members, but she shares with the rest of the Muslim community a firm

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1 Rida, interview with author, 4/18/2014.

2 Ibid.

3 Muhammad Asad is the father of eminent scholar of religion Talal Asad. Interestingly, the elder Asad once wrote, “I saw before me something like a perfect work of architecture, with all its elements harmoniously conceived to complement and support each other, with nothing superfluous and nothing lacking — a balance and composure which gave one the feeling that everything in the outlook and postulates of Islam was ’in its proper place.’” Muhammad Asad, My Discovery of Islam (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000), 310.

4 Dhikr is a silent form of devotional prayer, most commonly practiced by Sufi Muslims.
belief in their need for a mosque. As one of the Islamic Society’s founding families, she and her husband Umar initiated the search for a mosque and orchestrated meetings after its destruction.

Places have vibrations. Although members of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society might not use the word “vibrations,” they would agree with Rida’s claim that places carry with them mixed emotions. Thus, this chapter explores the “vibrations” of place, “the relational fluxes, flows, or currents in-between people and places,” which are discussed herein as “emotional geographies.”5 Through examining how members of the Islamic Society of Joplin and Congregation B’nai Israel describe places — countries, cities, religious spaces — I uncover the nature of congregants’ relationships with place. Moreover, I demonstrate how relationships with place shape individual practitioners, their relationships with their co-religionists and with their broader communities, and their reactions to the arsons.

It is critical to bear in mind that I explore congregants’ relationships with place as expressed to me after the arsons. However, it is these relationships that contributed to congregants’ experiences and understandings of the arsons. Their relationships with their geographic places and their places of worship retroactively set the scene for the story of this dissertation: the story of how the synagogue and mosque arsons compelled both religious communities to reevaluate and redefine themselves.

In the course of this chapter, I first briefly review bodies of literature on space and place and explain how studies of place benefit from considering emotional geographies. I then chart the histories of both B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society, mapping the communities’ relationships

not only to Sacramento and Joplin but also to the places of their pasts. Through examining the ways in which congregants discuss place, I show that regional places shape people in affect and action. The latter half of the chapter focuses in on the communities’ religious spaces. It recounts the histories of the synagogue and the mosque and narrates the connections people form in and through religious place. Finally, I reflect on how the arsons have added new threads of emotionality to the affective webs in which people and place are entangled.

MAPPING PEOPLE, MAPPING PLACE

Human beings exist in “place.” Movements, practices, and interactions: all “take place.” They happen somewhere. In this vein, scholars across the disciplines – from anthropology and sociology to history and philosophy – have contemplated the categories of space and place and the nature of human interactions in and with places. They have examined how space shapes and has been shaped by the passage of time, how place affects human activities and social dynamics, how place constitutes and inscribes power. Interested in many of the same questions, scholars of religion and place have analyzed sacred spaces and researched sites occupied by religious practitioners. Although the field of religious studies maintains a long history of scholars attentive to “sacred space” in their efforts to understand “religion” and the “sacred,” contemporary studies emphasize religious spaces as characters in the distinct stories of religious communities.

From the late nineteenth century onward, phenomenologists of religion resolved that sacred space is a manifestation of religion’s essence. Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye detailed the various origins and uses of sacred spaces in his 1891 work *The Manual of the Science of Religion*; his only explicit conclusion attests that once declared sacred, a place
remains sacred. In his 1933 tome *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, Gerardus Van der Leeuw theorizes that “Power” reveals itself in certain places to man; yet, he also declares that humans make some spaces “Powerful” by setting them apart from other places. By the middle of the twentieth century, Mircea Eliade had expanded on Van der Leeuw’s conception of sacred space, defining its origins as “hierophanous,” emerging from a sensorial experience of the sacred revealed in a place. According to Eliade, sacred spaces are created by manifestations of the sacred and reiterated through ritual re-enactments in those spaces.

Scholars associated with the so-called “spatial turn” of the 1970s more deeply probed the relationships between people and place, raising new concerns about space that later scholars of religious space would incorporate into their theories. In his 1974 book *The Production of Space*, Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre crafts a theory of space as a social product that produces society, whereas in *Space and Place*, human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan promotes explorations of the human experience of and relationship to space and place. Contemporary scholar of religion Jonathan Z. Smith followed suit. Countering Eliade and his theory of spatial hierophanies, Smith instead emphasizes sacred space as a manmade phenomenon. Sacred space is only sacred when men say it is and when they act in ways that reinforce its professed sacrality. Even such a

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concise overview reveals that scholars grapple with sacred space as revealed and created, permanent and conditional. Above all, it is dynamic.

Scholars continue to articulate more complicated conceptualizations of sacred spaces and religious places, anchoring abstract concepts to concrete realities of colonialism, power, and the sovereign state. They have also begun to attend to the senses and the visceral materiality of intersubjectivity between place and people. Some, like geographer Roger Stump, align with Eliade, viewing sacred space as a manifestation of the cosmos. Others, among them architectural historian Louis Nelson, theologian Belden Lane, and religion scholar Jeanne Halgren Kilde, evaluate how sacred spaces influence lived experiences. Political scientist Ron Hassner considers sacred space an object of contention and a strategic tool or resource for reconciliation, while religion scholars David Chidester and Edward Linenthal theorize that sacred space is constructed through the contestation and negotiation of complicated interpersonal relations, questions of legitimate ownership, and political conquest.11

However, it is not enough to bring together studies of religion, violence, politics, history, economics, and space and place. Instead, in order to understand how the Islamic Society and B’nai Israel processed the destruction of their religious places, I focus on the nuanced and intimate varieties of relationships between people and place. I do so by considering not only geography but also human senses and emotions. Attention to the embodied nature of religion offers scholars new points of access in understanding the complexity of human experiences.12

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Although people craft worlds of meaning through places, places craft people materially, sensorially, and emotionally.

Studies of religion and place become more robust when scholars consider “emotional geographies.” In the introduction to their edited volume, *Emotional Geographies*, Joyce Davidson, Liz Bondi, and Mick Smith describe the concept as follows:

> A genuine emotional geography cannot just deal in feelings, like a stockbroker deals in dollars, or measure policy outcomes in terms of some bureaucratically derived hedonistic calculus. It must try to express something that is ineffable in such objectifying languages, namely a sense of emotional involvement with people and places, rather than emotional detachment from them.\(^{13}\)

Religious communities and their places are of course tethered to one another. As the scholarship on religious place shows, people build and occupy places, and places structure people’s practices and frame their interactions with one another. But there is also a sense of “emotional involvement” between the religious adherents of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society and their physical spaces. Islamic Society members are entangled in Joplin and the mosque as B’nai Israel members are in Sacramento and the synagogue.

The arsons accentuated the “emotional involvements” between the religious communities and their places, both local and religious. However, the destruction and reconstruction of the religious places reveal the volatility and dynamism of affective linkages to places. On the whole, this dissertation evidences the intersubjectivity of people, place, and violence. While the second chapter shows how religious places and their religious communities were re-made through the arsons, and the fourth shows how local emotional geographies were reinscribed after the attacks,

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\(^{13}\) Davidson, Bondi, and Smith, 2.
this chapter examines each religious community’s historical connection to geographic place and individual members’ pre-arson connections to their religious places. It also attends to the discursive, homing in on the language that community members employed to talk about their personal connections to their spaces. Therefore, this chapter shows that the historical connections to regional and religious places involve necessarily contiguous emotional geographies that shaped the religious communities prior to the arsons and thereby influenced their responses to the attacks.

“How Beautiful is Our Heritage”

I first looked carefully at the aron during a tour of the synagogue with Rabbi Mona Alfi, B’nai Israel’s senior rabbi. As she led me toward the bimah, she told me about the ark, beginning with the congregation’s Torot. The heavy opaque glass doors of the aron shield the Torot, all of which survived the 1999 arson. One Torah came from a community in Poland, while another was inherited from a congregant who himself received the Torah from his ancestors in pre-Holocaust Germany. The Torot themselves house the European component of the community’s heritage.

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14 An aron, or ark, is a cabinet that houses the Torot, or Torahs, in a synagogue.
15 The bimah is a podium in a Jewish sanctuary from which the Torah is read and prayer services are often led.
16 Rabbi Mona Alfi, interview with author, 2/7/2014.
As we neared the *aron*, I noticed a sunken portion of the floor underneath and around it. Oddly, it was uniformly covered in what looked to be a few inches of sand. Rabbi Alfi explained that whenever members of the congregation go to Israel, they bring back small plastic sandwich baggies of sand to add to the sanctuary’s sandbox. B’nai Israel has always been a “Zionistic congregation,” Rabbi Alfi told me. She described the symbolism of the designs on the *aron*’s doors, pointing out to me that, at the bottom right-hand corner of the right door, Israel, the Dead Sea, and the Kinneret float amidst Hebrew lettering etched across the surface. Between the
bottom of the right door and the bottom of the left door, the Mediterranean morphs into the Pacific Ocean.

While the *Torot* within, the sand around, and the peripheral designs at the edges of the ark demonstrate the community’s European past and its present love of Israel, the *aron*’s central designs manifest most explicitly B’nai Israel’s deep-rooted relationship to Sacramento. The opaque glass of the left door is broken up by a clear glass depiction of the Sacramento River. The same panel is etched with “horizontal hatches” representing “the rows of crops of the surrounding agricultural lands (the lifeblood of the Delta).”¹⁷ On the right door, the Hebrew names of the weekly *parshiot* cycle from top to bottom, bleeding into one another to create a “graphic figure of tributaries.”¹⁸ While the *parshiot* visually convey the tributaries of the Sacramento River, they also imply that the portions of the Torah feed the congregation, much like the tributaries that feed into the river. Midway between the top and bottom of the right panel, where the doors meet, almost hidden among the words of the Torah, a “footprint” of B’nai Israel’s synagogue is nestled alongside the Sacramento River. The *aron* reveals that the community does not simply identify with the city. Rather, Congregation B’nai Israel is intimately tied to Sacramento.

On B’nai Israel’s home page, the congregation identifies itself as “Sacramento’s oldest Jewish congregation and its largest Reform synagogue,” dedicated to “honoring the traditions of our heritage while creating a Jewish experience that is relevant to today’s society.”¹⁹ The

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¹⁸ *Parshiot* are select sections of the Torah, portioned out to be read during prayer services each Shabbat.

community’s history dates back to the mid-nineteenth-century California Gold Rush. At the time, Old Sacramento served as the major supply base and transportation hub for the mining towns of the Mother Lode, cultivating an ever-changing but growing community. In fall 1849, a small group of European Jewish shop owners and craftspeople gathered to celebrate the High Holy Days. Among them was jewelry merchant Moses Hyman, a “pioneer of California Judaism” and “father of Temple B’nai Israel.” The founder of the local Hebrew Benevolent Society, he would later help establish California’s first Jewish cemetery and its first Jewish synagogue.

By 1850, approximately two hundred Jews were living in Old Sacramento. When floods devastated the town, Hyman purchased a plot of land, located south of J Street between 32nd and 33rd streets, for the necessary Jewish burial ground, the original Home of Peace Cemetery. Hyman and fellow Sacramento merchant Albert Priest co-founded Congregation B’nai Israel shortly thereafter. Believed to be the first Jewish settler in Sacramento, then New Helvetia, Priest operated a dry-goods store at Sutter’s Fort. On September 2, 1852, Hyman and Priest purchased the community’s first official house of worship from a Methodist Episcopal congregation, rendering the site at the corner of 7th and L streets the “first permanent Jewish house of worship.


22 Ibid.
in the state.” The congregation today recognizes the original synagogue as the “first
congregationally owned synagogue west of the Mississippi River.”

Congregation B’nai Israel faced troubles early on, however. Only two months after the
community purchased a new building, a fire destroyed it, along with much of Sacramento. Even
more unfortunately, an arbitrator determined that the congregation did not own the property, and
the community was forced to seek out another space. They operated out of three homes on 5th
Street until 1858, when they again bought a place of worship from the Methodist Episcopalians,
on the same site at 7th and L. Internally, dissent brewed when the German Jews of the
congregation opposed the chosen hazzan (cantor). The German Jews chose to form their own
congregation, B’nai HaShalom, and left the B’nai Israel synagogue to their Polish neighbors. In
1861, B’nai Israel again lost its synagogue to a fire, and the following winter, the Home of Peace
Cemetery was severely damaged by flood waters. However, the losses reunited the two Jewish
communities into one.

In 1864, the congregation bought its third permanent home from the First Presbyterian
Church on 6th Street, where congregants continued their Orthodox practices. By 1879, B’nai
Israel had adopted significant changes, from shorter services in English to the installation of an
organ. As the community reformed its practices, a divide again formed between those interested
in preserving the old ways and those supportive of the new changes. The former broke off to
form Mosaic Law, which is still Sacramento’s Orthodox Jewish congregation. In 1904, B’nai

23 Rochlin and Rochlin, 201.
Israel relocated to 15th Street, where, in 1912, a stove in the basement set the building on fire during Sunday school. Though no one was hurt, it was a year before the synagogue was again inhabitable.

The 15th Street synagogue was home to B’nai Israel until the 1950s, when the community moved a short drive south of the city to its present-day plot of land on Riverside Boulevard, situated between the Sacramento River and Land Park. The new temple was dedicated in 1954, and its education wing was added in the early 1960s. In the 1970s, when the City of Sacramento proposed building Interstate 5 behind the congregational site, B’nai Israel debated relocating. Separately, the congregation’s cantor was fired, resulting in some fifty families leaving B’nai Israel to form Temple Beth Shalom. In the later 1980s, the memorial chapel, the library, an administration building, and the courtyard were built.

Congregation B’nai Israel faced a century and a half of recurring unrest brought on by natural disasters, unfortunate accidents, and internal schisms. A firebombing in 1993 and the arson in 1999 extended an already-tumultuous communal history. The details of this tumult unto themselves do not characterize the community. Rather, it is how the congregation chooses to articulate its history. On B’nai Israel’s website, the “About” section features a page on “Our History.” “History — How Beautiful is Our Heritage,” the heading reads. Its subheading notes, “160 years and Still Going Strong.” The page supplies a narrative penned by a congregant and illustrated with archival documents, sketches, and photographs. The story commences with a brief but significant preface:

As we reflect on our past 160 years as a congregation, B’nai Israel members have many reasons to be proud: our pioneer past, our ability to adapt to change, and our strength to overcome obstacles. We have a rich history, filled with early settlers who practiced Judaism in their homes in storefronts within what is now Old Sacramento, and who made
monumental decisions about whether to remain an Orthodox synagogue or to adopt the thinking and practices of the Reform movement.

While memories of the destructive fires of the summer of 1999 remain fresh, history demonstrates that adversity is something that Congregation B’nai Israel has risen above, over and over again. The following information about B’nai Israel’s history illustrates how much the past continues to be part of the present.\(^{26}\)

The preface makes clear that the congregation takes great pride in its long history and contextualizes itself in the present through that lineage. The congregation’s establishment during the mid-nineteenth-century California Gold Rush lends to its members’ self-identification as pioneers, characterized by adaptability and strength.

Joe, like B’nai Israel, is historically entrenched in Sacramento. His family has been in northern California since the turn of the twentieth century. His ancestors escaped the Russian pogroms and journeyed to the United States through Ellis Island and then moved on to Sacramento. Joe’s family owns and continues to run the oldest pawn shop in Sacramento, which dates back to 1909, and a clothing store. Although his parents donated funds to build B’nai Israel’s synagogue on Riverside Boulevard, his extended family members are congregants at both B’nai Israel and Mosaic Law. Joe attended B’nai Israel as a child and celebrated his Bar Mitzvah there, though he mostly remembers skipping classes to get ice cream down the road at Vic’s ice cream parlor.\(^{27}\)

While many members of B’nai Israel do not share Joe’s extensive history with Sacramento, the congregation nonetheless identifies strongly with the “pioneer spirit,” as Rabbi Alfi put it.\(^{28}\)

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\(^{27}\) Joe, interview with author, 2/18/2014.

\(^{28}\) Harriet and Fred Rochlin note that Far West Jews tended to be more “adventuresome and independent,” as well ambitious, innovative, and enterprising. Rochlin and Rochlin, 220.
“A lot of people are immigrants,” she said. “Not necessarily from other countries but from other places. So, I think that that’s part of why the congregation really focused on the- ‘let’s go forward’ kind of thing.” 29 The community sees itself as one that has faced adversity but has “risen above,” as the website states, “over and over again.” 30

B’nai Israel’s story of “Our History” concludes with the story of Rosh Hashanah eve in 1999, when twelve-hundred people came to worship together at the Convention Center after the arson. As congregants entered the room, they passed a poster that stated: “We are strong. We are proud. We are together.” The historian writes, “This is the same sentiment that the early members of Congregation B’nai Israel felt in their hearts and souls when they joined in worship to welcome the new year in Old Sacramento 150 years ago.” 31

Intimately connected to Sacramento, Congregation B’nai Israel sees itself as formed largely through place and history. As the designs of the sanctuary’s aron indicate, B’nai Israel is firmly located in a multi-faceted history: linked to a European past, tied to the land of Israel, and deeply embedded in Sacramento. The community’s history in the northern California city situates congregants in the lineage of the Jewish pioneers who came before them. It roots them to the land and gives them reason to have a stake in the goings-on of the city. For many, it motivates their commitment to social action and political involvement. Above all, B’nai Israel’s connection to Sacramento engenders within congregants an inherited pioneer spirit of resilience in the face of adversity.

29 Rabbi Mona Alfi, interview with author, 2/7/2014.
31 Ibid.
An American Mosque

In stark contrast to the oldest Jewish congregation in Sacramento, which is perhaps even the oldest west of the Mississippi River, the nascent Islamic Society of Joplin, Missouri opened its first mosque in February 2007. Before the Islamic Society purchased the building from the Cavalry Apostolic Church, many Muslims in the area had traveled to a mosque in Pittsburg, Kansas, finding it inconvenient but the only option. A member of the community stated that, without their own mosque, “we didn’t know how many Muslims were in Joplin.”³² Before my travels to Joplin, I found few records that provided details about the makeup or history of the Islamic Society. An article and an obituary in The Joplin Globe suggested that I would find a diverse community comprised mostly of recent immigrants to the United States.³³

When I arrived in Joplin, I found that the vast majority of Islamic Society members were born in Pakistan. However, other members come from Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Malaysia, and elsewhere; the imam and his family are from Indonesia. The Islamic Society also includes a couple of native-born Americans who converted to Islam. “In our mosque, we have, I would say, fifteen countries,” Rida’s husband Umar, a pulmonologist and former Islamic Society treasurer, told me.³⁴ On occasion, international students from Missouri Southern State University pray with the Islamic Society, as do the predominantly-Somali migrant workers employed by the

³³ The Joplin Globe article mentioned in the previous footnote quotes a community member saying, “There are Muslims from all over the world in Joplin, but the majority of local Muslims are from Pakistan.” The same article denotes that another member has family in Singapore, and a 2013 obituary in The Joplin Globe commemorated a key leader in the Joplin Muslim community who immigrated from Palestine. “Ahmed Fannun Kanan,” Joplin Globe, February 24, 2013, http://www.joplinglobe.com/obituaries/x986691892/Fannun-Ahmed-Kanan/print.
³⁴ Umar, interview with author, 7/10/2015.
Tyson Foods poultry farm in nearby Monet, Missouri. However, the most active members are physicians who work either at the local Freeman or Mercy hospitals or practice privately in Joplin.

Nearly all of the primarily Pakistani physicians central to the Islamic Society’s existence and operations originally came to Joplin to fulfill their J1 visa waivers. Under this waiver, foreign physicians who received their graduate medical education or training in the United States may remain in the U.S. rather than return to their home countries for a minimum of two years before reapplying for an H1 work visa. In order to do so, they must apply for the Conrad State 30 Program, under a particular state’s public-health department. They sign on to work full-time for at least three years at a “health care facility in a designated health care professional shortage area or at a health care facility which serves patients from such a designated area.” Subsequently, some Islamic Society members who are in medical fields choose to live in Joplin only to fulfill their waivers before moving on to other locations.

Many community members have moved several times, from their country of origin to other countries in the Middle East or Europe, and then to various cities and towns across the United States. In a way, the physicians of the Islamic Society are also migrant workers, often leaving behind political turmoil in their home countries to follow a trail of education, training, and jobs overseas. A rare few have made Joplin their more permanent home to avoid relocating their young children during their elementary and secondary schooling years. Most community


members see themselves as adapting not to Joplin specifically as much as to America in general. Being citizens of Joplin is emblematic of their becoming American both individually and as a cohesive Muslim community.

Members of the Islamic Society spoke of living in America as “getting the best of both worlds,” particularly for their children. Originally from Pakistan, Shaheen and her husband Osman are both child psychiatrists who completed their fellowships and residencies in New York City and St. Louis before moving to Darwin, Missouri to fulfill their visa-waiver requirements. They moved to Joplin in 2008 when Osman received an advantageous job offer. As Shaheen told me, “For immigrant parents, it’s really important that we still want to teach them [their children] the good things that are from our culture and also adopt the good things of the American culture.”37 “What are those good things?” I asked Shaheen. “Timeliness!” she said, laughing, explaining how much she appreciates American punctuality. She is thankful for American education and parents’ involvement in their children’s lives, though she cited Pakistani culture for children’s serious respect for their parents.

“Actually, all these things that I see in the American culture, this is what Islam teaches us,” she said. “Islam teaches timeliness, Islam teaches open communication and respect at the same time.”38 Many members of the Islamic Society see their Muslim faith as consistent with American culture. Reciprocally, they see their faith as enhanced by American culture. The community is an American Muslim community, and the mosque, according to Islamic Society

37 Shaheen and Osman, interview with author, 5/2/2014.
38 Ibid.
founding member Rida, is “an American mosque” and “not a back-home mosque.”\textsuperscript{39} I was not sure what she meant; what is an American mosque, and what is particularly “American” about it?

At an American mosque, Rida said, “everything is by the book.” Her husband Umar explained that the Islamic Society voted, electing democratically a board of directors and officers. They established a constitution and worked with lawyers and a certified public accountant to draft the bylaws. Finally, “we did a formal incorporation of the nonprofit,” Umar said.\textsuperscript{40} Then there was the work of hiring an imam. They found Imam Lahmuddin through one of the Islamic Society’s members. Originally from Indonesia, Imam Lahmuddin was living in New York City at the time. However, having completed his PhD in religious studies from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, he was looking to move back to the Midwest. Luckily for him, the board found him to be a good fit, and they drew up a contract. Next was working with U.S. Immigration Services to obtain a religious visa for him. This brought the Islamic Society into direct contact with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. “They interview you,” Umar told me. He continued:

They would look at your books, they take your pictures, they see you are a legit community, you are holding services, you have—, you have the nonprofit corporation, you are—, you have a board, you have an executive committee. … You have to have R-1 visas, there is a special visa that is for religious purposes, okay? Like you wanna bring a computer programmer from abroad, you have to do the same thing. You have to show that you are a legitimate corporation, a company, you have employees, you pay taxes.\textsuperscript{41}

Members of the Islamic Society believe strongly in the compatibility of American culture and their Muslim tradition. Having an American mosque entails balancing the “best of both worlds”

\textsuperscript{39} Rida, interview with author, 4/18/2014.
\textsuperscript{40} Umar, interview with author, 7/10/2015.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Ibid.}
and crafting a democratic community. Yet it it also means making themselves legible to state authorities.

Most Islamic Society members said that they had interacted repeatedly with the FBI prior to establishing the first Joplin mosque. After September 11, 2001, FBI agents came to their doors to question them. One member told me she knew of a man who was taken in for further questioning, and when the FBI found that he had a few unpaid parking tickets, he was put in jail.42 For the most part, however, people explained that they tried to be extremely compliant with any and all requests from FBI agents and police officers. Though some are simply unaware that they do not have to do everything that the authorities say, most want to avoid any trouble. “We don’t even want to have a local file,” said Noor, an Islamic Society member who moved with her husband to the United States from the Middle East in 2000.43 In continuity with their policies to comply with authorities, Islamic Society members stressed the importance of doing everything “by the books” when they established the mosque. They had to be visible in the right ways.

While I address the Islamic Society members’ need to be properly visible and legible at greater length in chapters two and four, we see here that sanctioned place represents sanctioned people. Having an American mosque means making themselves available, known, and “legitimate” both to the government and to their neighbors. In emphasizing the legitimacy of their mosque, members reveal their own need to be seen as legitimately American. Congregants

42 I was unable to verify this information, but given that many community members shared similar stories, I take this to mean either that these experiences actually occurred to Islamic Society members and their acquaintances or that these have become collective experiences for Muslim Americans after September 11.

43 Noor, interview with author, 4/19/2014.
understand having a lawful mosque as the way to authorize their place in Joplin and approve their being in the United States.

On some level, they know that they are already citizens. As Rida said to me, “We’ve been living in Joplin for eighteen years; we are normal people.” Because many members of the Islamic Society are physicians in the community, they regularly interact with people in Joplin and feel they have established positive relationships with their patients and their patients’ families. They generally see their Joplin neighbors as “very friendly,” “accepting,” and “respectful.” However, “even if the majority of people are very nice, you just need one or two to, you know, just make a lot of problems,” admitted Tahira, a teacher originally from Lahore.

From their early days at the mosque, Islamic Society members encountered people who would drive by, yelling and saying “bad words,” like “f-word and ‘get out of our country,’ that kind of stuff,” said Shan, the president of the Islamic Society. “People shot our sign so many times… [They broke] our mailboxes. We will fix it, and they will come and break it again.” He explained that he does not think that people are bad or that their religions are bad, but “they’re raised and born in the community that just has, you know, one religion.” Lacking knowledge of other religions and experiences interacting with people of backgrounds different from their own, they act out of fear, anxiety, and anger.

Knowing this, Islamic Society members took steps to make themselves and their religious space visible and accessible. They invited people to visit the mosque. They held interfaith

44 Rida, interview with author, 4/18/2014.
45 Interviews with various Islamic Society members.
46 Tahira, interview with author, 7/15/2015.
47 Shan, interview with author, 7/19/2015.
meetings with the Joplin Jewish community and a couple of the local Protestant churches. They ran food drives for Thanksgiving. They provided medical check-ups and some basic testing for poorer Joplin residents. They sought to make themselves seen and understood, wanting their neighbors to “see that we are human beings, and our religion is peaceful, and get to know about our religion, and let us know about your religion,” Shan said. “You know, you just make a relation. But it didn’t happen, actually, you know. They burned our mosque.”

The mosque’s sign was burned in 2008, prompting the first of numerous FBI investigations. While the mosque was spared from the catastrophic EF5 tornado that leveled much of Joplin in 2011, the mosque was firebombed in July 2012, then burned to the ground in August of that same summer. Shaheen articulated the trauma of losing the mosque:

Our Islamic Society here, we are first-generation settlers in this country, so we are people who have already gone through the loss of migration, migrating across the Atlantic to this country, so we have already gone through a minor trauma basically. You know, when you move that far, it's not easy, so you come here and you try to establish yourself, and then something like this [the arson] happens on top of it, it tends to make people feel more vulnerable… because they have already gone through a loss and this is a second basically. It's an attack on the place that you thought you would be okay. You left those lands, we left those lands, because of certain bad things. We just didn't want to continue there, and we found this [Joplin/America] and we thought that we would be good here, safe here, and secure here…

The mosque gave a place for new immigrants to meet other Muslims who had been in Joplin for a longer period of time. Salma, Rida’s and Umar’s college-age younger daughter, explained that the mosque gave first-generation immigrants access to the worlds and cultures that they left behind even as it helped them to acclimate and to become American. The mosque was, in her

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48 Ibid.
49 Shaheen and Osman, interview with author, 5/2/2014.
words, “a really good bridge for those people who are moving here.”\textsuperscript{50} But when the mosque burned, that bridge was burned, too.

For all that Islamic Society members expressed appreciation for what Joplin, and by extension the country, provide for them, their sense of being different is always present. As Salma said, “It can be really hard to be a Muslim, a devout Muslim, in a place where there's like a church on every single block.”\textsuperscript{51} Though she was born in New Jersey, she has lived in Joplin for most of her life. She expressed conflicting feelings about living in southwestern Missouri, where she contends with a lack of diversity and the resultant problems of such homogeneity. And yet she feels proud to be part of the Muslim community in Joplin. “I think it’s just made me a more worldly person,” she remarked. “I can relate to being both American, from Missouri, and [know] what it's like to be a Pakistani Muslim.”

Other members likewise know intimately what it means to be both foreign and American. They built a home away from home, a bridge to America, by establishing a mosque, a space through which they could make themselves known to non-Muslims. They worked to build a proper “American mosque,” to go “by the book,” and to cultivate relationships with their Joplin neighbors. While Islamic Society members hold to the countries and cultures from which they came, they also struggle to allow their new country and their new culture to form them. They attempt to be known \textit{and} to be normal. Their global experiences, embrace of diversity, and openness to becoming American frame their relationships to Joplin and motivate their endeavors to have, as Shaheen put it, the “best of both worlds.”

\textsuperscript{50} Salma, interview with author, 7/13/2015.
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Ibid.}
LOCATING SPACE AND SELF

“Places do have vibrations” for Islamic Society members and B’nai Israel congregants. Places are imbued with feelings, informing people’s dispositions, influencing their interpersonal relationships, guiding their actions. Members of B’nai Israel hold to elements of their personal pasts, remembering their ancestors who long ago migrated to the United States from Europe. They also demonstrate religious reverence for Israel, which they see as the home of all Jewish people. Above all, they privilege the city of Sacramento and the congregation’s historical ties to the land. B’nai Israel and Sacramento share the same origins, dating back to the mid-nineteenth-century Gold Rush. This fact not only displays the community’s intimate connection to the city but also highlights the pioneering spirit that characterizes the congregation. The strength and adversity associated with this heritage define B’nai Israel and orient the community’s responses to the attack committed against them.

Much as members of B’nai Israel are defined by a specific geographic place (Sacramento), members of the Islamic Society may be defined by their lack of a deep connection to any one particular American place. Instead, they self-identify largely as a diverse community of immigrants accustomed to uprooting but committed to being American citizens. But it is in Joplin that the Islamic Society’s members work to become more American while they simultaneously attempt to maintain the residual cultures of their home countries. Just as Sacramento and B’nai Israel’s long history there lend B’nai Israel its pioneer spirit, Joplin shapes members of the Islamic Society by contrarily urging them to Americanize even as it underscores their otherness.

The cities of Sacramento and Joplin cultivate these religious communities’ collective subjectivities and influence their responses to the arsons of their religious places. The emotional
geographies of regional places shape people, in character and in behavior. Likewise, the communities’ religious places emit “vibrations” that constitute the religious practitioners who inhabit them. In the next section, we move from regional places to religious places, traversing the emotional geographies of B’nai Israel’s synagogue and the Islamic Society’s mosque, from inception to destruction. An examination of the affective cartographies of religious places reveals what was really at stake in the arsons that devastated them.

Finding Place

Though I spoke separately with Rida, her husband Umar, and their younger daughter Salma, the family members’ memories of the old mosque holistically portrayed the space and its place in the lives of their community. When Rida and Umar moved to Joplin in 1996, there was no mosque for the few Muslims who lived in the area. They instead drove thirty-five miles to a small mosque in Pittsburg, Kansas for Friday prayers and holiday celebrations. However, in 2006, they decided they had reached a critical mass and were ready to invest in their own Joplin mosque. In early 2007, they found a church on sale for $245,000. The price was right for an old church that was basically move-in ready. Salma recalled accompanying her parents on their search for a space, saying, “The only place I really remember going was the old location, and it was a church, and it was just like…that a church is going out of business is bad to say, but you know, they were running out of followers and money.” She continued, visualizing her visit:

It was really odd, because I hadn’t really been in very many churches, and it was odd to go in there, there’s like pews everywhere, and like a baptism bath thing, and it was just odd ’cuz we were like, ‘This is gonna be the new mosque. This is it. It’s the only place
we can get that’s a good price… This church is gonna turn into a mosque.’ Like, I just thought it was kind of funny.”

Like her daughter, Rida found amusement in their soon-to-be mosque, albeit for a different reason. Thinking back, she laughed as she remembered that the church “belonged to a Christian group that didn’t approve of medical treatments,” she said. “It’s pretty funny that a group of Muslim doctors ended up buying it!”

The church’s location on the rural Black Cat Road was the main drawback. While only a ten-minute drive from downtown Joplin, the site was on a back road, located in the midst of meadow and farmland. It lacked visibility, and it was technically just outside of the Joplin County line. But, as Umar told me, it met their needs:

The prayer hall, and the size, you know, the fellowship room, the kitchen, dining area, ’cuz you know, the mosque is not just [for] a prayer service. It also serves as a community center, so it should have enough room to hold those community gatherings, dinners, and you know, birthdays, and weddings. Ah, so the mosque is a nucleus in any Muslim community. All the activities are centered around the mosque. So…we had sports, we had soccer fields, and baseball, cricket pitch, how we call? You know, a cricket field.

Rida’s words echoed Umar’s statement. “For me, it was a community place,” she said. It was “a very good place to be.” The mosque offered the Muslim community of Joplin a space to gather, not only for prayer or for special events but also for meals and social activities. Yet, in calling the mosque the “nucleus” of the Muslim community, Umar conveyed that the space is more than

52 Salma, interview with author, 7/13/2015.
53 Rida, interview with author, 4/18/2014.
54 Umar, interview with author, 7/10/2015.
55 Rida, interview with author, 4/18/2014.
functionally important. His description implies that the mosque is paramount to the Islamic Society’s activities and to its growth.

The vast majority of congregants expressed the centrality of the mosque in their lives. Child psychiatrist Shaheen told me that when she and her husband Osman were first starting to look to move out of Rolla, Missouri: “Wherever we got an offer from, we would— I would first go on the Internet and check if they had a mosque in that area and how far that mosque would be from us so that we could easily access it…. Since Joplin had a mosque, we came; we took the position.”56 Umar validated the couple’s relocation process as a common experience. “For any Muslim, when you go anywhere, the first thing you ask is, ‘Do you have a mosque?’” Umar said. “If a town does not have a mosque, Muslim doctors for example, or workers, will be reluctant to come, to go there. Because you’re basically homeless without a mosque.”57

In contrast to the Joplin Muslim community, many members of B’nai Israel could not recall their first memories of the synagogue. For some, it had been a part of their lives for so long that they did not remember their initial perceptions of the space. For others, it was only in reflecting upon the new synagogue space that they thought of their old worship space in comparison. Some congregants first found the synagogue because they had family members who attended, while others simply wanted to attend a reform synagogue in the area (and B’nai Israel was the only one at the time). A conversation with Les, an environmental lawyer and long-time congregant who formerly served as B’nai Israel’s secretary, reveals much about how members of B’nai Israel related to the older synagogue structure:

56 Osman and Shaheen, interview with author, 5/2/2014.
57 Umar, interview with author, 7/10/2015.
Ariel: How did you find CBI [Congregation B’nai Israel]? Over one of the other local synagogues?

Les: Because when we moved here, my wife’s sister lived here and so her— She belonged here with her husband. And he grew up at B’nai Israel. So, there wasn’t any— There was no need to look anywhere else. It was just an easy fit.

A: In the family, yeah.

L: But I think that one of the things that I especially like about Jewish culture and religion is that there are so many different interpretations of how to do things, or how to think about them, or how to pray, that I think that’s one of our strengths. And I think that, I think that’s similar in philosophy to B’nai Israel. No one has to do everything the same, and there’s a lot of encouragement for lay leadership to pursue different projects. So, I think that’s a very— It’s a democratic philosophy (pause).

A: What did you think of the synagogue itself? The building structure?

L: When I joined it?

A: Mhmm.

L: I didn’t think— It was very practical and (pause) I mean, and it was just sort of a secondary thing. It was— I knew it was an older building, older in the sense that it was mid-twentieth century, but it didn’t have any particular appeal to me.

A: Were there any architectural features that stood out to you that you can remember?

L: As being good or bad? (pause) Well, let me fast-forward. After the fire I served on the committee that re-designed the sanctuary, so I— I liked— I saw that as sort of the phoenix rising from the ashes. I saw that as a way to revitalize the congregation, to develop a more contemporary place of worship where people feel more comfortable. But going back to before the fire. It was a dark room, a lot— I think there was dark paneling and I think there were pews. I don’t remember exactly, but the seats weren’t very comfortable, and it didn’t bother me, but it didn’t attract me. But I understand it was the historical home of the congregation and there’s a— in fact you may have seen it, there’s a marker in the sidewalk downtown at, uh, between Capitol and L streets, on 8th [Street], and that was the site of the original Congregation B’nai Israel. So I like being able to trace that as the source, and I understand that this Land Park location is close to that, and that’s where a lot of the older members grew up in Sacramento, the Land Park community. So it’s— it has historical ties.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Les, interview with author, 6/16/2014.
Les, like a number of other congregants, came to B’nai Israel through a family connection. The decision to join the congregation was almost a non-decision, as “there was no need to look anywhere else.” Implicitly then, B’nai Israel became accepted as part of an extended family by virtue of family lineage. Les’s wife’s sister’s husband grew up as a part of the community, and subsequently, Les and his wife were incorporated automatically when they moved to Sacramento.

When I asked Les what he remembered about the old synagogue building, his first response was “I didn’t think.” Members of B’nai Israel often could not remember what the building looked like, or at least they did not have any immediate thoughts about the architecture. However, as I will discuss shortly, many members did remember the feelings they associated with the synagogue from their earliest time with the community. Les noted the practicality of the building and dated its construction but otherwise discounted the space, saying, “it was just sort of a secondary thing.” In his mind, the building was not something to notice at that time, nor was it something that particularly appealed to him. Instead, he highlighted a feature of B’nai Israel that other members likewise appreciated: its diverse and democratic character.

Upon further thought, Les recalled some of the interior features of the old sanctuary, but only in comparison to the rebuilt sanctuary. As did many B’nai Israel members, Les primarily focused on the darkness of the space. He also situated the synagogue in B’nai Israel’s extended past, as part of the community’s heritage, as its “historical home.” Congregants associated the Land Park synagogue with the community’s previous synagogues at its downtown sites. Even the Land Park location held a deeper history, due to older congregants’ personal ties, growing up in the area. Before the arson, B’nai Israel members related to the synagogue in much the same way that one might relate to a family member. They recognized their implicit and historical
connections to the space, but otherwise, they did not think much of its physical properties. Rather than remembering particular architectural features of the old synagogue, they described their feelings in and toward it.

Through these two depictions of the Islamic Society of Joplin and Congregation B’nai Israel, we see that the places of worship were functional spaces, selected for their locations, their histories, their relationships with other members. For congregants in both communities, associations with their places of worship came about through convenient proximity. Many members of B’nai Israel currently live, or formerly lived, in the Land Park area. The Islamic Society in particular drew people due to its central location. While some might find surprising the notion of Joplin as central, Joplin’s position in southwestern Missouri situates it near the borders of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. One Islamic Society member told me that she sought out the Islamic Society’s mosque because “we didn’t have one there in Oklahoma,” where she lived at the time.\(^{59}\) If not for Joplin, she would have had to drive an hour and a half to Tulsa to find a Muslim community. Rabia, an Islamic Society member who runs a convenience store with her husband in Anderson, Missouri, told me: “[The mosque] provided the base for all of the community to come and gather there. It was not just people living in Joplin. We have families in Oklahoma and Kansas. […] It was a lot more central place for us to get together.”\(^{60}\)

The convenient physical centrality of these sacred places, however, soon became secondary to the purpose and meaning of the places. Members joined the mosque and synagogue to pray, to educate their children, to educate themselves, to find guidance through life events.

\(^{59}\) Joanna, interview with author, 4/5/2014.

\(^{60}\) Rabia, interview with author, 5/1/2014.
Rabia made clear, however, that their mosque “was not just a prayer mosque for us; it was a community center.”\textsuperscript{61} As both narratives indicate, the communal centrality of these places in many ways overshadows the importance of their physical centrality. The religious places provide families with spaces for prayer services and holiday celebrations, as well as religious meals, board meetings, study groups, barbecues, picnics, and other social events. Congregants also bring their children to the synagogue and mosque to raise them in the Jewish and Muslim communities.

As Rabia pointed out, the mosque is an especially important place for immigrant parents, who bring their American-born children closer to “the culture” through the mosque.\textsuperscript{62} The Black Cat Road mosque drew together families scattered across the southern Midwest, many of whom had left their families in Pakistan, Indonesia, and around the Middle East to relocate to places like Anderson, Missouri and Miami, Ohio. Children are often the sole Muslims in their classes. The mosque thus exposes these children to Islamic education and to Muslim friends they likely would not encounter otherwise. Shaheen explained that, “all the prayers were conducted, all the worshipping activities were conducted, but in addition to that, it helped the children to see what different Muslims from different parts of the world are like and how their cultures are.”\textsuperscript{63} The mosque provided a space in which congregants could share Muslim experiences while also encountering cultural diversity. In a city that lacks cultural and religious diversity, the mosque was where Joplin-area Muslims could find and befriend other local Muslims.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} Osman and Shaheen, interview with author, 5/2/2014.
While the mosque in particular served as a safe space for the Joplin Muslim community, both religious places were spaces where religious adherents could enjoy familial ease and comfort. Before the arson, children often played cricket or soccer together in the meadows beyond the mosque after Sunday school ended. At B’nai Israel, children “hang out” in the synagogue library and play basketball outside, while teenagers gossip in synagogue hallways. Several parents fondly recalled bringing their children to “Tot Shabbat,” a Sabbath service arranged for small children, their parents, and often their grandparents. Sherrie, a former journalist and a long-time B’nai Israel member, confided nostalgically: “I always loved looking at my kids being in temple feeling comfortable here. They were so cute in their little socks and clothes. […] I always felt very comfortable in the sanctuary.”

Parents in both communities derive joy, support, and comfort from their religious places, as well as from the families with whom they share their places. “We could tell it was an incredibly friendly place,” said Steve, a reporter for the local newspaper, the Sacramento Bee, and a former B’nai Israel president, said of his and his wife’s first impressions of the synagogue. “It’s always had a pretty welcoming quality to it.” The statement evidences that experiences of community link directly to places. The religious adherents who inhabit the religious places and religious places themselves operate together to contribute to congregants’ experiences of religious community. Though it may seem self-evident that when people gather together they contribute to experiences of community, Steve’s initial encounter with the synagogue conveys that the synagogue space itself might relate a particular feeling of inclusivity.

64 Sherrie, interview with author, 2/11/2014.
65 Steve, interview with author, 2/9/2014.
This is the crux of emotional geography: to “understand emotion — experientially and conceptually — in terms of its social-spatial mediation and articulation rather than as entirely interiorised subjective mental states.” Seeing religious places, religious communities, and emotionalities as necessarily mutually constitutive allows for more holistic comprehensions of the relationships between religious communities and their spaces and the repercussions of disturbing those relationships, through, for instance, vandalisms or arsons of the religious places.

Homes of Worship

At B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society, members have established connections with their co-congregants that they describe as more like relationships with family members than with affiliates of the same religious institutions. “It was a lot more like a bigger family there,” Rabia said of the Islamic Society’s mosque. “I think that’s what we are missing the most, that once the things will be in place, you know, then it will be a lot more back to normal. Our kids will feel place for home.” Of particular note here is her emphasis on “place” and place-related language (“there”). Rabia’s words relay her feeling a lack of normalcy in the temporary mosque. The Islamic Society was displaced, out of place, and to be back in place would entail a return to the usual. The community would be re-placed, restored, returned “home.”

The language of home and family echoed through my conversations with members of both religious groups. The mosque and the synagogue feel like homes. Religious adherents expressed ownership over these spaces, in a manner similar to people discussing their personal

66 Davidson, Bondi, and Smith, 3.
67 Rabia, interview with author, 5/1/2014.
dwellings. Describing her first visit to B’nai Israel, Sherrie said, “It just felt like home right away.” Later in the same conversation, she said that the rabbis are “like parents to us.” Her analogical language conveys her intimately experienced relationships to the synagogue and its clergy. Moreover, the word choice of “home” over “house” denotes a particular kind of relationship to religious space. Such similes reveal the affective roles religious places inhabit in the lives of their religious communities.

Attention to “topophilia,” a term coined and defined by human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, demonstrates the force of “the affective bond between people and place or setting.” As indicated, members of the Islamic Society and B’nai Israel often spoke of their mosque and synagogue, respectively, as places that feel like or are homes to them. The relationships that religious adherents develop with their co-religionists layer onto the uniquely experienced bonds they have developed with their religious places. What is unclear is whether experiences of the community as family contribute to experiences of place as home, or if the place as home crafts the community as a family. Does the place itself compel particular ways of feeling and being? Does the physical place do the work of creating a home? Or is the place a chance component of community as family? Is place a receptacle for community, or is it a necessary contributor to the family created by religious community?

By taking seriously the combinatory sensorial experiences, and related actions, theorized as affect, questions of causality dissipate, and the theory that religious spaces are simply

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properties can be dismissed.\textsuperscript{70} Affective experiences emerge at the intersection of numerous encounters; historical lineages, personal circumstances, individual affinities, precise moments in time, and specific aesthetics contribute to certain moods and modalities. Moreover, because human beings always occupy places, human experiences are necessarily emplaced. The question of how we may fully access emotionality, geographic or otherwise, is under discussion.\textsuperscript{71} By its nature, affect cannot be expressed precisely through words. However, through attending to the particularity of language about place, we may “get at” some elements of emplaced experience.

Members of both the Islamic Society and B’nai Israel invoked language about their places of worship that highlight home and ownership, albeit in ways that are in excess of property and material goods. “This is our place.”\textsuperscript{72} “We just need a place to call our own.”\textsuperscript{73} The possessive rhetoric conveys the importance of the communal unit. The emphasis on place suggests that people seek ownership not merely of a building but rather of a special site that uniquely and collectively belongs to them – and to which they belong. Sherrie expressed her connection to the synagogue succinctly and poignantly. “I went and sat in the sanctuary and just went, ‘Ahhh…,'” she said, her eyes closed. After a brief silence, she looked at me directly, searching for the words to relay her experience: “You know? This is where my heart lives.”\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{70} For examples of scholarship that suggest that religious places are important primarily because they are scarce resources, see Hector Avalos, \textit{Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence} (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005) and Ron E. Hassner, \textit{War on Sacred Grounds} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).


\textsuperscript{73} Steve, interview with author, 2/9/2014. Emphasis mine.

\textsuperscript{74} Sherrie, interview with author, 2/11/2014.
Her words convey the affective intimacy she feels for her synagogue. The connection moves beyond ownership to a cherished relationship with her place of worship. Her language indicates a struggle to find the proper words for powerful emotions and incorporates Sherrie’s physical body into her physical space. Most significantly, her words express the extent to which her identity is tied up in her religious place, living evidence for theologian Belden Lane’s claim that, “who we are… is inseparably a part of where we are.”

Joanna, an educator and a native-Oklahoman who converted to Islam as an adult, relayed her experience of the mosque in a differently embodied way. Though she did not map her body onto the mosque, she too articulated her feelings in terms of the sensorial:

At the beginning… I just really felt this sense of community. Like, I felt I have this big support system, and I was focused on all the people that were there for me, and I was still learning a lot, so I really wasn’t focusing on the building per say. Um, but then I remember I started going to the mosque like in the summer— No, when was it? It was probably in the fall, and then I said my shahada in April and then I remember that summer, my first Ramadan, thinking like, when I would go into the mosque…It’s like when you stepped over that threshold into the prayer hall, it was just like a warm blanket.

You just felt so much peace and you wanted to stay in that room, that’s where you wanted to be. And people would just sit there and talk quietly or study, and it was just like you were going to, like a sensory-deprivation chamber, like nothing bad is going to happen here. And it made you like, I want to go back again. I want to go there again. And I remember saying to myself, ‘Ah it was a one-time deal, it was just peaceful that time.’ But it wasn’t. It was like that every time. And I remember just being in line with everyone and saying prayers and just feeling like, because we stand very close, and I just remember thinking, like, we were one, one continuous, ya know, group. I didn’t really feel like, ‘Oh, I’m the white person’ (laughs) or I’m the convert or I’m the this. I really felt like we were all together and that God would see that and He was happy.

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76 The *shahada* is the Muslim declaration of faith, proclaiming brief in the oneness of God and the acceptance of Muhammad as God’s prophet.

Communicating her earliest memories at the mosque, Joanna got choked up. She described the space through her actual physical movements in the space, recalling stepping over the threshold into the prayer hall, watching other members of her community speaking quietly or studying, standing in line with everyone to say prayers. But in speaking about these physical motions, she invoked other embodied experiences: a warm blanket, a sensory-deprivation chamber, the unified body of the community. Joanna related to the mosque as a place in which her physical body moved and as a site that evoked other physical sensations. Corporeal moments mapped onto one another, underscoring the importance not only of spatiality in general but of this space in particular.

Joanna herself raised the possibility that she might be overly nostalgic about the mosque on Black Cat Road. “Maybe looking back on it [the old mosque], I put more emphasis on it than what it was then because I don’t have it,” she said. Her statement suggests one of the ways in which loss may affect memory, whether of people or of places. It may be that losing the mosque compelled Joanna to remember her experiences in an idealized manner. Perhaps she crafted memories that overly accentuated the positivity of her lived experiences at the mosque while also dissolving any of the less enjoyable moments. However, by bringing together Joanna’s description with Sherrie’s, it seems that congregants lived their religious spaces through and in their physical bodies. As Sherrie explained, “The fire made us all question, ‘How much does this place mean to me?’ and people realized.” Her words caught in her throat and came out in a whisper: “People realized, this place is part of my life. My heart. My brain.” She paused and

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78 Ibid.
took a breath. “Maybe we took it for granted,” she continued. “But the fire made us say, ‘That temple’s…right in me.’”

At their most basic, the arsons of course concern the destruction and reconstruction of religious spaces. However, these acts of violence illuminate “the messiness, ambiguity, and mystery of people’s deeply personal experience of place.” The arsons of B’nai Israel’s synagogue and the Islamic Society’s mosque demonstrate that through orienting studies of religion and space to emotional topographies, human substance and depth enhance social constructivist analyses of brick and mortar. It almost goes without saying that congregants’ bodies resided in their religious spaces. But these spaces also resided (and in some ways continue to reside) in congregants’ bodies and contribute to the ways in which congregants’ experiences of religion, community, and trauma are structured.

Religious adherents described the synagogue and the mosque as homes for their physical and communal bodies, and their language likewise demonstrates that their bodies house their spaces. Especially in the wake of violence, congregants realized the extent to which their places are part of them. As Sherrie’s words reveal, the synagogue is not only part of her life; it is is part of her heart and her brain. It is in her. Individual, social, and spatial entities are bonded to one another and constitute each other, and congregants highlighted the beauty of those bonds. However, they also expressed the ways that violence to their spaces complicatedly altered these bonds and contributed to their decision-making processes as they discussed how to rebuild their places of worship.

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80 Lane, 6.
B’nai Israel and Islamic Society congregants often acknowledged that the arsons destroyed only physical buildings and the material objects housed by the buildings. They frequently professed relief that no people had been hurt or killed. It was only property, only things — and yet their language about the destruction of the tangible things disclosed raw emotions that reinforce the emotional significance of their relationships with their religious spaces. In the days, weeks, months, and even years, after the arson, congregants often used the word “shocked” to describe their emotional responses to the attacks on their places of worship. They recognized the experiences as confusing, jarring, threatening, traumatic. Many compared the loss of their religious spaces to the loss of a parent or other cherished family member. These were stunning personal losses.

Thinking back to that day, Salma recalled how she heard about the arson. She was sleeping in when her mother, Rida, came to wake her up, asking how her night was and whether she slept okay. Salma remembered it as odd. “Every time my mom’s upset, she like, beats around the bush,” she explained to me. So Salma asked her mother outright: ‘What’s wrong? You look really distressed.’ And she just said, ‘The mosque burned down last night.’ And we were both just kind of stunned. Neither of us were crying or anything… It was just, like, shocking… Like, I couldn’t believe her. […] Neither of us were really sad. Like, we were sad, but we weren’t reacting to it.”81 In both communities, people often first registered “shock,” beginning the

81 Salma, interview with author, 7/13/2015.
narratives of their personal experiences by saying, “I just remember being in shock” or “we were all in shock, basically.”

During our conversation, Islamic Society members Osman and Shaheen, both practicing psychiatrists, spoke about this commonly professed emotion. Osman explained: “Initially, everyone goes through this. We have these four stages when you hear about somebody dying or short term of life… You have shock, denial, acceptance, and then grief. So everybody went through the same stages, especially shock.” Notably, Osman compares people’s experiential reactions to the mosque’s destruction to the emotional stages of grief that people endure when a loved one dies or when one is informed of one’s own nearing death. The comparison extends the familial linkage between religious adherents and their places of worship.

Osman’s own memories of the mosque burning follow the emotional stages he described. “When [Imam Lahmuddin] called me and told me that the masjid is burning, I couldn’t believe his words, so much shock,” Osman said. “And I was in denial, I think maybe something else is burning, not our masjid.” It was only after seeing the mosque burned to the ground that he grasped the reality of the situation. “When I took the picture and accepted that it was gone, nothing was left, nothing… and then the grief, we don’t have the place now…” As for Osman, the destruction became most real for religious practitioners when they physically encountered

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82 B’nai Israel member Hope, interview with author, 6/11/2014.
83 B’nai Israel member Mark, interview with author, 2/20/2014.
84 Osman and Shaheen, interview with author, 5/2/2014. I believe that Osman was referring to the Kübler-Ross model, which has five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. See Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy, and Their Own Families (New York: Scribner, 1969). However, he included shock separately from and preceding denial, and he did not include anger, bargaining, or depression. Rather, in his summary, grief itself became the final stage of the process.
85 Osman and Shaheen, interview with author, 5/2/2014.
their religious places — or what remained of their religious places. Walking amidst the ashes, seeing the charred books, and smelling the acrid smoke, community members moved from shock and denial to acceptance. In physically facing the material destruction, they began to confront the reality of the violence committed against them. According to Osman, “the whole community went through the same thing,” evolving through the progressive stages he described and eventually grieving the loss of their religious spaces.

Losing their places of worship triggered for B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society the same emotional process endured by those who lose family members. Although congregants’ initial descriptions of their religious spaces made clear the degree of intimacy they hold with these sites, their narratives of losing these sites reinforce the family-like relationships between the religious communities and their places. In April 2014, Joanna took me to the Black Cat Road mosque site for the first time. As we walked toward the bare grounds, she illustrated for me what used to occupy the empty spaces, pointing to the portico where cars could pull up to drop off people, the former doorway, the women’s restroom to the left of the entry, the men’s to the right. She tried to draw out an imaginary line dividing the rest of the mosque from the designated prayer room, showing me where the bookshelf used to be, where the mihrab was, where the stage was (recalling that it was mostly where kids would run around). She showed me where the narrow kitchen was and pointed out what used to be the backdoor that children used to go outside to the playground and fields to play soccer or cricket. When she finished mapping out

86 Chapter three delves further into the congregants’ physical and emotional modes of reliving their memories of the arsons. Materiality functions centrally here in religious adherents’ acceptance of the arsons; in chapter three, we see that these same individual material memories are eclipsed by collective memories that render the arsons meaningful.

87 The mihrab is a wall niche in a mosque. It indicates the direction (eastward toward Mecca) in which Muslims should pray.
what once was the Black Cat Road mosque, we stood in silence to take in the stark surroundings, each of us envisioning what used to be.\footnote{Fieldnotes, 4/24/2014.}

Back in the car, I asked Joanna about the new mosque. She was not yet sure how she felt, she said, looking straight ahead at the road. She paused, glanced quickly at me, and said: “I want what I had before. That was taken away from me.” I could see her thinking about the two mosques, the old and the new. “It’s kind of like your mother,” Joanna added. “If she dies, there will be others to comfort you and support you and care for you, but she won’t be replaced.” The mosque, she explained, is “the place where you can be with the people you love, where you go when people die, where you go when things are difficult.” She paused. “It really \textit{is} like your mother,” she emphasized, affirming her own analogy.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}}

Joanna’s comparison relates the loss of the mosque to the loss of a mother, a parent often understood as the nurturer. Echoing throughout conversations with B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members, the analogy underscores the intimate connection between a religious space and religious adherents. Human geographer Caitlin Cihak Finlayson writes about the affectual relationships between religious adherents and their religious spaces, demonstrating a shared characteristic between them: the feeling of “home.”\footnote{Caitlin Cihak Finlayson, “Spaces of faith: incorporating emotion and spirituality in geographic studies,” in \textit{Environment and Planning A} 44 (2012): 1763-1778.} However, by describing the bond in terms of the familial, and by comparing the post-arson grieving process to mourning a loved one’s death, congregants convey connections to their religious places that are far more intimate and
Losing Space and Safety

Congregants’ bonds to their religious places are, like familial relationships, complicated and contradictory. To adherents, the synagogue and the mosque were and are familiar homes, places they experience as safe, comfortable, and friendly. But these places of worship are simultaneously places about which adherents express unease, anxiety, and fear. While congregants see the synagogue and mosque as inclusive spaces, their religious spaces also serve as markers of difference. The entangled affectual relationships between B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members and their religious places tell us how religious spaces shape religious practitioners in their emotional worlds. The divergent but contemporaneous affective forces also become manifest in each community’s internal negotiations around how to rebuild their religious sites. The “poetics” of space influence religious adherents’ experiences of religious places and their decision-making processes as they work to reconstruct their religious places.91

While Sherrie so eloquently described her intimate connection to B’nai Israel and the synagogue, she also spoke of her religious space in ways that reveal the messy complexity of her feelings toward and in her place. She told me that after the synagogue arson, she penned a letter to the rabbi. She recalled that she wrote, “When I go to temple sometimes, I get very scared about being safe.” “That is more Holocaust-connected,” she added, pausing, thinking of her

91 The next chapter further examines how fear and anxiety inflect religious communities’ decisions about reconstructing their religious places.
Holocaust-survivor parents. “But the fire fueled it, so to speak. Sometimes I think, like, I have my cell phone with me, and if somebody comes in and tries to hurt us, I’m going to dive under a chair and dial… [The rabbi] told me a lot of people feel that way.”

Much as the synagogue is a place of respite, a home for Sherrie’s heart, it is also the site of a trauma. When she inhabits the space, she feels vulnerable. In part, she attributed her emotional response to her parents’ stories about their own experiences of the Holocaust. But “the fire fueled it.” Sherrie made clear that the arson prompted her fears. Her fears arise “when I go to temple.” Thus, the arson has become a part of the synagogue space. Together, that moment in time (which has become part of the physical place for Sherrie) and the physical place itself incite the emotional experiences of alarm, apprehension, and dread.

Although Sherrie continues to feel fearful of her safety at the synagogue, other B’nai Israel members told me that their anxieties have faded over time. Steve conceded that he was constantly worried “that something bad was going to happen” during his time as congregation president only a few years after the arson, but those feelings have since ebbed. On occasion, when the fears do rise to the surface, B’nai Israel members said that they try to disregard them and focus their attention elsewhere. As one congregant told me, “fear draws fear to it,” so she prefers not to focus on the anxiety. B’nai Israel members clearly struggle with lingering fearful feelings and a strong desire to dismiss those feelings. “It’s always kind of there, in the back of people’s minds,” Steve said. “That stuff is never totally out of your life. It’s not an abstraction. A distant memory, but not an abstraction.”

93 Debbie, interview with author, 2/11/2014.
94 Steve, interview with author, 2/9/2014.
The anxiety that Sherrie experiences at the synagogue parallels the fearfulness that Umar experiences at the mosque. When we spoke in July 2015, the Joplin arsonist had been arrested and was awaiting trial. Still, Umar said, he is “not satisfied” that “this thing is over.”

“Every time, every Friday [during the main prayer service], I think about it,” he told me. “That somebody may — and especially after South Carolina — somebody may just show up and start shooting people.” Umar’s fear was palpable. His frame of reference is not only the arson but also a more recent hate crime: the June 17, 2015 mass shooting of several black churchgoers at a Bible study at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Being in the mosque provokes Umar to remember the arson and to think about possible scenarios in which the Islamic Society could again be the target of violence.

Members of both communities recalled the arsons regardless of their proximity to sites of violence, but the act of physically inhabiting these religious spaces viscerally conjures painful memories and active fears that muddle adherents’ feelings of comfort and fulfillment. Their religious places incite negative affective responses. While both Sherrie and Umar expressed similar heightened senses of distress, Sherrie contextualized her experiences in the synagogue through her association with the arson and the Holocaust, and Umar conjured images from a recent mass shooting at another place of worship. Though their frames of reference differed, both arsons elevated congregants’ worries about being attacked. The arsons were signs that someone(s) could, and might, do far more harm the next time, and the religious places were reminders of the previous violence that signaled the continued potential for future attacks. Thus,

95 Umar, interview with author, 7/10/2015.
96 Chapter three addresses the ways in which the Holocaust frames B’nai Israel members’ retellings of the arson. Memories and affective experiences alike are shaped by distinct narrative scaffolds in both religious communities.
the same spaces that cultivate senses of home, comfort, and community also generate powerful anxieties. Rabbi Alfi best summarized the affective struggle common to both communities:

“Well, ‘cuz we’re a minority… so for a lot of people, the synagogue is where they feel safe. … And all of a sudden, their safe place wasn’t a safe place.”

The Effects of Fearful Affect

The worries articulated by Umar, Sherrie, and others, have lived repercussions. The emotional impact of the arsons gave many congregants pause, leaving them wondering how to move forward. Some considered whether it would be prudent for them to continue on with their religious communities. Others found themselves reinvigorated to participate in their religious communities, actively rejecting their fears and taking a stand against the perpetrators’ efforts to overpower them. Ultimately, the collective concerns about safety and security drove communities’ conversations about how to reconstruct their places of worship. Individuals’ affective responses to the arsons influenced their communal decisions about how to react and how to rebuild.

The attacks brought to light the vulnerabilities of these religious minority groups and prompted them to assess the potential for further hostility and violence. After the arsons, congregants from both communities questioned a host of choices they had made that they perceived as situating them in the midst of violence. B’nai Israel members were concerned primarily with their safety or lack thereof as part of the congregation and as part of the broader

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97 Rabbi Mona Alfi, interview with author, 2/7/2014.
98 The next chapter attends to this element of emotional geographies at greater length.
Jewish community, while Muslims affiliated, or soon-to-be affiliated, with the Islamic Society of Joplin reconsidered their decisions to live in Joplin.

B’nai Israel congregants reflected upon the arson and its correlation to their Jewish identities. The reactions among one family in particular convey the range of responses. Sacramento Bee reporter Steve, his wife Eleanor, and their young daughter Amy moved to Sacramento only a few years before the arson. Although Eleanor is not Jewish, she and Steve wanted to raise Amy in a Jewish community, and B’nai Israel offered an interfaith families program that appealed to them. When I asked Steve to tell me about the conversations among the interfaith group members after the arson, he outlined a distinct contrast between the Jewish partners and the non-Jewish partners. For the Jewish partners, he said, the arson was part of a collective history, a fulfillment of a general sense that “these things do happen.” They weren’t minimizing or trivializing, he said, “but there was a sense among the Jews in the group that, hey this is what happens, you know?” As for the non-Jewish partners, Steve said, the feeling was, “‘Wow, what did we sign up for?’” 99

Eleanor had a similar story to tell. Narrating her memory of the arson, she told me about Amy’s reaction: “‘What if they burn our house when we’re there?’” Eleanor recalled that she had almost explained to Amy that the bad guys “have no reason to burn our house” — but then she realized they also had no reason to burn the synagogue. She laughed nervously, sadly, “I suddenly realized I don’t even know how to explain this to my child, and it was so unsettling to think that it’s— that I put her in harm’s way by choosing Judaism.” 100 Although Eleanor

100 Eleanor, interview with author, 2/14/2015.
underscored that she has been mostly happy with her decision to choose Judaism and to raise Amy in a Jewish community, she said, “religion shouldn’t be about having to explain bad guys to your child, ya know?”

Among members of B’nai Israel, the positions expressed by Steve and Eleanor were common. Many people read the arson as motivated by anti-Semitic sentiments that are part and parcel of the Jewish experience. Others, parents especially, were distressed about the active decision to be part of a community and in a place targeted by violence. Rabbi Alfi explained that after the arson, the children seemed less “freaked out” than their parents were. “Parents look at their precious babies and go, ‘Oh my God, why would I take them some place where they are a target?’” she said. As I discuss in the following chapter, both feelings of insecurity and concerns about the inevitability of anti-Semitic acts compelled the B’nai Israel community to prioritize safety measures in the reconstructed synagogue.

Nonetheless, Steve and Eleanor reaffirmed their belonging to the synagogue. “Maybe it’s a little counter-intuitive,” Steve admitted. “But it was just a sense of not turning our backs.” Other B’nai Israel members seem to have felt similarly. Rabbi Alfi showed me the numbers corroborating Steve’s statement; synagogue memberships after the arson actually rose. “Why do you think that was?” I asked her. She answered matter-of-factly: “A lot of Jews…basically said, ‘Really?! You’re going to tell us we can’t have a synagogue? We’ll show you!’”

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101 Chapter three contends with B’nai Israel’s arson as an almost-anticipated event, given their understanding of the Jewish history of anti-Semitism, with the Holocaust as its paradigmatic instantiation.

102 Rabbi Mona Alfi, interview with author, 2/7/2014.

103 Steve, interview with author, 2/9/2014.

104 Since 1999, however, B’nai Israel has seen a decrease in membership from around 700 families in 1999 to about 560 families in 2014. Numbers were communicated to me verbally by Rabbi Alfi, who read them from the annual membership report.
people who had been unaffiliated actually joined as a statement of solidarity.” While the arson affectively compelled fear, vulnerability, and anxiety, B’nai Israel members pushed back against the negative emotions, instead making a statement about their Jewish identities. As for Amy, now a college undergraduate, she has come to espouse similar feelings and has been drawn closer to Judaism.

As with B’nai Israel, the mosque arson generated anxieties that caused some Islamic Society members to reconsider their decisions to move to Joplin. These fears also prompted a few potential members to reverse their plans for their impending relocation to the area. Osman said that there was one couple that had committed to jobs as physicians in a Joplin hospital. They had even signed a contract for a house. “But when they heard about the masjid burning, they cancelled and they didn’t want to come,” Osman said. “We tried to convince them that it was just a coincidence and all that, but people say, ‘Why? Why should I go there when I have other opportunities?’” He said that, even if there is no masjid, Muslims look for towns that are safe, so people have not come to Joplin. “People were scared away,” he said. “And some of the physicians who were already here, they have moved to other towns.”

Although some Islamic Society members denied that there were any changes in the Joplin Muslim community after the arson, others confirmed the dip in membership. Rida explicitly told me that so many people left because “morale is down.” The arson was particularly difficult for

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105 Rabbi Mona Alfi, interview with author, 2/7/2014.
106 Amy, phone interview with author, 3/13/2014. Chapter three returns to Amy and to the “statement of solidarity” posed by members of B’nai Israel in the wake of their experience of anti-Semitism.
107 Shaheen and Osman, interview with author, 5/2/2014. I am unsure exactly what he meant by “it was a coincidence,” or why it would be reassuring to the newcomers.
those who were newer to Joplin and had not yet developed local relationships. Jameel had very recently moved to Joplin and become a regular at the Islamic Society mosque when the arson occurred. His wife especially “was scared and terrified and shocked,” he said. Her main concern was, “Are we safe here?” He reassured her that they were safe, that nothing would happen to them, and they remained in Joplin for another year before Jameel accepted a new job elsewhere.

Although it contributed to people’s decision-making processes, fear spawned by the arson was not the only factor in the choice to stay in or leave Joplin. Reiterating his emphasis on the mosque as a home for the community, Umar said, “Actually, after the arson, we lost community members.” Practically speaking, Joplin became a less-attractive place to live once it no longer had a mosque. Moreover, Joplin is only one of numerous medically under-served areas in which non-American physicians may work to satisfy their visa-waiver requirements. As Osman told me, after the arson, a couple of physicians slated to work in Joplin reapplied to work in different under-served areas. For others, the combination of the 2011 tornado and the 2012 mosque arson reinforced decisions to relocate after they fulfilled the requirements of their visa waivers in Joplin. The mosque-burning was the final straw. The arson convinced members of the Islamic Society that they did not belong in the Joplin community, compelling them to leave. Although the vast majority of Islamic Society members did not leave Joplin after the arson, they expressed notable anxieties around difference and concerns about belonging.

The arsons of the mosque and synagogue communicated to these religious communities that their religious identities, embodied in their religious sites, set them apart from their

110 Umar, interview with author, 7/10/2015.
neighbors in Joplin and in Sacramento. The religious places both shelter and segregate the
Islamic Society and B’nai Israel. On a day-to-day basis, congregants of both communities said
that they did not feel distinct from others in Sacramento or in Joplin. However, they
acknowledged that when they inhabit their religious spaces, they are aware that they are set
apart. “I don't think I fit the traditional profile [of a Muslim],” Rabia told me, specifying that this
is in part because she does not dress traditionally, meaning in Pakistani clothing or in hijab, in
public. In fact, she said, “a lot of people think I’m Mexican.”

While Rabia made clear that she does not regularly feel as though people explicitly
recognize her as a member of a Muslim community, she underscored that being at the mosque
designates her as such, and that being there puts her at risk:

> When you are in one place, at the worship center, somewhere like a mosque or a
> synagogue or at the temple, they know that you belong there. If somebody is hating you,
> that’s the target. […] They target you, and they come after you. But I don’t have the
> feeling that someone is targeting *me*, but when I was *there* [at the mosque], I felt as a
target within a part of the Muslim community.

Rabia’s words describe how religious places generate, isolate, and highlight religious
communities’ otherness. The arsons proved that religious places outwardly embody difference.
They provide tangible sites against which people who hate may act violently. Inclusivity and
exclusivity are inscribed implicitly and concomitantly through place.

Even as they cohere groups of religious practitioners, religious spaces delineate
difference. In his book *Geographies of Exclusion*, David Sibley correlates the borders that
demarcate places to Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject. A bounded place signals the Otherness

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111 Rabia, interview with author, 5/1/2014.
of those who inhabit that space. The synagogue and the mosque denote their respective occupants as Jews and Muslims, designating them as abject Others that necessitate monitoring, control, containment, perhaps even violence. The constant sense of being marked as Other in their spaces – the “hovering presence of the abject,” as Sibley calls it – haunts the congregants of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society. They acknowledge their vulnerability in and because of the spaces to which they are tethered. Their spatially activated memories in particular remind religious adherents that their communities were attacked and could be attacked again at any time.

In parsing the ramifications of the arsons, affective cartographies reveal that people create their religious places, and those places likewise shape their inhabitants in sometimes unseen but highly sensorial ways. Returning to Rida’s claim, the religious places seem to have “vibrations.” They hold in tension often oppositional modes of experiencing religion and religious community. While the synagogue and the mosque are sites of family, comfort, and familiarity, they are likewise places that trigger unease and apprehension. Parameters drawn around properties delimit B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society as different. Although potentially protective, physical boundaries also designate who is Other. Property lines demarcate interiority and vulnerability.

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Space and place contribute to the complexity of human experience, particularly after places — and by extension, the people who inhabit those places — are the targets of violence. Religious places and religious communities operate in tandem, negotiating conflict, violence, and change. These processes are imbued with affective gravity entangled in the politics of religious places haunted by violence. The arsons, the ensuing communal negotiations, and the spaces themselves produce what human geographer Yael Navaro-Yashin calls “dis-resonance,” a messy comportment that complicates collective subjectivity.\textsuperscript{114} Ignoring how violence to religious places emotionally and physically affects religious adherents stops short of understanding the deep complexities of religious place.

Even as they began to rebuild after the arsons, Islamic Society and B’nai Israel members continued to navigate their affective relationships with their places of worship. Their messy emotional relationships with local places and religious spaces influenced their discussions. The violence of the arsons incited divisive internal debates about how to reconstruct their religious places. But it was through these debates that the communities redefined their collective identities. The next chapter explores the ways in which communities’ contentious negotiations around reconstructing religious places in the wake of violence illustrate an effort to articulate their own parameters.

CHAPTER TWO

Clearing Religious Rubble: Creating Home and Fortress

Congregation B’nai Israel is more a campus than a synagogue, comprised of several connected buildings that house the sanctuary, small chapel, memorial room, meeting hall, library, and administrative offices, a Sunday School wing, and approximately one dozen classrooms. On the sunny, chilled day in February 2014 when I first visited, a newly established metal art installation welcomed me to the expansive property. Adorned with sculpted representations of the Seven Species, it serves as a bicycle rack, a greeting and parting message to visitors, and an aspiration: the word Shalom.¹ The serene scene before me made it difficult to

¹ According to Jewish tradition, the Seven Species are the seven sacred fruits and grains grown in the land of Israel: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates. This derives from Deuteronomy 8: 7-8, which states
imagine a day fifteen years earlier when the same campus had been cordoned off with yellow police tape, demarcating the site where the buildings had burned.

Unlike the exterior of B’nai Israel, which bore no obvious trace of the hate crime, the former site of the Islamic Society’s mosque still felt haunted by the arson. When I initially visited Joplin in April 2014, nearly two years had passed since the hate crime, and yet broken tiles still blanketed the building’s concrete foundation. Rubble formed a lone mound among puddles of rain left by the latest spring storm. A weathered playground and worn soccer nets sat off at a distance in the field. At the same time, my visit also revealed the Muslim community’s next life stage. On a hill in central Joplin, near the city’s medical complexes where many Islamic

that, “For Adonai your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill; a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey.” Shalom is the Hebrew word for hello, goodbye, and peace.
Society members work, the new mosque’s wooden shell stood amidst the clutter of rebar and other dusty evidence of construction-in-progress.

As the previous chapter showed, places shape people, their practices, and their affective experiences. The synagogue and mosque structured B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society as religious communities. Though both B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society eventually rebuilt their religious places after the arsons, the above scenes provoke two critical questions. First, how did violence affect the ways in which these religious communities rebuilt their spaces? And second, how did decisions about reconstructing the synagogue and the mosque affect the intersubjective relationships bound up in these places?

When the arsons destroyed the buildings, they disrupted the relationships and routines located “in place.” The sudden demolitions of religious spaces called into question senses of normalcy and concrete understandings of community. Having lost the places that cohered and stabilized them, B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society were left disoriented and fractured. In order to rebuild, both communities grappled not only with the logistical nightmares and emotional fallout generated by the arsons but also with existential disputes about their own collective identities. The destroyed spaces exposed divisions within these communities and forced each to struggle with its internal discord. For both communities, the project of rebuilding their religious places was bound up with the fraught process of redefining and reconstituting themselves as cohesive religious groups.

This chapter demonstrates that the violence of the arsons unsettled B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society and upended what they had taken for granted. Subsequently, their discussions about how to rebuild were debates about how congregants understood their religious communities’ identities. But answering the questions of “who are we?” and “who do we want to
be?” is never a simple project nor one of consensus. This chapter first situates the arsons amidst conversations about other disasters and crises to show how the destruction of place ruptures community. It then demonstrates that repairing the rupture is itself a conflicted process, made more difficult by physical disunity. B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society struggled to resolve communal disagreements but eventually had to do so in order to rebuild. Thus, the remainder of the chapter examines the decisions that were made and considers what these decisions relay about the religious communities, their histories, their anxieties and hopes, and their internal and external relationships.

REMAPPING PLACE AND PEOPLE

In *To Take Place*, Jonathan Z. Smith demonstrates that place is both noun (‘a place’) and verb (‘to place’). Place refers both to a specific physical location and to relationships and rituals set in a particular space. Religious groups, religious individuals, and religious practices are emplaced. Even sacrality, Smith claims, is “above all, a category of emplacement.”

Subsequently, sacred places become sacred only through the rituals that take place in them. Rituals are modes of paying attention, and place “directs” that attention. Moreover, for Smith, religious practice and sacred space are arbitrary. Determined through situational circumstances and ritual praxis, they always house the potential to shift in use and meaning.

Certainly, the synagogue and mosque at the center of this dissertation at times are considered sacred by those who inhabit them. They are places of worship, of prayer, and of

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practice. However, they are not always ‘sacred’ spaces. B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society also use these places to gather as religious communities. At the synagogue and mosque, people worship, but they also eat, gossip, play, learn, joke, and rest. The spaces are not solely ‘places of worship’ because their purposes and meanings extend beyond prayer. Instead, I refer to them as ‘religious places.’

‘Religious place’ designates a space that belongs to a religious community and to which a religious community likewise belongs. Qualitatively, ‘religious places’ are much like many other places. Like all built places, ‘religious places’ come into being through “a particular constellation of relations, articulated together at a particular locus.” And like all built places, B’nai Israel’s synagogue and the Islamic Society’s mosque materialized through “human decision-making.”

In other words, what makes ‘religious places’ religious are the communities that create them. Much as houses are made homes, certain buildings are made ‘religious places,’ for it is through the “particular constellation of relations” that a place is rendered distinct. Those relations include, as David Chidester and Edward Linenthal write, “the temporal processes of ritual and practice, memory and narrative, and the ongoing engagement with historical factors and

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4 In part, “belonging” for B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society is constituted through property ownership and community membership, both of which occur through technical financial means. The religious groups possess deeds to the physical properties, and individual members become part of their communities by paying dues. However, community members are more than financially invested in their communities and places. They also convey their “belonging” in emotional terms. They are connected affectively to their communities and places.


change.” Relationships, rituals, and memories make certain places more than simply locations. The ‘religious places’ in this story differ substantively from other places only because they belong to B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society and therefore hold particular purposes and meanings for these religious communities. Because religious places are not intrinsically different from other places, literature on other places destroyed or violated may shed light on the destruction of the synagogue and mosque.

In his book *In Place/Out of Place*, human geographer Tim Cresswell argues that transgressions entail stepping across, being “out of place.” All transgressions are breaks from normality, “moments of crisis in the flow of things” that “confuse and disorientate” and cause “a questioning of that which was previously considered ‘natural,’ ‘assumed,’ and ‘taken for granted.’” Transgressions overturn and unsettle. Expressing their “shock” upon hearing about the arsons of their religious places, members of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society experienced the crimes as moments of crisis that disrupted and upended their everyday lives. The arsons were transgressions that left the religious communities disoriented and questioning what they had taken for granted.

B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society were forced to clean up their properties, relocate their services, fundraise extensively, hire architects, and assess and reassess blueprints. Funding efforts and the tasks of rebuilding, however, were relatively minor challenges compared to the impossible project of deciding how to rebuild – a project that conveys how a community envisions itself, what a community wants to be. Building processes are often contentious, but

\[\text{\cite*{Ibid., 25.}}\]
\[\text{\textit{\textsuperscript{8} Tim Cresswell, In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 21 and 26.}\]
they were all the more so for B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society. The hate crimes disrupted the communities’ normal routines and suspended their usual interactions with their spaces and with each other. Bereft of their religious places, community members were physically separated from one another and fractured emotionally. The buildings that brought them together had been destroyed, leaving their internal divisions not only laid bare but exacerbated.

*Discordant Places*

For a short time after the arsons, B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society united as cohesive religious groups and rallied together with their local Sacramento and Joplin communities. B’nai Israel staff even reported a brief rise in membership and an increase in members attending services.9 But the subsequent years of rebuilding were fraught with disputes and discontent. Devising the blueprints for the new synagogue and mosque meant redefining the religious communities themselves. The already-diverse congregations struggled to concretize their core identities, distilling their priorities to materialize them in the physical spaces. Orchestrating renovations and reconstructions of religious places likely precipitate animated conversations under ordinary circumstances, but in the wake of the arsons, these conversations became heated intra-communal debates about layout, interior design, and security measures.

The material circumstances created by the arsons compounded the communities’ contested deliberations about how to rebuild. The synagogue and the mosque would have supplied space to discuss community logistics, but they were destroyed. At times when people needed to unite as religious communities to move forward, the absence of their religious places

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9 Rabbi Mona Alfi, interview with author, 2/7/2014.
left them divided. In his seminal work *Everything in its Path*, sociologist Kai T. Erikson reveals the layered traumas of the 1972 flooding of Buffalo Creek, West Virginia. While the deluge was the primary disaster, residents were affected profoundly by a secondary trauma: the loss of communality caused by physical separation.\(^\text{10}\) Though Buffalo Creek was by far a disaster of greater magnitude, the arsons were layered traumas for B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society, who lost their collective homes and their sense of communality.

Without a gathering place, the Islamic Society discontinued much of its programming, instead meeting in people's private residences for prayers, board meetings, and Sunday school classes. The board eventually decided to rent a space for a temporary mosque, and for over a year, the Islamic Society met in what was formerly a Thai restaurant, one of several storefronts in a strip mall.\(^\text{11}\) The Islamic Society’s interim home had no sign, and newspapers covered its glass windows. While daily prayers and Sunday school classes continued, attendance waned and most other activities ceased entirely. Instead, the Islamic Society grappled with vocal dissent, disagreements over the modes of reconstruction.

Likewise, B’nai Israel saw its community physically divided. Synagogue staff, board members, and educators relocated at first to individual congregants’ homes, and then they moved into trailers set up in the congregation’s parking lot. Congregants shared memories about their discomfort in the trailers, reflective not only of actual physical discomfort but also of their feelings of unease after the arsons. Rabbi Alfi expressed that during the summer, the trailers were

\(^\text{10}\) Erikson distinguishes his use of “communality” instead of community “in order to underscore the point that people are not referring to particular village territories when they lament the loss of community but to the network of relationships that make up their general human surround.” Kai T. Erikson, *Everything in its Path* (New York: Touchstone, 1976), 187.

\(^\text{11}\) The strip mall is across the street from the location of the new mosque.
“uncomfortable and hot,” and Amy, who was only five years old at the time of the arson, vividly remembered attending Sunday school classes in the trailers, the feel of their cold cement floors seeping through her clothing.12 Moreover, Rabbi Alfi said, the trailers were located along the wall that the arsonists had mounted to attack the synagogue, so “to be in a parking lot at night next to the wall…was very unsettling.”13

For a time, the arsons separated members of the Islamic Society and B’nai Israel from one another. When the congregations most needed to come together to make decisions about how to proceed and rebuild, they were divided spatially and communally. The arsons destroyed the communities’ religious places and impaired their communality. Undoubtedly, people experienced disagreements with their co-congregants before the arsons, but the physical dispersion caused by the arsons amplified those divisions. “At a time when we really needed to be together, we were not,” Rabbi Alfi explained. “We couldn’t physically be together.”14 In the process of trying to establish where, how, and in what ways to rebuild, both communities experienced “a lot of strife, a lot of bad feelings, a lot of discontent.”15 Such discontent informed decision-making processes and increased people’s insistence upon their often-incompatible opinions. B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society grappled with disagreements around major reconstruction decisions like relocating, constructing central prayer spaces, and installing security cameras and gates. But “bad feelings” fostered heated debates even over seemingly

13 Rabbi Mona Alfi, interview with author, 2/7/2014.
14 Ibid.
mundane matters, like storage space and signage, and contributed further to the schisms in each community.

Religious Cartographies

Considering their members’ diverse interests and individual requests from particularly outspoken and influential congregants, both religious groups deliberated the practical and political implications of their decisions. The debates around rebuilding predominantly fall into three categories: hopes for the future, considerations of the past, and concerns with safety and security. Before addressing each in turn, however, it is important to survey the religious places as holistic entities. The following detailed descriptions are meant to evoke the embodied experience of navigating the spaces in order to understand the “thickness” of communal experience.\(^{16}\) With the maps of these places in mind, we then examine in greater detail the conversations around and final decisions about reconstructing religious places.

The Mosque

From the street, the new mosque looks much like a medical office building, tucked in between a few actual medical office buildings. There are no architectural features that signal a mosque, such as a dome or a minaret, nor a sign to designate the building as belonging to the Islamic Society. The mosque sits on the top of a small hill, set back a bit from the street. A paved drive slopes upward to a black chain-link fence, where brick pillars flank movable black

aluminum gates. Tall streetlamps overlook a parking lot, and an American flag stands in front of the mosque’s entryway.

Figure 4: Front entry of the reconstructed mosque. Source: Photograph by author.

Two sets of double doors open into the mosque’s foyer, which houses plants on either side of two more sets of double doors that lead to a carpeted lobby. A massive gold-and-crystal chandelier hangs overhead. On either side of the entry to the lobby are rooms that can be used as classrooms, meeting rooms, or tornado shelters. When not in use, their doors remained closed and locked, with the lights off. One of the rooms houses a television screen that displays at least twelve different video images from security cameras situated in and around the mosque.

There are three halls off of the lobby. To the right, one leads to the men’s area: the men's bathroom, the men’s shoe-rack closet, and a double-door entry to the main prayer hall, in which hangs the lobby chandelier’s match. Walking straight from the lobby, a short hall leads to the women’s area: a women’s bathroom, a women’s shoe-rack area, and secluded women’s prayer space cordoned off from the main prayer hall by thick sliding glass doors. Plush red carpets
conjoin the prayer spaces. The carpet’s gold designs demarcate the lines for prayers, showing people how to space themselves. Next to the women’s area, a room for small children is furnished with short tables and plastic chairs, with brown cubbies that lie flush with the walls.

Walking left from the lobby, a long hallway winds on to the kitchen and to a multi-purpose hall used for dining and community activities. From the multi-purpose hall, one door leads to the parking lot, another connects to the children’s room, and yet another opens out onto a fenced-in plastic playground and a small concrete patio featuring three barbecue grills. Beyond, soccer goals bookend a larger field; this field, too, is fenced in, although this fence has two rows of barbed wire along the top.¹⁷

Moving through the mosque feels a little like walking in circles, passing through various compartments, each sectored off for its own purpose yet contained.

¹⁷ Fieldnotes, 7/10/2015.
The Synagogue

Framed on two sides by the West Side Highway, which runs alongside the Sacramento River, B’nai Israel’s campus is across from William Land Park and adjacent to a municipal water-treatment plant. While the brick walls of some of the buildings meet Riverside Boulevard, access for entry or exit is isolated to a black aluminum gate toward the south side of the property. The parking lot spirals into the inner core, where concrete outdoor footpaths lead to different parts of the campus: to the left, a string of classrooms, the main sanctuary, and the small chapel, and straight ahead, a foyer that branches out into the administration building, the main conference room, and the education wing that houses the cantor's office, library, and archives.

![Image](image_url)

Figure 6: View of B’nai Israel from Riverside Boulevard. Source: Photograph by author.

A set of double doors open into the foyer, where boxes for B’nai Mitzvah projects and food and toiletries collections await donations. Behind a door to the left, administrative cubicles sit across from the rabbis’ offices and an office kitchen. The main conference room and a small
gift shop are directly connected to the foyer, and to the right of the foyer, a hallway leads to the offices of the cantor and the education director, as well as the library. A bright, open space, the library boasts high ceilings, many windows, natural daylight, comfortable chairs, and computers for shared use. There are sections for new books, reference books, and young adult books, and a separate room contains the children’s library. At the end of the education wing’s hall is an archive room, also used to store a folding table and chairs.

The synagogue’s small chapel can be reached through the administration building, or if unlocked, from an outdoor path accessed from within the campus; the same path leads to the main sanctuary. A secure passcode locks and unlocks the heavy main-sanctuary doors, which

Figure 7: Entry to B’nai Israel’s library. Source: Photograph by author.
open to a foyer. A second set of double doors leads to the sanctuary itself. High ceilings are softened by an expansive white drapery that hangs over the room, and the chairs and pews are set up around a bimah that extends out into the center of the space, in what is a traditionally Sephardic style. A small room connected to the sanctuary functions as a memorial room, with rectangular plaques of now-deceased members of the congregation mounted on the walls. Though the room used to function as an entrance to the synagogue, its doors are now locked, as is the surrounding gate.

From the memorial room is a hallway lined with enlarged photos from B’nai Israel's history; each wall of “heritage hall” supplies an overview of a particular epoch. The hall leads into the auditorium, and from there, an outdoor courtyard bordered by classrooms aleph through vav (one through six). The courtyard features Jerusalem stone, a fountain, a canvas covering for the hot summers, and plants native to Israel. Although a fence bounds the property, a gate remains open. Facing out onto Riverside Boulevard and Land Park, the building’s exterior proclaims the biblical adage, “Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself.”

SHAPING COMMUNITY

In rebuilding their religious places, B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society attempted to fulfill their perceptions of their current needs while also outlining their communal goals and

\[\text{Fieldnotes, 2/5/2014.}\]

19 The classrooms accommodate between one-hundred and one-hundred-twenty students for religious school, held on Sundays and Tuesday evenings. Prior to October 2014, the Brookfield School, a private secular school (kindergarten through eighth grade), used the B’nai Israel campus classrooms during regular week days.
20 Jerusalem stone refers to various types of pale limestone and are often used in contemporary synagogue design, as a means of evoking the Western Wall.
trying to preempt their future needs. How large was the community, and how much would they — or how much would they hope to — grow? How important was education? The choices they would make about the number, size, and quality of classrooms were grounded in and reflective of their answer. Other questions followed suit: What kind of ambiance should the sanctuary or prayer hall promote? Which kinds of interior design would foster the community character they wanted? What was the desired communal character? While B’nai Israel focused on creating an aesthetic that would cultivate an embracing atmosphere, the Islamic Society was primarily concerned with the construction of its first “purpose-built mosque.”

In both communities, money was a central concern. The spaces cost a substantial amount of money, but it was not enough money to satisfy everyone’s sometimes-contrary needs and desires. As Joanna noted, “Any time you have a large amount of money, everybody has an opinion on how you should spend it, and everybody wants their voice to be heard.” The communities fissured as congregants debated how to raise funds and in what to invest them. I asked Umar, the Islamic Society’s former treasurer, about the nature of the conversations among community members as they worked to set a plan to rebuild, and he said simply, “Money.” He expanded: “I mean, we had a lot of schism. We had a lot of debate. The insurance money was only so much.” He listed the numerous considerations the community undertook in planning the reconstruction: “As soon as you come to the city limits, the cost goes [up] three times. The land, you know [is] commercial, the land, the city code, the requirements, and then the security

features, and then the community hall... And we wanted something bigger. [...] And we thought we should have a storm room.”

Making a “Sacred Space”

B’nai Israel had already begun a Capital Campaign to raise funds for a redesign of the sanctuary when the arson occurred. Constructed in 1952, the Land Park synagogue had fallen into disrepair, with carpets and furniture in need of repair or replacement. Congregants also felt that the synagogue’s style was outdated. From January 1996 to May 1997, an initial exploratory committee convened to examine “whether renovations to the Temple Sanctuary are warranted, as well as to identify unmet space needs for the Congregation.”

Referring to a pamphlet on “Why Temples Look the Way They Do,” by Rabbi Daniel Hillel Freelander, the committee assessed the status and functions of the buildings. Members recognized in their sanctuary the outdated nature of what Freelander described as ‘Stage 2’ architecture of the “growing suburban movement after World War II.” They agreed that the raised *bimah* felt like a mode of keeping the clergy leadership “remote, distant or elevated.” The 1950s interior design also overemphasized dark woods and provided little natural light, which according to the report, many congregants found “depressing or not conducive to an overall feeling of comfort and connection.”

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22 Umar, interview with author, 7/10/2015.
23 Exploratory Committee notes, B’nai Israel archives.
25 Exploratory Committee notes, B’nai Israel archives.
As congregants shared their memories of the previous synagogue with me, I found that they retained the visuals of the raised bimah and the general darkness of the sanctuary before the arson. One person recalled: “It was far more stage-y. The synagogue was set up more like a theater, more like a classic church kind of thing, where you know, everyone was lined up and you have this raised bimah and then behind you have the ark.”26 Some noted that the bimah turned the rabbi or service leader into the star of a show, with the congregation as the audience. Other congregants attempted to communicate the feel of the space. “It was very dark,” Debbie, B’nai Israel’s former art teacher, said. “Very dark… It felt like you were in a closet.”27 Other people related the sanctuary to a lodge, a cave, and the hull of a ship.

The initial exploratory committee met with Rabbi Freelander to discuss the psychology of change and to address how to create “a sense of sacred space.”28 They emphasized a desire for “dialogue and communication as opposed to preaching.” Privileging participation, interaction, and friendliness, they aimed to create a space that would promote egalitarianism, engagement, feelings of peace and “enhanced spirituality,” and “an enjoyable presence.” Early on, there was a strong consensus around incorporating parts of the old into the new. However, additional design hopes placed emphasis on simplicity, elegance, durability, and “ease of cleaning.”29 A second exploratory committee took place from September 1997 to June 1998, affirming the goals of “renovation and spiritual invigoration” and beginning plans for a sanctuary update.

26 Leslie and Howard, interview with author, 2/14/2014.
28 Exploratory Committee notes, B’nai Israel archives.
29 Ibid.
Melvin Solomon, a synagogue architect based out of Kansas City, Missouri, visited Sacramento throughout 1998 for preliminary architectural assessments, and he submitted his first report on January 18, 1999. Solomon wrote:

The Sanctuary has a typical religious building trapezoidal floor plate. […] By most current standards, the Bimah is small for this size Sanctuary, and it appears cramped for the existing Bimah furniture. It is accessed via a narrow stairway (six risers) at the center and an obtrusive ramp for the disabled in front of the colored glass wall to the north. The Ark is accessed via four additional steps, which does not allow access for the disabled. 396 individual theater-type flip-up seats, within a wooden framework lie perpendicular to the axis with a center and two side aisles. […] The Sanctuary has back to back spacing of 33”, uncomfortable for taller persons. […]

The Sanctuary’s interior is vertical and dark; neither characteristic reinforcing the sense of Jewish Community. Its surfaces are composed of a variety of dark and darker wood paneling, exposed Roman brick, and exposed roof structure/deck that appears to disappear in darkness over the starkly contrasting white floating light panel. The Ark door, the stained glass south of the Bimah, and the north colored glass wall (which is inconsistent with the primary color scheme) compete as the focal point. The glass wall provides minimal clear daylighting. Carpet and seating upholstery are dated and worn.

Besides the darkness, the discomfort of the seating, and the tightness of the Bimah, perhaps the most problematic condition is the remoteness of the seating from the Bimah, both in plan and in vertical dimension. The two areas are clearly separated and are not consistent with modern concepts of linking congregant and clergy.

The entire mood of the Sanctuary is somber and reflective of a mid-century design style. By today’s sensibilities, it is less than conducive to prayer and does not express the feeling of Jewish Community that modern congregations try to achieve.30

The sanctuary was clearly in need of renovation, and the Sanctuary Renovation Committee set about initiating a Capital Campaign to fund the necessary alterations.

When the arson occurred, plans halted, and priorities shifted. In a contract proposal dated August 1999, the committee outlined the need to reconstruct the library and administration

buildings; the committee also requested an accelerated timeline for renovating the sanctuary, which the arson had rendered nonfunctional.\textsuperscript{31} Insurance evaluations of damages revealed that the committee would have to expand their campaign strategies and raise substantial funds to rebuild their properties.

The committee conducted a study in September 1999 to gauge B’nai Israel congregants’ desires for their synagogue. The report took stock of what members considered most important about B’nai Israel, as well as their opinions on priorities around rebuilding. The findings revealed people’s feelings about “the impact of the firebombing on my/our Jewish identity and affiliation,” demonstrated the side effects of the firebombing, and underscored community members’ frustrations with institutional disorganization and fragmented plans.\textsuperscript{32} “As the oldest synagogue west of the Mississippi and with the Jewish world watching for its reaction to the firebombing,” the study reads, “CBI is clearly at another of its critical and historic crossroads.”\textsuperscript{33} The study recognized the significance of the building project and of the project’s branding. In addition to being part of the one-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the congregation, the campaign was considered a “rise from the ashes” and was a message to the anti-Semites that “we are here to stay.”\textsuperscript{34}

Despite the pressing nature of the renovations, the matter of finances complicated decision-making processes. Dave, the head of the Rebuilding Cabinet, prepared two options for

\textsuperscript{31} Proposal to Contract for Architectural Services, August 15, 1999, B’nai Israel archives.

\textsuperscript{32} The subsequent two chapters will deal with some of B’nai Israel members’ early affective responses to the arson, as well as to their local Sacramento community.

\textsuperscript{33} CBI Campaign Planning and Feasibility Study, 4, B’nai Israel archives.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.}
reconstructions of the synagogue as a whole. The first, a “simple renovation,” would repair the areas damaged by the arson and bring the buildings up to code. Or there was the “Cadillac” option.\(^{35}\) This second proposal would allow for a total overhaul of the buildings, with particular attention to reconstituting the sanctuary for greater congregational engagement. Because the sanctuary had been entirely out of commission for almost eight months, community members experienced worship services in other spaces on and off campus: the courtyard, the social hall, the chapel, even the Sacramento Convention Center. They acknowledged that these spaces “worked better” than the sanctuary as it was, and that the seating layout was largely responsible for this success. The path to greater community participation and enhanced worship experience was through the establishment of a “radial or circular design” that would enable congregants to see one another and be in closer proximity to the \textit{bimah} and to clergy and staff.

Building and security updates were communicated to the entire community via a \textit{Building Blocks} bulletin. The sanctuary was under quick repair so that the community could use it again, and plans for the rest of the buildings were underway. The December 15, 1999 issue of \textit{Building Blocks} conveyed that the renovations had been divided into two phases. Phase one would entail internal demolition and reconstruction of the administration building, offices, work areas, chapel and foyer; phase two would include a new library wing and would take place at a later date. On March 11, 2000, the community rededicated the sanctuary for temporary use.

At the sanctuary rededication ceremony, then-president of the congregation Rena discussed the sanctuary in relation to the week’s Torah portion, which addressed wandering in the desert after the exodus from Egypt, receiving the Ten Commandments, and building the

\(^{35}\) Letter from Dave to Barry Judelman, B’nai Israel archives.
tabernacle. She emphasized the rabbinical commentaries on the “holy mission of creating the communal place of worship — the Temples and Synagogues as a place to find and house God.”

She encouraged the community to mimic the actions of the ancient Israelites, banding together to begin the “holy mission” of creating a place of worship “so we can pray together, celebrate together, and mourn together.” Rebuilding the synagogue entailed not only a reconstruction of the sanctuary space but of the campus as a whole.

In their efforts to craft community unity holistically, the B’nai Israel community leaned toward the “Cadillac” option. An “integrated facility plan” would bring the buildings up to code, prioritize education and meeting spaces, and improve worship space. Yet the Vision/Finance subcommittee noted explicitly that the sanctuary would be “the most visible element of the program and most emblematic of our aesthetic vision,” on creating a sanctuary that would be, in Dave’s words, “a warm and inviting place, one that brings people together and builds community.”

According to this committee, the sanctuary needed to be made a “sacred space” through the enhancement of “lighting, physical layout, intimacy, acoustics, aesthetics, bimah flexibility, and seating.”

The committee hoped to cultivate a sense of the sacred. During my tour of the synagogue with Rabbi Alfi, she described how the designs outside and inside the foyer prepare people to enter into a space of prayer. A community pamphlet on “The Meanings in the Architecture” confirms that the sanctuary’s interior design is meant to allow congregants to engage with “G-d’s

36 “Return to Sanctuary” speech for sanctuary rededication service, March 11, 2000, B’nai Israel archives.
38 Vision/Finance Subcommittee memo to B’nai Israel Board of Trustees, May 1999 - with revisions August 2001, B’nai Israel archives.
presence, or ‘Shechinah,’ a post-biblical Hebrew word derived from the words ‘Shachan,’ which means ‘to dwell,’ and ‘Mishkan’ which means ‘dwelling.’” The sanctuary is the Shechinah, “a bridge between the transcendent and the everyday world.”

People prepare to meet the Shechinah as they approach the exterior doors of the sanctuary building. The stone entryway to the lobby is wider on the right than on the left, evoking the mezuzah side of the doorway. A glass canopy is etched with the letter shin and the words of the Shema, the text of the mezuzah. Together, these features “[allow] one to occupy and walk beneath the space of a mezuzah transitioning one from the everyday to the sacred.” Moreover, the stone-patterned entryway resembles the distinctive striped pattern of a tallit, which is mirrored in the silhouettes projected against the lobby windows’ diffused glass at night and in the sanctuary’s Riverside Boulevard-facing windows. Copper detailing in the lobby and sanctuary represent a Talmud page.

In the sanctuary itself, congregants sit beneath a huge swath of white drapery, meant to bridge the congregation and the bimah. It acts as both the “Shechinah cloud” and the marriage chuppah, representative of home. Meant to evoke a sense of this presence, light enters the sanctuary through long windows, reflecting off of the space, the fabric, and the ark. The ark itself also contributes to the brightness of the room. Composed of “translucent textile panels” running from floor to ceiling, the ark is surrounded by the aforementioned depression in the floor filled

40 Ibid.
41 A mezuzah is a piece of parchment inscribed with biblical verses from Deuteronomy, which are also the words of a central Jewish prayer, the Shema. Often contained in a decorative case, it is affixed to the right side of a doorpost.
42 A tallit is a fringed Jewish prayer shawl.
43 A chuppah is a Jewish wedding canopy, often made of a tallit or sheet.
with sand brought back from congregational trips to Israel. “The Meanings in the Architecture” pamphlet explains that the ark’s panels meld with the windows facing Land Park and the drapery over the bimah, so that “a cloud in the sky might start to visually blend with the fabric of the ark.” As such, “the play of daylight and artificial light within the ark is meant to add to its temporal quality and fill it and cast upon it an ever-changing eternal light.”

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Figure 8: Main sanctuary at B’nai Israel. Source: Photograph by author.

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45 Ibid.
Most of the congregants emphasized the marked contrast between the old space and the
new as a distinction between darkness and light. Debbie expressed her feelings about the revised
space:

There’s transparency. There’s light. […] To go from having this authoritative bimah-like
thing in the front to being in the middle makes you realize that they’re [the clergy are]
accountable to us, as well as we’re accountable to them, and that we surround them and
empower them, so it’s much more about community, and more than anything, what takes
my breath away is the feeling of light. Light is so (she sighed) … it effuses the way I pray
in there. And sometimes it’s so powerful that I begin to cry, because it’s so different. I
remember how dark, musky, murky, candlelight before… The light to me is the most
important thing. Because it feels like that’s a space where there’s breathing. You know,
the in-breath, the out-breath (she demonstrated) — that place, for me, it’s easier for me to
quietly focus. I can pray and meditate with my eyes open. I don’t have to close my eyes. I
just look upward. And there’s beauty everywhere. […] I love that space. I love it.46

Debbie’s words convey the importance of the radical aesthetic shift. The Rebuilding Cabinet, the
Vision/Finance committee, and the architects crafted a sanctuary that remade the congregational
worship experience — and arguably, the spirit of the congregation, as well.

As Rabbi Alfi told me, they reconstructed the sanctuary as “a room of life, not of death.”47

The previous sanctuary was dark, almost morose, with low ceilings, dark panels, a domineering
bimah. It housed the community’s yahrzeit name plaques.48 And it was one of the rooms that
sustained significant damage in the arson. Together, these characteristics constituted a space that
exuded gloom. Through reconstructing the space, B’nai Israel dissolved the sanctuary’s
melancholy, removed reminders of death, and transformed the sanctuary into a place of light,
space, transparency, beauty. Nathan, who handled many of the legal matters around the

47 Synagogue tour with Rabbi Alfi, 2/7/2014.
48 The yahrzeit is the anniversary of someone’s death. Often commemorated with the lighting of a candle, many
synagogues also turn on a small (electric) light adjacent to the name of the deceased, engraved on a plaque.
reconstruction, articulated that the changes made to the sanctuary made it a more “inviting” place. The shifts “really promoted, in my opinion, B’nai Israel to come out of the legacy of being the old staunch-y congregation to one where the rabbi was chief among equals.”

Rabbi Alfi added another meaning to the white drapery hovering over the bimah; symbolic of Abraham’s tent, she told me, it transmits a message of inclusivity and equality.

Despite the sanctuary renovations that B’nai Israel members saw as equalizing religious leadership and the congregation, other elements of the reconstructed campus evidence B’nai Israel’s internal disputes. Rabbi Brad Bloom, the head rabbi at the time of the arson, insisted on his need for a shower at the synagogue, which would be added to the new education wing built during renovations. Hope, who was then the education director, remembered thinking: “Well, I am moving down to that end of the building; I don’t want you to take your shower near where I’m working. This is not a good plan.” She explained that “in days of yore” political and religious leaders often had showers in the restrooms of their work places, since they spent a great deal of time at work. “But,” she continued, “I’m annoyed, as the educator saying, ‘Excuse me, I have no storage space. I run the school. We need storage, not a shower.’ Well, guess who got what? … I think maybe he took a shower there once or twice.”

The rabbi’s desire for a synagogue shower was one of many grievances about reconstruction. On February 25, 2000, then-president Rena e-mailed Dave, the chair of the Rebuilding Committee. She wrote:

I have just heard via the grapevine that the staff is mad as hell about the final configuration of the buildings — so what else is new? I perfectly agree with the

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49 Nathan, interview with author, 6/12/2014.
50 Synagogue tour with Rabbi Alfi, 2/7/2014.
configuration and what has to be and your very logical rationale, but I must tell you some others disagree with me (again so what else is new).  

Rena signed her e-mail with the following, “Thanks for your continued work and aggravation.” Her note indicates a resignation to the internal politics of the community. As a congregation, diverse opinions were bound to clash, and certain parties would inevitably be frustrated, but regardless of internal dissension and unpleasantries, the synagogue needed to be rebuilt.

_A “Purpose-Built” Mosque_

The Black Cat Road mosque destroyed in the arson prompted little conflict among Islamic Society members. When the few Muslim families in Joplin pooled their money to buy the space, it was a church, and by removing the pews and the baptismal stoup, the Islamic Society transitioned the space into a Muslim prayer hall. Yet the space was not sufficient for the community and its distinctively Islamic needs. The bathrooms were not structured for _wudu_, the practice of washing hands and feet before prayers; the dining and community spaces were not large enough to accommodate the Muslim community for holiday celebrations; and while there was room for children to play outdoors, there was no indoor space for them nor a fence surrounding the property.

Islamic Society members expressed excitement and gratitude for a space built explicitly to house their community. “That [the Black Cat Road mosque] was not a purpose-built place. […] Muslims’ needs are different from Christians’ [needs],” Rabia said when we spoke in April 2012, before the new mosque had been completed. She added, “I’m really excited and interested that

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52 E-mail from Rena to Dave, Friday, February 25, 2000 at 10:06 a.m. Subject: ACL. B’nai Israel archives.
now kids have a place, there is a gym and a proper sitting area… a proper library space… a dining area.”

Because the mosque is, in Jameel’s words, “the center of the community for Muslims,” it was important that the space be uniquely theirs. Islamic Society members felt that a custom-built space would address the needs of the community directly, supporting its priorities and practices.

The desire for and appreciation of a “purpose-built” or “proper” mosque was a shared one, but community members differed in opinion as to which purposes (and whose) were most important. One of the community’s priorities was to find ways to accommodate diversity. Islamic Society members felt that the mosque needed to craft a milieu of inclusivity for all congregants, regardless of duration of residence in Joplin, age, or country of origin. The community experiences regular turnover due to a regular flux of physicians seeking to fulfill the visa-waiver requirement. Although most members originally emigrated from Pakistan, others are Jordanian, Egyptian, Indonesian, Saudi Arabian, and Malaysian. “We have to understand that their culture is going to change our religion,” Joanna said. “It’s going to change how we view things, and when we plan Sunday school— You have to take that into consideration and make sure that you serve everyone.” I asked for an example, and she responded:

We have some from Iraq now, and they’re Shia Muslim, and we’re predominantly Sunni Muslim. [...] The congregation believes very strongly that Muslim is Muslim. [...] They’re still brothers and sisters. [...] Although we do realize historically what the differences are, there’s no contention or anything like that. Everyone is in it together.

53 Rabia, interview with author, 5/1/2014.
54 Jameel, interview with author, 4/30/2014.
56 Ibid.
Her words evidence communal tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims and between longer-term members and newcomers. While Joanna emphasizes that “Muslim is Muslim,” she also articulates a problem inherent to a culturally diverse religious community. As she says, “we,” the mostly-Sunni, long-time Islamic Society members, need to accept “them” by understanding that “their” culture will change “our” religion. In other words, inclusivity depends largely on the majority’s willingness to accommodate.

Efforts to accommodate the diverse community are evident throughout the new mosque. One space in particular conveys the challenge of accommodating different needs, as well as the impossibility of satisfying everyone: the women’s prayer space. In discussing the space with community members, I was told that it was the prayer space for women, that it was only the women’s entrance to the prayer hall, that it was meant to isolate the children’s noise during prayer. One member even told me that, “it’s basically for privacy, if somebody wants to be there.”\textsuperscript{57} While conversations about the room left its exact purpose unspecified, my experiences confirmed that it was at least a space deliberately free of men, and usually even school-age boys.

The Islamic Society evolved to this bisection of its prayer space by integrating an expandable room divider at the temporary mosque. When I spoke with an Islamic Society member in April 2014, while the new mosque was still under construction, she pointed out that the partition was under debate. “In the other mosque [on Black Cat Road],” she said, “it wasn’t divided; we all said prayers together.”\textsuperscript{58} She explained that the community previously shared a single, open prayer hall. Men occupied the front of the prayer hall (closer to the mihrab, the

\textsuperscript{57} Interview with unnamed congregant, July 2016. Due to the sensitive nature of the conversation material, I elected to leave out even the pseudonym of the participant who expressed this particular opinion.

\textsuperscript{58} Interview with unnamed congregant, April 2014. Due to the sensitive nature of the conversation material, I elected to leave out even the pseudonym of the participant who expressed this particular opinion.
niche indicating the direction of Mecca), women were situated toward the back, and “if you wanted to pray together as a family, you could in the middle. We had space.” Through the unified prayer hall, people literally “had space” to be together as a family and as a community.

Both the temporary and the new mosque divide the prayer hall into bounded gendered spaces. While the prayer space at the temporary mosque was segmented by a portable folding room-divider, the women’s space at the new mosque is a distinct room, about one-quarter of the size of the main prayer hall. The two are connected by transparent sliding-glass doors, which typically are either closed or slightly ajar. Some Islamic Society women feel uncomfortable about being physically closed off from the main prayer space. A few said that sometimes they are unable to see or hear the imam. Describing her discomfort with the partition, one woman said

Figure 9: Women’s prayer space at the reconstructed mosque. Source: Photograph by Salma.
it makes her “feel like a Rosa Parks” or a child. It removed almost entirely her interest in praying in the new space. She explained:

When you say prayers, you should have a clear heart and you should have a clear mind. And when I go in and I see that partition, it just galls me, I just… I just want to push it down, I just want to say, ‘No, you're not going to put me back here like a little child!’… I'm not faulting anyone who is okay with it and saying they are wrong. I’m just saying it's not for me. And so how can I pray with that in my heart? That's not a proper prayer, so I just don't.

Dividing the prayer space not only physically manifests fractures within the Islamic Society but also altered an Islamic Society member’s ability to pray “properly.” When we spoke again in July 2015, the same community member reflected back on the extent of the contention around building the new mosque. She impersonated various community members: “‘In my country, this is how mosques are,’ and ‘in my country, this is how mosques are,’ and ‘my country’s right,’ and ‘this is the best way ’cuz it’s from my country.’ It was a lot of chefs in the kitchen.” The arson amplified the sometimes-conflicting opinions already present within the diverse community. In an effort to accommodate everyone, the community chose a more conservative gender segregation, where women pray behind a curtain or wall, a practice more common among American “immigrant mosques.” As one community member said:

The Islamic Society has always been very encouraging and accepting of everyone participating. They’ve tried to make everyone feel comfortable and everyone included, but that doesn’t always represent the majority of people, and it’s going to put off some

59 The direct reference to American civil rights and race relations is notable here, deployed by a long-time Islamic Society member.
60 Interview with unnamed congregant, April 2014.
61 Interview with unnamed congregant, July 2015.
people. It’s going to drive some people away. Like I said, we do have some families that do not attend because of that separate room.  

While the women’s prayer space represents an attempt to demonstrate inclusive respect for diverse cultural traditions, it is also a space of controversy and discomfort.

The Islamic Society strove to make the new mosque accessible and amenable to all but inevitably displeased some of its members. Though not a member of the board, Farooq, a pulmonary and critical-care specialist, was involved actively in almost every meeting after the arson. He recalled discord even over which architect would design the mosque. The board met with different architects, including a Chicago-based one who offered his services for free.  

However, the board found his plan to be too simple, so they instead merged the blueprints supplied by an architect from Springfield, Illinois and from a member of the Islamic Society who worked as an architect in the Middle East before immigrating. This decision, along with the decision to relocate to the center of Joplin, limited available funds, as did a religious obligation to pay upfront in cash with no debts.  

Thus, the community was forced to concede certain elements of the purpose-built mosque.

Originally, the community wanted to build a three-story structure, so that the children could have a “proper school, like a Sunday school,” Farooq said. However, due to financial limitations, they revised their plan to a two-story building, which would allow for a basement-level F5-tolerant storm shelter. They eventually modified the plan to a single-story structure.

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63 Again, due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, I have opted to omit even the community member’s pseudonym for purposes of anonymity. In my queries, however, I did not find anyone who did not attend prayers solely because of the separate women’s prayer room.

64 Noor, interview with author, 4/19/2014.

65 In the next section of the chapter, I will discuss further the decision to relocate.

66 Farooq, interview with author, 7/14/2015.
Other compromises involved reducing classroom sizes and storage areas. Even the construction plan for the restrooms was shifted slightly to accommodate financial restraints. Farooq explained, “You need to share the walls to cut the cost, you need to share the doors to cut the cost, you need to do this to cut the cost, you need to do this to cut the cost.”

Funding also limited the original plans for a sizable kitchen and a large social hall, spaces widely desired by community members. They emphasized that the mosque was never only a place for prayer; it is a community center. “You can pray at your home, but having a mosque means that you have a social life, which…develops your sense of community, your personality, and your individuality,” Umar said.67 As such, the social spaces are highlights of the new mosque. When I asked Umar about his favorite part of the new mosque, he immediately responded, laughing, “Well, it’s the kitchen!”

During my time with the Islamic Society, the social hall was so frequently filled with people that I had trouble taking a photograph of the space without any people in it.68 When I finally managed to do so, the room was disorganized, littered with the detritus of a gathering.69 Ramadan iftar dinners bustled with people and conversations and play, children racing around the room, parents fixing plates of food for their children, and young adults ensuring that the older aunties and uncles had everything they needed. A long buffet table stretched down the hall leading to the social hall, bending around a corner toward the lobby. Meals started early, with women crowding the kitchen, and they ended late, with small clusters of men chatting quietly.

67 Umar, interview with author, 7/10/2015.
68 I finally asked Salma to visit the mosque during a regular weekday so that she could take a picture of the quiet, organized hall for me.
69 Fieldnotes, 7/12/2015.
and casually over paper cups of tea, amidst the scattered plates, hastily pushed back chairs, and other remnants of the evening’s festivities. One day, shortly after Eid, I walked into the mosque to find it strangely silent, but for an occasional shout or the squeaks of sneakers on a gym floor. A badminton net bisected the social hall, and a few middle-aged men in athletic gear, their white gym socks pulled up to their calves, darted around the ad-hoc court.70

Figure 10: The mosque’s social hall. Source: Photograph by Salma.

The kitchen and the social hall are the nucleus of the Islamic Society. “At the old mosque, […] we had two separate dining areas,” Joanna said. “Even though it was not purposefully men and women, it ended up segregating itself that way… So now I love that we’re all together in

70 Fieldnotes, 7/15/2015.
that one room.” Sadeeq, a law student, echoed Joanna’s sentiments about the space’s effects, though he was also critical of the room’s design:

That room is a disaster for so many reasons. [...] It was work to put these basketball hoops… They never thought about how to arrange the food, even though that’s something we have trouble with at every masjid in the history of mankind. [...] It’s a terrible room objectively; it’s not a good-designed room at all. But I love it because that’s where everybody comes together. It’s like, the best memories in this masjid do not take place in the prayer hall. Without question it’s always gonna be in here [the social hall]. And so that’s why I like this room.  

Sadeeq, Joanna, and others reveal in word and action that the social hall offers the community a space in which they may be a community. In the kitchen and social hall, they share in familial activities: cooking, gossiping over meals, playing pick-up games of basketball and badminton.

However, even the spaces that reconstitute the feelings of “home” damaged by the arson were criticized by Islamic Society members. While some found fault with the design, others called attention to the seeming lack of forethought about general maintenance issues. For instance, Sana, a dentist and mother of two young children, underscored that she hated the white tile floors and white walls. “It’s a lot of work to maintain white,” she told me. “I thought they had done a great job, but from a realistic point of view, like, ‘how are they gonna end up supporting this thing, or maintaining this, or paying for this, and paying for that?’”

Still other members, mostly women, admitted that they wished that the needs of the children and youth would have been a priority. “Kids are the least in their [the rebuilding committee’s] priority,” said Noor, a trained physician and stay-at-home mother of three. “This is what makes me feel sad... But we’ll make it work.” Although she understood that limited  

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71 Sadeeq, interview with author, 7/12/2015.
72 Sana, interview with author, 7/15/2015.
73 Noor, interview with author, 4/19/2014.
economic resources prohibited fulfilling everyone’s desires, Noor also acknowledged that some people’s priorities were placed above others’ priorities. Limited finances were both a practical concern and a smokescreen that allowed those with decision-making power to sacrifice others’ needs in order realize their own. As Farooq admitted, “We could have done better than what we have done.” They could have, but they did not. There is a sense of resignation amongst Islamic Society members. Things could be different, but they are not. “We don’t sit and cry about what happened,” Imam Lahmuddin said. “We plan. You cannot stop.”

Although many community members expressed varying degrees of dissatisfaction with features of the new mosque, they hold these feelings in tension with an impulse to move forward and gratitude for a purpose-built mosque. Ultimately, the new mosque returns a sense of normalcy to the Islamic Society. “I like that the new mosque is built for the community’s needs. So it feels like it’s ours more, you know?” asked Salma, Rida’s and Umar’s younger daughter. “It feels natural, like what I’ve always done, going, and just hanging around, and eating…,” she said, laughing. “I guess it feels normal! It doesn’t feel out of place.”

Through reconstructing their religious places, the Islamic Society and B’nai Israel reconstituted normality, which, as Cresswell writes, “is defined, to a significant degree, geographically.” Where the arsons interrupted normal patterns and amplified communal conflicts, the rebuilt places reinstated feelings of normalcy and of communality. As in many families, that communality involves natural disagreements, perhaps even resentment. Yet B’nai

74 Farooq, interview with author, 7/14/2015.
75 Imam Lahmuddin, interview with author, 4/16/2014.
76 Salma, interview with author, 7/13/2015.
77 Cresswell, 27.
Israel constructed a space that attempted to enhance communal spirituality and democracy, and the Islamic Society constructed a “purpose-built mosque” specific to the community’s needs. In rebuilding their religious places, both communities rebuilt the homes the arsons stripped from them.

**THE FUTURE OF THE PAST**

After the arsons, the congregations set out to create spaces that would reflect their communities’ priorities and hopes. They built new religious places that would fulfill their current demands and anticipate their future needs. However, for all that they were looking forward, the communities also looked back, to the past. Evaluating the salvageability of their places and belongings, they asked themselves what, if anything, could be saved. Moreover, what *should* be saved, and why? How should the new space reflect what came before? The answers to these questions suggest community endeavors to identify themselves in relation to their histories. B’nai Israel members weighed the importance of retaining certain architectural and design features, thereby debating the representation and relevance of their collective history. In contrast, the Islamic Society deliberated a move to a new location, reflecting an effort to formulate a collective past.

“*Know Before Whom You Stand*”

As a community with a deep history in Sacramento, Congregation B’nai Israel preserved certain structural elements and decorative features from the previous synagogue. Although the administrative and library buildings had been destroyed almost entirely, the sanctuary was able to be cleaned of the smoke and water damage. The community had options for the sanctuary:
“one was to tear down and build a new space,” Dave told me. “But what we ended up doing because of finances was to renovate heavily within the existing walls.” Moreover, the community kept the walls because some of the older congregants, those who were instrumental in building the previous sanctuary, felt connected to them. As Rob, who was on the Capital Campaign committee, explained: “You can imagine these conversations when you’re going out and raising money. Somebody says, ‘You know, I’d be happy to give you money…but you’ve got to keep this.’” Once again, money proves to be a significant factor in which changes are prioritized and which are not, what is kept and what is discarded.

Congregants lobbied to retain elements of the old sanctuary despite the radical overhaul of the new sanctuary’s interior and ambiance. “That was my idea,” said Les, an environmental lawyer. “Just to provide a sense of continuity into the newer design.” Above the ark housing the **Torot**, a small flame-shaped pink-and-orange lamp glows. This **ner tamid**, the Eternal Light that traditionally hovers above synagogue arks, is the same as the one in place preceding the arson. Similarly, the Rebuilding Committee preserved the ark doors from the previous sanctuary. The wooden doors are decorated with a gold image of the hand formation for the Priestly Blessing and also depict the Ten Commandments. The doors now hang just beneath the ceiling toward the back of the sanctuary, behind the congregation. They hover over another relic of the previous sanctuary: three-dimensional bronze Hebrew letters spelling out the phrase, “**dah lifneh mi atah omed**,” “know before whom you stand.”

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78 Dave, interview with author, 2/19/2014.
79 Les, interview with author, 6/16/2014.
80 While not a direct quote from the Torah, the phrase is often found over the ark at many synagogues. It is meant to evoke Moses standing before the burning bush (Exodus 3) and to remind practitioners of God’s presence.
“That was a huge ‘discussion,’ shall we say,” one member told me, choosing the word ‘discussion’ over the implied ‘conflict.’ Many people originally “wanted to get rid of it,” she said. “And some of us felt that it shouldn’t be gotten rid of.” Many other B’nai Israel members felt similarly, emphasizing the adornments’ religious and historical significance for the congregation. “It carries on the tradition of what we had before all of this,” one person told me. “I think it’s very important that you have the new with the old.” Another member recalled that she was “part of the subgroup that championed, ‘for god’s sakes, don’t lose the doors of the old ark!’” I asked her why it is so significant for her, and she responded: “‘Know before whom you

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81 Leah, interview with author, 2/10/2014.
82 Eric and Jeanne, interview with author, 6/10/2014.
stand.’ It was a point of meditation for me… I frequently, in the opportunities to stand in services, will turn around and look up, because I miss them. They were very meaningful for me.”

Cantor Julie Steinberg articulated most explicitly what many of the congregants felt:

I love that they kept the doors of the ark. And the words. And I love that I get to see them from the bimah. [...] I feel like, being on the bimah, reading the service, it is such a spiritual connection for me to be connected to B’nai Israel’s past and history. And it almost feels like those letters and the doors are just a reminder, to me, of what I’m doing.

Cantor Steinberg’s words demonstrate that the doors and the words encapsulate a connection to the community’s past. Further, she sees those historical linkages as integral to her own prayer experience.

The continuity between the previous synagogue spaces and the reconstructed ones is visible outside the sanctuary, as well. The Rebuilding Committee preserved the architectural structure and design of the old library in the current conference room, which is where the old library used to be. The windows of the conference room, as well as the new library, are built to look exactly like the windows of the old library. The main conference room and the library share the same elongated clerestory windows. Having conducted a number of my interviews in the synagogue’s conference room, I had this pointed out to me several times. People also frequently mentioned that, from the conference room’s windows, one can still see the trees that were burned during the fire across the street in Land Park.

The committee also reinstated the previous synagogue’s “footprint,” the physical paths that congregants traversed through the buildings. Before the arson, congregants generally entered

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83 Leslie and Howard, interview with author, 2/14/2014.
84 Cantor Julie Steinberg, interview with author, 2/13/2014.
the synagogue through the two service doors that opened onto the library. From there, they would then go through the library to the kitchen, and from the kitchen to the sanctuary. Thus, when the committee members decided upon plans for the new synagogue’s buildings, they oriented the campus’ spaces so that people would still enter the synagogue as they had before. Congregants’ physical movements through the reconstructed synagogue replicate the way they used to move through the old synagogue.

However, there were few conversations about the layout plans among non-committee members. “The board ultimately made those decisions,” said Carol, a former B’nai Israel president and Rob’s wife. “There wasn’t a lot of choice about where things were gonna go, ’cuz…to move things around a lot was gonna…add a lot of costs.”85 Once again, though a legitimate factor, financial restraints also justified the committee’s often-unbridled power to make decisions on behalf of the community.

The one space that everyone, congregants and committee alike, seemed to agree upon was the library. According to Rabbi Alfi, at the time of the fire, B’nai Israel had the largest Jewish library in the Sacramento area, even larger than that of the University of California, Davis. She told me that students studying Judaism at nearby universities would often come to B’nai Israel to use the library. “That’s [where] work got done and all of our meetings were,” Rabbi Alfi said. “It wasn’t used as much as a library as a social center.”86 After the arson, the community particularly emphasized honoring the loss of the library and its books, for instance, by burying the burned books, as is the Jewish custom, and by focusing efforts on building an

85 Carol and Rob, interview with author, 2/12/2014.
86 Rabbi Mona Alfi, interview with author, 2/7/2014.
even better library. In Rabbi Alfi’s words: “It was a very high priority, that the library be better than the older library, that it was gonna continue to be a hub for the congregation. … We were not going to let this stop us from being Jewish.”

The decimation of the library and its contents profoundly affected many B’nai Israel members, who see themselves as grounded in a strong Jewish tradition of textual study and intellectual growth. Carol recalled the deeply emotional experience of burying the books at the Home of Peace Cemetery:

I just remember thinking at the time, you know, these idiot people, hateful people who did this [the arson], I don’t even think they knew when they were doing this, like, how important books are to us, you know? […] The library was just so…central to — and is so central to what we’re about.

The Rebuilding Committee included in its plan a library that would surpass the one destroyed in the arson and yet still evoke the space the community lost. High, sloping ceilings, exposed wooden beams, and nearly identical clerestory windows characterize both libraries, transposing congregants’ visual memories of the old library to the new. “I can thoroughly appreciate the thought and care that went into maintaining a connection to the past while making it a new and beautiful space,” Cantor Steinberg said. “We have a home, we have a beautiful home. And while it feels very different from the last…it still reminds me. I still have feelings of the old…Maybe the best parts.”

B’nai Israel members seemed to agree unanimously that the library was critical to their self-identity as a congregation. Whether the library was meant to serve as a shared study space,

87 Ibid.
88 Carol and Rob, interview with author, 2/12/2014.
89 Cantor Julie Steinberg, interview with author, 2/13/2014.
to house an extensive book collection, or to be the synagogue’s social hub, it was representative of the community. Along with a few other select elements of the past, the library moved B’nai Israel into its future.

**A Move to the Center**

When the arson entirely destroyed the Black Cat Road mosque, it was considered a total loss. Virtually nothing was salvageable. Prayer rugs, texts, school books, and the building itself were beyond recovery. Subsequently, incorporating any architectural elements or physical materials from the previous space — as B’nai Israel did — was an impossibility. The only option was either to rebuild from the ground up or not to rebuild at all.

The Islamic Society was divided as to how to proceed. Some members thought it unsafe to rebuild. Although the mosque was destroyed while he was away at college, law student Sadeeq remembered distinctly that his overwhelming thought was, “Don’t rebuild it.” He explained his feelings as follows:

> It’s too dangerous. People could die… I remember I talked to my dad, ‘It would be criminally irresponsible for you to rebuild given what happened, and like you can’t treat this as an isolated incident; it’s happened repeatedly, this is just like, the boiling point.’ So I thought it was a terrible idea to rebuild.”

Sadeeq recalled that his parents were largely in agreement with him. However, Umar and others told me that to rebuild “was definite.”91 This discrepancy reveals two oppositional but equally strong reactions to the arson. Sadeeq’s viewpoint speaks to the very real fears of being Muslim in twenty-first-century America. The Islamic Society’s arson was not the community’s only

90 Sadeeq, interview with author, 7/12/2015.
91 Umar, interview with author, 7/10/2015.
encounter with hate crimes. Moreover, Islamophobic sentiments and hate crimes have increased in frequency since September 11, 2001. And yet many American Muslims, including members of the Islamic Society, feel that countering Islamophobia requires Muslims to be physically present and accessible to non-Muslim Americans.

Once the Islamic Society decided to rebuild, the community needed to resolve a critical dispute. In Umar’s view, “the first schism in the community was, where we gonna rebuild.” A number of congregants argued that the mosque should remain in the same location on Black Cat Road. From a purely financial perspective, “the new place would cost so much,” Noor said. “Why not build on old land, which is big?” she queried. The Islamic Society already owned the Black Cat Road property, which included a substantial plot of land. The only cost would be in physically rebuilding the mosque.

Beyond the economic practicality of rebuilding on the same site, community members felt connected to the land. “I think people have…emotional ties to your place,” Umar said. “You know, you wanna see it re-come up.” Noor admitted that she has a “sentimental” attachment to the land. “It’s the place where kids played. We held Eid parties there,” she explained. And, she added, “we were there when the tornado happened, and we were saved.” When an EF5 multi-vortex tornado swept through Joplin in May 2011, congregants who were in or near the mosque at the time took shelter together at the mosque, which miraculously was not struck by the tornado but was then destroyed just sixteen months later at the hands of an arsonist. Finally, many saw rebuilding at the same site as a “sign of strength.” “Go bigger and better!” Umar exclaimed.

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92 Ibid.
93 Noor, interview with author, 4/19/2014.
94 Umar, interview with author, 7/10/2015.
“Any place that is destroyed you want to rebuild at the same site for that reason. It shows your strength and conviction.”

Other Islamic Society members were unconvinced. Despite the financial and emotional benefits of remaining at Black Cat Road, people were deterred for one major reason. Umar explained that after the arson: “We had meeting with the sheriff [who] said, ‘You know, where you are [on Black Cat Road], I cannot do anything… It’s outside our [Joplin city] jurisdiction. You’re in the county [Jasper County]. You’re not in Joplin.’” Umar continued, “So [the sheriff] said, ‘Where you are, that location…,’” he hit the table emphatically. “‘We cannot do anything.’” The old mosque at Black Cat Road is approximately three-quarters of a mile outside of the Joplin city line. This technicality prevented the Joplin fire department from responding to the arson, as the mosque was outside precinct boundaries. Instead, the Islamic Society waited for the volunteer fire department in Carl Junction (roughly seven miles away) to assemble and make its way to the mosque. In that time, the mosque burned to the ground.

Noor said that the Islamic Society’s board called the city to see if the city limits could be extended just enough to include its property. The city confirmed that it would be possible if the Islamic Society’s neighbors would agree to the change in city boundaries. However, Noor explained, the expense of city taxes dissuaded many people from siding with the Islamic Society, so the community spent the next six months looking for new land to purchase. They were interested in buying residential land where they could build their new mosque, but this, too, required permission from their potential neighbors. When people heard that Muslims wanted to

95 Ibid.
move into the neighborhood, they refused to grant the permissions necessary for the landowner to sell to the Islamic Society.97

Instead, Noor told me, the Islamic Society decided to buy a commercial property in central Joplin.98 This decision was a contentious one. First, it required the community to buy new land, a purchase made even more expensive because it was a commercial property. Being in a commercial zone also required the community to follow more extensive building regulations. Additionally, the mosque is just minutes away from the two hospitals, Mercy Hospital and Freeman Hospital, where the vast majority of Islamic Society members work. Although many community members are physicians who appreciate easy access to the mosque for Friday prayers, “some people were like, ‘Well, not all of us are doctors…,’” Salma remembered.99 Finally, many felt that “if somebody is going to target [the mosque], there is no safer space,” as Rabia said. In other words, “If someone is trying to do it [an attack], they will find a way to do it.”100 Within this reasoning, the Islamic Society might as well retain the same site.

However, many Islamic Society members felt that relocating the mosque to central Joplin better serves the Muslim community. Not only is the new mosque close to the hospitals, it is also proximal to nearby Interstate 44. As Shaheen said:

It is in the middle of the city [so] everyone can approach it. Because sometimes people who are passing by, people coming from St. Louis who are going to Tulsa or Tulsa people going to St. Louis, and somebody coming from Texas, if the masjid is in the middle of the

97 Denying the Islamic Society land due to their religious affiliation directly violates the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, but zoning boards often cite other regulations to justify permit rejections. I was unable to verify Noor’s claims and therefore cannot confirm what the Islamic Society actually encountered as they navigated zoning regulations. I nonetheless include this narrative to demonstrate what Islamic Society members remembered of the rebuilding process.
98 Noor, interview with author, 4/19/2014.
99 Salma, interview with author, 7/13/2015.
100 Rabia, interview with author, 5/1/2014.
city, it is easier to find. You can Google it. Even with our old masjid sometimes it was very difficult to find because it was outside of the city and you can Google it but the GPS will give them the run-around. People would say, ‘Oh, I've been looking for this place for the past hour, and I can’t find it,’ so… we wanted to be closer to the highway and easy access for people coming from outside.\(^{101}\)

Accessibility was key for this small, relatively isolated Muslim community in southwestern Missouri. The Islamic Society wanted to ensure that its members, and even non-member Muslims passing through the area, could easily visit the mosque. Moreover, the move to the center was a symbolic one that resituated the Islamic Society among its neighbors. By building the mosque from the ground up, in the city center, the Muslim community established its future in the city. The physical building reinforces that the Islamic Society belongs in Joplin, and it begins to construct the fledging community’s collective past.

In stark contrast to B’nai Israel, Islamic Society members had little shared history upon which to draw as they planned the new mosque. Only formally incorporated as a non-profit organization in late 2006, the Islamic Society is still developing a shared past and collective identity. If the community has any shared history, it is one of transience. Most members are accustomed to frequent relocation, as many immigrated to the United States as young adults and moved regularly for their medical fellowships and residencies. Bringing together people who are essentially migrant workers, the purpose-built mosque in the middle of Joplin provides southwestern Missouri Muslims with a centralizing place, a shared home that is uniquely theirs and integrated into the city of Joplin.

In the midst of so much change, the group’s board has yet to deal with the Black Cat Road site. The property is nearly bare, and only a concrete-and-brick sign designates what once stood

\(^{101}\) Shaheen and Osman, interview with author, 5/2/2014.
behind it: “The Islamic Society of Joplin,” the sign reads, the address posted below. It is unclear whether community members have been too busy to bother with this property, or perhaps they are not ready to contend with the space. As far as I was able to uncover, the board has not made moves to sell the site or to repurpose it. Only a few Islamic Society members mentioned the site to me of their own volition. Occasionally, they said, they make a point to drive by the land, en route to various destinations. As Tahira, a former Islamic Society Sunday school teacher, said, “just to look, you know, that we used to come here so much… and look at it, there’s nothing here.” Deliberations over reconstruction compelled the Islamic Society and B’nai Israel to question the relationships of their pasts to their futures. While B’nai Israel interwove selected elements of its history into the new synagogue, the Islamic Society chose to relocate to the city center, thereby cultivating, if not a shared past, then at least a shared future in Joplin.

SAFE SPACES

As they decided how to rebuild their religious places, B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society thought of their collective histories and homes. They considered how to reinvigorate feelings of comfort, family, and communality, and they anticipated the ways in which they might evolve over time. However, the disputes about rebuilding addressed not only preserving history and planning for the future. Much of the conflict centered on concerns about vulnerability and safety. The arsons reminded the communities that they are different, that they needed to worry about their differences, that they should fear the potential dangers that those differences can evoke. These thoughts and feelings intensified debates and complicated the decision-making processes,

102 Tahira, interview with author, 7/15/2015.
for congregants realized that their religious places outwardly embody their differences. The synagogue and mosque were, and are, tangible sites against which hateful people acted violently and may do so again.

B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members argued over the extent to which their religious places should securitize. In conversations, people stressed the importance of vigilance, a subject that led to intense disagreements about security measures. While many felt inclined to take any and all precautions to protect their communities, others pointed out the importance of appealing to outsiders, whether to prospective members or to the general public. Both communities needed to address their relationships to their broader local communities. Would fences and security cameras send the wrong message to their neighbors? How might visibility work for or against their own safety? In rebuilding after the arsons, both congregations were forced to ask, how can we best protect ourselves without segregating ourselves?

“Bigger and Better”

In reconstructing their synagogue’s exterior, B’nai Israel members expressed three central concerns. The synagogue needed security measures that would help congregants feel safe coming to their religious place. Yet it also needed to be welcoming, to convey a message of openness to their neighbors, both Jewish and non-Jewish. And finally, the synagogue as a whole needed to be “bigger and better” in order to demonstrate the congregation’s fortitude. B’nai Israel members wanted their co-congregants’ to feel comfortable coming to the synagogue, but as part of a congregation with deep historical and political ties to Sacramento, they were concerned about how they would be perceived by others.
B’nai Israel members extensively deliberated the matter of security. Rob and Carol are a husband-and-wife team who served in key positions on B’nai Israel’s board and its committees before, during, and after the arson. They also co-chaired the Capital Campaign to raise money to rebuild the synagogue. When I asked them to talk a bit about security, they simultaneously heaved enormous sighs, and said, “Oh god.” They told me about the frequent meetings held to address security. “There was a conversation about having a fence around this place,” Rob said. “And a paid security guard with a gun.” He scoffed. “It’s like… do you think somebody can’t jump over the fence? You gonna have a guard here all the time? Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year? Are they gonna have a gun?” He laughed, incredulous, and Carol spoke over him, reminding him of how hard it was:

There was the fencing issue, and there was the security guard issue. […] And it’s also, you know, that’s also around the same time that like, the JCC shootings happened and stuff like that, so I think the security end of stuff, particularly when there were kids around… I don’t think there’s anybody who questioned that you needed to have some kind of security presence here.103

The exchange between Rob and Carol relays the intensity of opinions around security. While most agreed that the community needed to undertake certain precautions, they questioned the necessity and efficacy of the precautions and argued over the appropriate number and best kinds of safety measures.

Meetings after the arsons revealed that people were ready and willing to instate extensive security measures if it meant protecting their home and their community. Although each safeguard cost the community more money, many felt that cutting costs on fences, cameras, or

103 On August 10, 1999 (less than two months after the arson at B’nai Israel), a white supremacist opened fire at a North Valley Jewish Community Center in Granada Hills, in Los Angeles. No one at the JCC was killed, and only five were injured, but the shooter’s “wakeup call to America to kill Jews” prompted widespread anxieties among American Jewish communities. Carol and Rob, interview with author, 2/12/2014.
guards meant increased risk. A January 2002 “Security Assessment” notes that the board strove “to make B’nai Israel not only a sanctuary for the soul, but to foster an environment where everyone will feel safe and secure.” The note underscores that the synagogue must provide congregants with refuge for their souls and with peace of mind. Although actual physical safety was key, it was equally important that people felt protected.

Both Rob and Carol admitted that they were not sure that any of the security measures under discussion would make any substantial difference in congregants’ safety at the synagogue. As Carol said, “People who are determined are gonna find a way to do it.” However, it was critical that people feel safe at B’nai Israel. Hope, the former director of education at B’nai Israel, said that one of her main goals after the arson was “to reassure our students and our parents that the building was safe, that it was a safe space.” The clergy, staff, and board wanted congregants to experience the synagogue as a place of comfort and home, not as a place of vigilance and fear.

However, as with many facets of reconstruction, limited funds proved prohibitive. The security measures “would have cost a pretty penny,” Hope said. “Cost was certainly a factor.” And as Rob said, some community members were not interested in “spending a whole lot of money to have a false sense of security.” Nonetheless, B’nai Israel erected a tall black

105 Carol and Rob, interview with author, 2/12/2014.
109 Carol and Rob, interview with author, 2/12/2014.
aluminum fence around the campus, installed security cameras, locked all doors but for the entry to the administration building, and established detailed emergency procedures. For months after the fire, parents wearing neon vests circumambulated the premises while their children attended Sunday school, and private security conducted round-the-clock surveillance. To this day, a guard stands watch during Shabbat services.\textsuperscript{110} When I visited, I was given an entry code so that I could access certain parts of the synagogue that remain locked when not in use.

To some extent, the security measures protect the campus and reassure members. However, they also “secure” B’nai Israel’s otherness. The security features recall and reinforce congregants’ awareness that they are religious minorities susceptible to attack. Speaking about the windows in the sanctuary, Leslie, a retired social worker, discussed her feelings of unease at the synagogue:

Initially, I was stunned by the windows and thought, ‘My god, you are just inviting another attack. Everybody knows when we’re here. The lights stream out of those windows and say, we’re here! We’re all collected in one place. Come get us!’\textsuperscript{111}

In part, Leslie’s anxiety derives from the community’s visible presence in the synagogue. But the security measures add to those feelings. “The front has secure windows,” she said, listing off safety features at the synagogue. “We are of course now fenced in. And it’s locked. […] The security [guards]. […] For me it feels a little like living behind bars.” She explained further:

What do you say to yourself every time you pull into temple, and it’s surrounded by wrought iron, there’s a security person there, you walk through gates to get in the front

\textsuperscript{110} A January 2002 “Security Assessment” notes that “as history teaches, vigilance is key to protecting our temple property and providing a sense of security for our staff and congregation.” It therefore imposes a mandatory $100 fee per member household “to pay for the increased costs of providing guard services.” “Security Assessment Effective January 2002,” Security, B’nai Israel archives.

\textsuperscript{111} Leslie and Howard, interview with author, 2/14/2014.
door, you can’t get in early because the gates haven’t been unlocked…? It, from my perspective, says that we feel vulnerable.\textsuperscript{112} Her words express a struggle between wanting to be safe, or at least to feel safe, and the sense that those same safety measures reinforce her own anxieties. The same precautionary efforts that aim to protect the congregation also remind congregants’ that they should be worried, that safety is a concern, that violence is imminently possible.

Instating safeguards to protect B’nai Israel from without has led to unsettling consequences within. B’nai Israel members worry about how others perceive their community based on their synagogue campus. A letter from Dave, the chair of the Rebuilding Cabinet, anticipated that though the committee found it necessary, installing a permanent perimeter fence “will give a different ‘feel’ to our Temple.”\textsuperscript{113} In the years since the arson, \textit{Sacramento Bee} reporter Steve told me, “It’s […] less welcoming because of the reality of the gate, the fence, the closed circuit cameras.”\textsuperscript{114} “We didn’t use to have gates,” said Debbie, the congregation’s former art teacher. “They both close in and uh… they have a dual effect.”\textsuperscript{115} Meaning: the gates close in and guard synagogue members but also cut them off from the rest of the Sacramento community. “It sends kind of a mixed message,” said Lisa, a state judge and former B’nai Israel president.

\textsuperscript{112} Leslie and Howard, interview with author, 2/14/2014.

\textsuperscript{113} Letter from Dave to congregants (no date), “President letters,” B’nai Israel archives. Rabbi Loving told me that, “the majority of temples I’ve been in are not so security conscious. I think it’s very high on, in people’s memory, in people’s hearts, and they wanna make sure it doesn’t happen again.” Rabbi Loving, interview with author, 2/19/2014.

\textsuperscript{114} Steve, interview with author, 2/9/2014.

\textsuperscript{115} Debbie, interview with author, 2/11/2014.
“It’s a place of peace and rest and hope and tranquility, and it’s also a place of potential violence.”

In particular, B’nai Israel members feel that the fence conveys the wrong message to others. Even though the fence attempts to shield the community from potential attacks, it also generates worries that the congregation looks like it is distancing itself from the rest of the Sacramento population. In Rob’s words, “Are you part of this [the B’nai Israel] community, or are you not part of this community?” Debbie underscored the juxtaposition between valid anxieties about safety and their religious obligations to espouse kindness and to exhibit hospitality to others: “It says on the outside of our building, ‘love our neighbor as ourselves,’ you know?”

Congregants clearly experience a tension between wanting to respect people’s fears and wanting to be available to the greater community. “I mean, people get scared, you know, and you want to do something; I totally understand that,” Carol admitted to me. “But at the same time, it's like… I don't want to be intimidated into changing who we are as a welcoming community and present a face to the community that says, ‘Keep out,’ instead of, ‘Come in,’ you know?” Her words evince the extent to which rebuilding the synagogue was also about sending a message to their own community, to the rest of Sacramento, and perhaps even to the watchful world.

B’nai Israel felt that the world was watching to see how the congregation would respond to the arson and how it would rebuild. Fundraising materials emphasized that rebuilding the

116 Lisa, interview with author, 2/20/2014.
117 Carol and Rob, interview with author, 2/12/2014.
119 Carol and Rob, interview with author, 2/12/2014.
synagogue was not only necessary in a practical sense but in a symbolic one, as well. “The Temple is more than a building,” one fundraising pamphlet claims. “It is a testament to our history, tradition, and faith as Jews.” Furthermore, the pamphlet pronounces, “rebuilding a better, more beautiful synagogue than we had before” is a way to “demonstrate to future generations that a fire of hatred should not and can not extinguish our steadfast commitment to each other, to religious tolerance and to Judaism.”

Rebuilding bigger, better, more beautifully sent a message to the world and to future generations that B’nai Israel would persevere. “We needed to project, ‘This is a tragedy, it’s terrible, [but] we’re going to rebuild,’” Lisa said. “We’re going to rebuild better, bigger. This is not going to hold us back in any way.”[121] The rebuilt synagogue would “project” B’nai Israel’s fortitude and determination to continue on as a Jewish community. Joe, a former president of B’nai Israel, noted that the new synagogue is “a testament to the message we delivered within hours of the fires being extinguished”:

>You can burn a material aspect of Judaism, you can burn our books, you can burn our synagogue, you can burn our building, our equipment, our records, but you can’t deter our resolve to be who we are as Jews. You can’t deter us from practicing our religion. You can’t deter us from the thousands of years of cultural identity that we have, our traditions, our values. You know, you don’t define a synagogue by brick and mortar. The synagogue is really defined by the character of the people that inhabit the brick and mortar. […] It’s a testament of our resolve, our ability to come back bigger and stronger and better. […] It’s just a material reflection of what we felt on the inside.”[122]

Joe’s words encapsulate the way that places reflect both the people who inhabit them and people’s affective relationships to those places. Through rebuilding the synagogue, B’nai Israel

[120] “Now is the Time; We are the Ones” fundraising pamphlet, B’nai Israel archives.

[121] Lisa, interview with author, 2/20/2014.

demonstrated its strength, fortitude, and conviction. Yet the emphasis placed on synagogue security also conveyed the contrary message: that B’nai Israel members felt vulnerable as religious minorities in America.

Since the arson, congregants’ awareness of the safety modifications has waned significantly. Newer congregants barely notice these features in their usual visits to the synagogue. For instance, some members cannot recall a time when they did not enter the synagogue through the administrative offices. As Rob said, “People have talked about [security] for a long time […] and probably don’t talk about it much anymore.” Community members have gradually begun to feel more safe, and the money formerly earmarked for security has been reallocated to congregational programming and building maintenance. B’nai Israel’s security measures have not been forgotten. Rather, as integral elements of the synagogue, they have become normalized.

(In)Visibility

Like B’nai Israel, the Islamic Society was acutely concerned with security. However, while B’nai Israel members worried that visible safety features might affect their political and social standings by marking them as inhospitable and isolationist, Islamic Society members deliberated which kinds of visibility and surveillance would most help prevent future attacks. As a Muslim community in southwestern Missouri, the Islamic Society needed to render itself transparent but not ostentatious. Many members wanted to show that the community had nothing to hide, but others cautioned against being too apparent, to the extent that their non-Muslim

123 Carol and Rob, interview with author, 2/12/2014.
neighbors might perceive them as aggressive. Islamic Society members struggled with this tension in deciding whether, where, and how to rebuild their mosque.

As previously discussed, many in the community did not want to rebuild the mosque. Sadeeq, for instance, feared it “criminally irresponsible” to do so. But the impulse to rebuild outweighed anxieties about potential violence. The subsequent issue was where to rebuild, a heated debate that led to their relocating to the center of Joplin. The decision was precipitated by desires to be closer to city resources like the Joplin police and fire departments and by the new site’s convenient proximity to the hospitals where many members work. However, what confirmed the community’s decision to relocate was that most Islamic Society members see the new location as much safer.¹²⁴

Situated on top of a hill and at the intersection of two main roads, 32nd Street and McClellan Boulevard, the new mosque is in a populated area, with relatively high streams of traffic and overall increased visibility. “This is more in the city limits,” Rabia said. As a result, she explained:

There will be traffic all the time. We’ll be in the middle of other buildings. It’s not like people who go at five o’clock in the morning, they will be the only people walking down the road, or people coming at ten o’clock [at night], that they will be the only people coming. There will be a lot more traffic than our previous place.¹²⁵

Being at this main intersection reassures Islamic Society members that when they go to prayers early in the morning or late at night, they will not be isolated in the way that they were at the

¹²⁴ One member told me that while the mosque was still being built, they made sure not to expose the location, since there was no security there at the time. He explained that there was a Muslim funeral home in Las Vegas, which was burned while it was being built, and likewise, he had watched a PBS documentary about a mosque that was burned while it was being built. So, he said, “we are taking every precaution so that it’s not very obvious where it is and that it’s a mosque.” Jameel, interview with author, 4/30/2014.

¹²⁵ Rabia, interview with author, 5/1/2014.
mosque on Black Cat Road. Basic “street-smart” logic holds that if the community is publicly visible, it is safe. But the Islamic Society’s awareness of its own visibility goes beyond common sense.

Islamic Society members are aware that their religious community is under surveillance, both by the government and by the general public. The American government has historically been suspicious of minority religious groups, particularly those considered “highly insular” and those “deemed incompatible with democratic institutions.” Catholic, Mormons, and the Oneida Community were viewed as subversive, as were the Moorish Science Temple in the 1930s, and by the 1960s, the Nation of Islam. The People’s Temple suicides in Jonestown and the 1993 Branch Davidian standoff substantiated state concerns about ‘dangerous’ religions. And although concerns about radical Islam initiated during the 1979 Iranian Revolution, they magnified substantially after September 11, 2001. Thus Islamic Society members understand that they must be visible in order “to prove that what they do is socially harmless.”

The centrality of the new location increases the Islamic Society members’ safety by making them visible in case there is another attack. But it also grants the government and the people of Joplin the ability to see the Muslim community. By being so publicly visible, the Islamic Society demonstrates that it is not a danger to Joplin or to America. Islamic Society

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126 This correlates, for instance, with deciding to walk on a well-lit versus a dark street late at night, or choosing to walk with other people instead of on one’s own.


128 Ibid., 294.

129 In chapter four, I show that Islamic Society members work with the FBI to self-police the community. They also prioritize making themselves known to their neighbors. All of these strategies increase their visibility and their safety within the context of contemporary American concerns about radical Islamism.
members feel more secure in knowing that their mosque outwardly demonstrates that their community has nothing to hide. And yet the community has also deliberated the limits of their visibility.

Islamic Society members actively debated their mosque’s style, eventually settling on a design that camouflages the building. The new mosque looks much like the medical offices that flank it. The Islamic Society especially took care to build a mosque that would not be, as former Islamic Society member Jameel said, “like a very classical mosque, with a minaret and a dome.”¹３０ He explained further, “We don’t wanna be offending people, ’cuz there still may be some people who don’t want a mosque in Joplin, as if Muslims are invading this area.” In other words, the Islamic Society needed to be visible — but not visibly Muslim.

After rebuilding, community members continued to argue over whether or not to erect a sign in front of the mosque. Numerous congregants told me that they did not want a sign to designate the building as belonging to the Islamic Society. Imam Lahmuddin explained that the community did not want to put up a sign that might provoke anyone. Expressing similar feelings, Tahira said: “I am not in favor of it [the sign] … because then it just becomes very obvious that this is where the place is, so anyone who is passing by would know. Not everyone needs to know.”¹３１ However, others, like Jameel, wanted to make a sign so Muslims new to town or those passing through Joplin would know where to go. But, he clarified, “it’s not going to be a very big sign.”¹３２

¹３０ Jameel, interview with author, 4/30/2014.
¹３１ Tahira, interview with author, 7/15/2015.
¹３２ Jameel, interview with author, 4/30/2014.
Jameel elaborated that Islamic Society members did not make the mosque structure look like a mosque nor would they put up a big sign, because they wanted to be careful not to “give somebody a reason to feel uncomfortable.”\footnote{Ibid.} They were concerned about how others perceived them. They did not want to make anyone “uncomfortable” or “provoke” anyone. The building sits back unobtrusively from the road, and an American flag stands guard in front of the mosque’s entryway. While these features do not provide intensive security, community members feel they are deterrents that remind their neighbors that they are American and that they are harmless. “My guess is the American flag is more of a defense mechanism,” law student Sadeeq told me. “The reason we put it up there is sure, we’re happy to be in America, but […] it’s mostly like, ‘Hey, we’re one of you, please don’t burn us down.’”\footnote{Sadeeq, interview with author, 7/12/2015.}

The arson was only one of a number of hate crimes the community faced, amidst a social environment where Islamophobic acts are common and widespread. “We are very scared, and the security is a main issue for us,” founding member Umar said. “Every Friday, I think about it… that somebody may just show up and start shooting people.”\footnote{Umar, interview with author, 7/10/2015.} His words reveal not only a concern about violence in general but a worry about gun violence in particular. Many Islamic Society members mentioned that there was a mass shooting at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin only a day before their mosque was burned. Thus, the arson triggered worries about the possibility of escalated violence against the Muslim community.
However, like B’nai Israel, finances limited the Islamic Society in its security measures.

When we met in July 2015, Umar’s daughter Salma relayed to me a recent conversation she had with her father:

I asked him, like, you know, ‘Aren’t you afraid that someone could just come into the mosque with a gun?’ … It was like, a really blunt question, but I was like, you know, ‘What are we going to do to prevent that?’ And he said, ‘Well, we have to put in a security gate, and get in these cameras, and some people wanna get a keypad access.’ (‘They were really intent on getting like maximum security,’ she said softly as an aside to her story.) But he’s like, ‘But that costs money, and I don’t know how we would get the money to do it.’ So he was very like, you know, obviously this is still a concern today… about how to raise money to keep the place safe.¹³⁶

Salma joins her father in his concerns about the potential for the Islamic Society to be targeted again, potentially by gun violence. However, her conversation with him reveals that, much as the community would ideally integrate any and all security measures to keep the community safe, there is only so much that people can afford.

Jameel, Umar, and Sadeeq communicated concerns about how the Islamic Society and its mosque make other people feel. While Islamic Society members were interested in building a space unique to their Joplin Muslim community and in ensuring their safety, they also saw the reconstruction of the mosque as an opportunity to reengage with their non-Muslim neighbors. They needed to avoid offending their neighbors, but they also needed to reach out to their neighbors. Rida and Umar expressed desires for the new mosque to be a sort of community center for both the Muslim community and the rest of the Joplin community. They hoped the mosque would bring together people of all faiths for lectures and learning and informal

¹³⁶ Salma, interview with author, 7/13/2015.
conversation. Umar wanted the mosque to have space for WiFi and coffee, so that it would be a gathering place, especially for youths, a “Muslim Starbucks,” he joked.\footnote{Conversation with Umar. Fieldnotes, 4/11/2014.}

While the “Muslim Starbucks” does not yet exist, the Islamic Society prides itself on its interfaith involvement. When I visited in April 2014, while the mosque was still under construction, people told me that they were most looking forward to resuming interfaith activities once the mosque was completed. The mosque now regularly holds interfaith events at the mosque, including an iftar dinner during Ramadan.\footnote{In chapter four, I will discuss at length my experiences at this interfaith event and address how it fits into a broader narrative of establishing security and safety through religious legibility.} However, community members again expressed that they need to be conscientious of the particular impressions that they might convey to non-Muslim visitors. For instance, one member worried about what iftar attendees saw when they visited the mosque. She was especially concerned about their perceptions of the women’s prayer room. “I felt like I owe them an explanation that this isn’t the way we always do it,” she said to me. “‘Don’t think that we stash the women back here!’ Because that’s definitely not the stereotype to put out there.”\footnote{Interview with Islamic Society member. For reasons of sensitive material, I have retained the participant’s anonymity.}

Islamic Society members contend with a precarious balance between being seen and being seen in the wrong ways. They also work to live their normal daily lives while remaining attuned to the potential for danger. In their regular uses of the mosque, many members think little of its security features. But on occasion, the fears resurface: during an Eid celebration at the end of Ramadan in July 2015, I sat outside of the main social hall, speaking with Sadeeq, when we heard someone banging loudly on one of the room’s locked doors. Abruptly, the room went
silent. People exchanged worried glances. An older man rose, holding up a hand to the room, an unspoken message to stay calm and quiet. He would check. As it turned out, the noise was only a small child, clamoring to come in from the outside. Conversations resumed, and Sadeeq returned to his narrative of the arson: “Like the banging on the door,” he said, “my immediate thought was, ‘Oh no. Trouble.’ We knew it was probably the kids, but your immediate first thought is, ‘Danger.’”

In contrast to B’nai Israel, the potential for danger and violence has yet to become normalized for Islamic Society members. Most are hyper-aware of their own vulnerability, particularly in a social climate that equates Muslims with terrorists. Although both communities were intent on protecting themselves, the strategies for doing so are markedly different. B’nai Israel’s security efforts were mostly concerned with creating a feeling of safety while simultaneously sustaining their relationships with the broader Sacramento community, thus preserving their socio-political status. The Islamic Society’s precautions, however, are rooted in a heightened sense of twenty-first-century anti-Islam violence, where visibility and vigilance are key in safeguarding them from attacks.

**SPACES OF MEMORY**

Fundamentally transgressive acts, the arsons broke the law. They destroyed others’ property. But they also violated the order of things and precipitated communal instability, for the destruction of place disturbed what was previously taken as established. When the arsons

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140 Sadeeq, interview with author, 7/12/2015.
demolished the synagogue and the mosque, they also ruptured the order of congregants’
everyday lives and forced them to construct new conceptions of ‘normal.’

B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society faced questions that demanded practical decisive
answers. How should we spend our limited funds? Do we tear down and begin again? Do we
relocate? What do we keep, if we can? Which security measures do we establish? In answering
these questions, both communities were forced to evaluate the substance and spirit of their
congregations. They argued over what their communities were and what they hoped to be. They
assessed the relevance of their pasts and debated how to represent their histories as they moved
toward the future. In planning to rebuild, both communities confronted ever-present concerns
about safety and security.

The destruction of these religious sites generated communal disagreements, necessitated
reflection, and demanded negotiation. B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society struggled through the
processes of reconstruction. But in rebuilding their religious places, they reconfigured their
religious communities. As environmental lawyer and former B’nai Israel secretary Les said,
“One of the positive things that came out of the fire was that it brought people closer together by
working to reconstruct the physical environment of the temple.”\(^{141}\) Where the arsons destroyed
the places and eroded the communities, rebuilding their religious places reconstructed the
communality and the feelings of “home” that were lost in the fires. “Destruction always pulls
you down,” Tahira told me. “Construction always makes you feel good.”\(^{142}\)

\(^{141}\) Les, interview with author, 6/16/2014.

\(^{142}\) Tahira, interview with author, 7/15/2015.
Reconstituting the physical buildings of the synagogue and mosque recrystallized B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society as religious communities. The congregation’s communal narratives about the arsons similarly shape their affective and actionable worlds. In the next chapter, I move from structures of space and place to the infrastructures of memory. Like the construction of physical spaces, the creation of collective memories attempts, with varying degrees of success, to render feelings understandable and productive and to make meaning out of madness.
CHAPTER THREE

Trial by Fire: Contextualizing Arson

In conversation after conversation that I had with people in each community, the stories unfolded in the same ways. B’nai Israel congregants spread the news through an informal phone tree. The synagogue had burned, as had two other area synagogues. The library and administration buildings were destroyed. The sanctuary was heavily smoke-damaged. The Torah were fine, valiantly rescued by the congregation's outgoing president. Friday night services were held at the local community center, and the following Monday, a community unity rally took place at the Crest Theater. In Joplin, early morning phone calls and text messages disrupted Muslim community members’ suhur meals as they prepared for another day of the Ramadan fast. The news: the mosque had been burned to the ground. Only rubble remained. In the days after the fire, Islamic Society members gathered in one member’s basement to pray, to commiserate sadness and anger, and to plan the next steps forward.

Years after the attacks, members of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society shared the vagaries of where they were at the time, followed by sweeping narratives of the violence. ¹ “Tell me about your experience of the arson,” I prompted, only to have each person broadly recall the historical facts of the attacks, as if responding to journalistic inquiries of the who, the what, and the where. I soon reached the mythical “saturation point” touted by anthropologists. Each

¹ When I spoke with B’nai Israel members in 2014, fifteen years had passed the 1999 arson. Alternatively, I visited the Islamic Society in 2014 and 2015, only two and three years after the 2012 mosque arson.
interview echoed its predecessor and foretold the next. What more was there to learn, I worried, if everyone had the same story to tell?

This chapter locates the answer to that question in the frameworks structuring the stories of the arsons and in the spaces between the plainly articulated lines. Congregants’ memories of the arsons are constituted as much by what is omitted and de-emphasized as they have been by the basic facts and the manners in which they were conveyed.² Having offered me a familiar rundown of the arson, community members gradually described specific sensorial details of their personal experiences: the thick feel of smoky air, the pervasive smell of fire, the sight of crisped pages. Yet people abruptly truncated these visceral memories, sometimes halting midway through a sentence to absorb the renewed pain, occasionally asking me to pause the tape.

B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members tended to discuss their communities’ collective memories of the arsons rather than share their personal memories. Their personal memories were often deeply sensorial and affectively powerful, and recalling such memories renewed emotions that they seemed to prefer not to reengage. In remembering the arsons, congregants de-emphasized the personal and instead privileged the collective. Moreover, each community’s collective memory of the arson is structured by a distinct framework. While Islamic Society members underscored the importance of patience, B’nai Israel members invoked the Holocaust in their narrations of the arson. Shaped by their particular political and historical contexts and

drawing on established communal scripts, these scaffolds of collective memory layered the violence of the arsons with some semblance of greater meaning and purpose.

**RELIVING MEMORY**

Mark is a B’nai Israel member who works for the State of California and previously served as the vice president of membership at B’nai Israel. We met for lunch down the street from the synagogue, at Vic’s Ice Cream, and within the first fifteen minutes of our conversation, he had briefly outlined his personal history, his family life, his relationship to B’nai Israel, and his memory of the events around the arson. After a long pause, he told me about the burial ceremony that the community held for the burned books. “Just like when you bury someone if they passed away, we had all of these burned library books and prayer books,” he told me. “So we said Kaddish for their burial […] at the [Home of Peace] cemetery.”

I asked him to say more about what that was like, and with a viscous tenor to his voice, he said: “I remember standing there and, ya know, saying some of the prayers. It was a very small sermon and short service, saying the Kaddish, and um, then um…” Tears ran down Mark’s cheeks as he spoke, and he quietly wiped them away. The interjections “um” and “uh” began to break up his speech as he struggled to continue his story:

I don’t remember what happened to the books, um, but I know we had them in a pile, and they were taken some place, and then I just found myself stepping away and um, uh, ya know… I was just overcome with grief. Um, I had to sit down against a wall, the structure that was there, and I was just, uh, crying almost, uh, uncontrollably because it

3 Kaddish means simply “sanctification.” A prayer that praises God, it is typically recited in Aramaic during different parts of Jewish prayer services. A version of the Kaddish is recited by mourners for eleven months and one day after the death of a parent and for thirty days after the death of another close relative.
just, um, hit us so hard and, uh, uh, it just seemed like a very personal blow to all of us. 
… If you could stop the tape for a second… 4

Although we were speaking so many years after the arson, Mark outwardly exhibited his
emotions when he told me about the book burial. He quickly touched on the basic details of the
arson, but he seemed to relive this particular memory.

As the previous chapter showed, members of both communities relate to their religious
places in practical and affective terms. Like other relationships, human relationships with space
and place are complicated, conflicted, and emotional. Mark’s words, and his bodily reaction,
convey that em-placed memories are likewise freighted with feeling. Recalling his experience of
the arson, he envisioned the cemetery, reimagined his embodiment there, and relived his
emotional state at that time. However, Mark then halted. He had me turn off the tape, stopped
speaking, and took time to collect himself before we resumed the conversation.

Mark likely paused to regain his composure for a number of reasons. He was speaking
with someone whom he had only recently met. Recognizable in a small city, so near to his
synagogue, he occupied a visible table at a popular local lunch spot. But he also wanted to move
on from the powerful memory of burying the burned books. “You can see it still really affects
me,” he explained when he had me again turn on my recorder. “Uh, so um… I don't remember
much more I can tell you about it,” he said. He then switched topics and shared his
understanding of what had happened to the perpetrators. Having acknowledged his resurgence of
feelings, Mark returned to the safe solidity of facts.

4 Mark, interview with author, 2/20/2014.
A conversation I had with Farooq, a pulmonary and critical-care specialist who had been actively involved in plans for the new mosque, in July 2015 resonated with my exchange with Mark but explicitly named one of memory’s defining features. While we talked, Farooq cradled his three-year-old daughter, who quietly ate cheese puffs out of a Styrofoam bowl. “How often do you think about the arson?” I asked. “It was just initially,” he said. “I think that’s what the meaning of, uh— Like in Qur’an, God says the human is insan. The English translation of human being is insan.”

“How often?” I repeated. “Insan,” he said. “One of the meanings is like, is ‘forgetful.’ God has put that in our— Uh, it’s that we forget things.” Noting the curious look on my face, he clarified:

Like, I remember like— After the mosque was burned, [feeling like] ‘Oh man, this is terrible, how are we gonna live? Am I gonna live in this city or not? Should I leave this city or not?’ But as the time pass… You don’t recall those things. And then I can relate this with like, when my mom died. I was in high school. And I felt like, ‘This is the end of life. There is nothing, it’s just darkness.’ But as the time passed, how often I remember my mom? I don’t know, I cannot tell you. Maybe once a year… I should be remembering more. I pray for her every day… That’s part of my prayers. But remembering or recalling like, what I used to do with my mom, how my mom used to hug me… I think that’s the part of the forgetfulness, and I think this is good for us. To forget things, and keep moving.”

Farooq’s words illustrate feelings of loss similar to those that Mark expressed. Relating how he felt after the destruction of his mosque to how he felt after his mother’s death, Farooq conveyed both the gravity of those losses and the extent to which those feelings have faded. He also marked a distinction between reliving memory and remembering. While he remembers his mother regularly in his prayers, he no longer actively recalls his interactions with her or how she used to hug him. In other words, although remembering is perhaps unavoidable, human beings

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5 Farooq, interview with author, 7/14/2015.
are made to forget — in particular, to forget sensorial experiences and emotional responses. People are made to forget feelings.

REMEMBERING TO FORGET

The process of creating memories is itself a process of forgetting. They imply one another.\(^6\) Whether memories are individual or collective, the process of their formation necessitates letting some details fade in order to construct and preserve a cohesive story. Forgetting sublimates, and sometimes entirely dissipates, certain aspects of an event in the service of cultivating a master narrative. Moreover, forgetting and remembering always take place in particular social, historical, and political contexts. In his seminal work *On Collective Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs shows that individuals acquire their memories among and through other people. They “recall, recognize, and localize” their memories in society.\(^7\)

Memories and their frameworks are thus constituted by communities. But how? While anthropologist Paul Connerton suggests that collective memories form through commemorative ceremonies that the remembering communities perform, social psychologist Jeffrey C. Alexander underscores Halbwachs’s thesis and validates its applicability, particularly for communities subject to trauma.\(^8\) Alexander writes, “Rather than denial, repression, and ‘working through,’ it is

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\(^6\) Much of the contemporary research on memory and forgetting has emerged from the fields of human cognition, neuroscience, and psychology. While the positions in such works vary drastically — and shift rapidly as technologies advance — scholars of forgetting underscore as a process necessarily entwined with remembering. In particular, see Sergio Della Sala’s edited volume, *Forgetting* (New York: Psychology Press, 2010).


a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating stories and characters, and moving along from there.”

As this chapter shows, the ways in which B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members retold their stories of the arsons confirm that collective memory is indeed a “matter of symbolic construction and framing.” However, the modes of “symbolic construction and framing” vary, as they are dependent upon people, place, time, and circumstance. Both B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society are American religious communities, but they have different backgrounds, operate under different conditions, and inhabit different identities. Aware of their distinct socio-political positions, they cull their collective memories by drawing from available narratives. In turn, collective memories ascribe meaning to the arsons and guide religious adherents in their responses going forward.

Paul Ricoeur glosses collective memory, its construction, and its mobilization as “in the service of the quest, the appeal, the demand for identity.” Because memory has the capacity to structure identity, it is thus manipulated “to legitimize the authority of order or power.” While B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society did not evidence “manipulated” or “abused” memory, the question of power must not be discounted, for both communities operate within systems of power that limit their memories’ frameworks and capacities. Their memories were shaped through their circumstances, whether as a politically involved American Jewish community with a long history in the United States or as a young Muslim immigrant community cautiously responding to an encounter with violent Islamophobia.

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10 Paul Ricoeur, 81.
Subsequently, collective memory may be related to Bourdieu’s *habitus*. It is a “structured structure” that is also a “structuring structure.”¹¹ Shaped by place in geography and history, it also shapes people’s perspectives and has the capacity to shape their actions. The collective-memory habitus is not a rigid system that directs and prescribes. Rather, it is a syncretic orientation toward a select moment in time (in this case, to the arsons).

In the sections that follow, I examine the frameworks through which B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society developed their collective memories of the arsons and the significance of these scaffolds. I first highlight two texts, one material and one oral, that most explicitly manifest each community’s way of framing its collective memory of the arson. I then show how such frameworks orient the communities and inform their reactions to the arsons. Finally, I explore how the structures and silences of communal memories of violence may stabilize targeted religious communities, solidifying their identities and redirecting their responses.

*The Holocaust as a Scaffold of Memory*

The library was consumed. It was blackened and gutted. Before the fire, it had been the symbolic heart of the synagogue, the site of board meetings and B’nai Mitzvah lessons, Torah study and quiet contemplation.¹² For so many personal reasons, the loss of the library deeply wounded B’nai Israel members. Congregants also saw the total destruction of the library as representative of an attack on Judaism’s core values: knowledge, reading, study, intellectual

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¹² As discussed in chapter two, before the arson, the library was the “social center” and the “hub” of Congregation B’nai Israel.
conversation and debate. It is no surprise, then, that these principles are boldly exhibited in a painting on the wall next to the entrance to the rebuilt library. At the center of the large canvas is an acrylic painting of a page of the Talmud, which reads in Hebrew, “Ein ani elah b’da’ah.” Below it, the quote translated into English: “None is poor, save one who lacks knowledge.”

![Figure 12: Painting outside B’nai Israel’s library. Source: Photograph by author.](image)

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13 Interviews with numerous B’nai Israel members.

14 The art hangs within plain visibility for anyone entering the library or passing through the education wing of the synagogue.

15 Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 41.

Although the mixed-media piece is not the only material artifact of the arson, it is the only deliberately cultivated one. The artist responsible for the work is the synagogue’s current librarian, Saul, who was inspired to create a painting focused on the Talmud quote. When he came across a box of burned books from the arson, he said, he thought they were perfect for the piece. Through the painting, the Talmud quote was no longer only about the importance of knowledge but rather it was about “knowledge faced with the destruction of knowledge.”

The artwork writes many stories. It pairs biblical supplications with historical tragedies. It interweaves Jewish chosenness and inheritance of God’s law with a lineage of Jewish persecution. Preserving and presenting remnants of the 1999 arson, the visual bricolage recalls the collective Jewish past of oppression and destruction, and it reminds viewers of Jewish ethics and duties. Considered in isolation, the work spotlights priorities central to Jewish identity, including knowledge, interconnectivity, commandments, and the Holocaust.

However, pairing the composition with my conversations with B’nai Israel members illuminates a shared theme. Congregants recounted their memories of B’nai Israel’s arson – and the two other synagogue arsons that occurred the same night in June 1999 – within the historical motif of the Holocaust. I spoke with Holocaust survivors, children of survivors, and friends of

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16 Saul, phone interview with author, 10/29/2015.
survivors who shared autobiographical memories related to the Holocaust. I also spoke to many B’nai Israel members who had no direct personal connection to the Holocaust but who referenced or alluded to it when narrating the story of the arson. Without being prompted, B’nai Israel congregants shared memories that invoked the Holocaust.

This was not entirely surprising. People in the B’nai Israel community often mention anti-Semitism and the Holocaust as part of the Jewish legacy. Sunday school teachers discuss the Holocaust with their students every year. Lecturers mention the Holocaust in evening adult education classes, and the Holocaust often finds its way into Shabbat sermons. But why did members of this Renewal Reform Jewish community in Sacramento, California draw on the Holocaust to tell the story of their synagogue’s arson? Why not the destruction of the First and Second Temple in Jerusalem? Or, as per the art outside of the library, why not specifically Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass? If anything, one might imagine a parallel between the 1999 arsons and the 1938 night when Jewish businesses and synagogues were stoned and burned. Yet it was to the Holocaust that B’nai Israel members turned in remembering the arson.

In the Ruins, “Out of Time and Space”

Most B’nai Israel congregants are not survivors or related to survivors of the Holocaust. Almost all with whom I spoke were baby boomers born and raised in the United States. Many have lived in Sacramento for decades. Despite their temporal and geographical distance from the

17 Interviews with numerous B’nai Israel members.

18 Memory of the Holocaust is often seen as a “paradigm for trauma,” in part because it is the “most extreme reach of violence,” and in part because it developed out of silence. It also displays the link between collective trauma and individual suffering. Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 18.
Holocaust, they frequently alluded to it in their narrations of the arson. Often, they conflated their perception of the arsonist’s intent with their perception of the motivations undergirding the Holocaust. In their view, the perpetrators responsible for burning down their synagogue were reminiscent of the Nazis, demonstrating their hatred of Jews through violence.

Rob, a former board member and co-chair of the congregation’s Capital Campaign, searched for the right words to describe his feelings about the arson. “I don't think I've ever really articulated this before, but you know, when we were growing up... a wad of your Jewishness was tied to the anti-Semitism of the Nazis,” he said, pausing. “You'd say to your parents, ‘Come on, there have got to be other pieces, other reasons, to be Jewish.’ [...] It [the arson] was just such a slap in the face, such a jarring thing, from that perspective. You think, that stuff is in the past... It’s so in the past.”

Rob’s language asserts definitive understandings of the Holocaust, the arson, and Judaism. The Holocaust was the result of intersecting historical, sociological, political, ideological, economic, and racial threads, but Rob distilled the Holocaust to the anti-Semitic drive of the Nazi regime. And though he expressed a childhood frustration with his parents’ emphasis on the Holocaust as a reason to be Jewish, he also acknowledged that his parents’ urgings were not unfounded. The 1999 arson proved to him that “that stuff” – the anti-Semitic hatred central to the Holocaust – is not in the past, secluded to mid-twentieth-century Europe. In his eyes, it still exists in twenty-first-century America.

Like Rob, many other B’nai Israel members think of the Holocaust as the epitome of anti-Semitism. In turn, anti-Semitism is itself an experience they see as central to their Jewish
identity. This train of thought demonstrates that, in cultivating a collective memory of their synagogue’s arson, B’nai Israel members drew on a broader post-1970s American Jewish narrative that equates Judaism with potential anti-Semitic violence and correlates any acts of anti-Semitism with the Holocaust.

Historian Peter Novick examines this curious centralization of the Holocaust in the American imagination and tracks its delayed development. The general public socially silenced survivors until the 1960s. In 1968, Meir Kahane's Jewish Defense League first used the now-pervasive mantra “Never Forget,” and by the 1970s, the term “holocaust” was applied to describe the genocide of European Jewry. Novick argues that the shifting attitudes toward the Holocaust coincided with the tribulations faced by the young state of Israel, among them the Yom Kippur War. In his view, the 1973 Yom Kippur War incited fears of a Holocaust in the Middle East. It was then that American Jews began to define their Judaism by their history as victims.20

According to Novick, Holocaust anxieties functioned as a scare tactic to Jews, propelling them toward Zionism and Zionist actions manifest as military aggression in Israel and as financial and political support in America.21 The struggles of the Israeli state, combined with the likely intentional goading of political figures and media outlets, drew the Holocaust to the center of the American Jewish consciousness. In this way, the Holocaust “provided a language and a framework that deepened anxiety about American anti-Semitism.”22 The logic suggested that if people hated the Jews in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, they surely also hated the Jews in the United States.

21 Ibid., 163.
22 Ibid., 177.
Rob’s words indicate that B’nai Israel’s baby boomers were raised with this language and framework. As such, the politicized and essentialized version of the Holocaust seems to have shaped their Judaism. And by the 1980s, when this generation of B’nai Israel members began to start their Jewish families, American Jews routinely cited the Holocaust as the definitive event that distinguished them as Jews, united by their shared persecution. All Jews everywhere, then, needed to be wary of universal prejudices against them – and to be especially cautious about where those prejudices might lead. Hostile feelings toward the Jews could evolve into anti-Semitic violence. “Among other things, the Holocaust came to symbolize the natural and inevitable terminus of anti-Semitism,” Novick writes. “First stop, an anti-Semitic joke; last stop, Treblinka.”

Though B’nai Israel congregants might find Novick’s claim hyperbolic, it is not entirely off-base. Many members of B’nai Israel felt that the arson was a sign that the powerful anti-Semitism of the Holocaust had not gone away. One B’nai Israel couple suggested that anti-Semitism never dies but only goes underground to flourish and emerge again. They likened it to their potatoes, “only more malevolent.” The hatred lay dormant, always capable of being drawn to the surface, even in twenty-first-century America.

The arson reminded B’nai Israel members that anti-Semitism is widespread and ceaseless. Hope, B’nai Israel’s former director of education, grew up outside of Indianapolis after the end of World War Two. Having lost distant members of her family in the Holocaust, she chose to focus her life on Jewish education and Jewish communal service. She was hired as

23 Ibid., 178.
the director of Jewish education at B’nai Israel around the same time that Rabbi Alfi was hired as the assistant rabbi, a few years before the arson. In the first minutes of my conversation with Hope, she said to me, unasked, “For me, [the arson] brought the Holocaust back front and center.” It was clear, she said, that we didn’t learn from the Holocaust, that the hatred of the Holocaust didn’t go away. “This is the United States. Not Israel. Not Europe, where the Holocaust was,” she stated. “It doesn’t happen here... But it does.”

Jewish studies scholar James Young writes that Holocaust museums and memorials operate in a metonymic fashion. The physical structures and historical artifacts represent the event as a whole. Likewise, B’nai Israel members seem to contextualize the arsons in light of the Holocaust, the American Jewish metonym for an entire Jewish history of oppression and persecution. For B’nai Israel congregants, both the Holocaust and the arson said, “You are Jewish, and you are hated because you are Jewish.” If the Holocaust was the epitome of anti-Semitism, and if anti-Semitism motivated the arson, then the arson was a terrifying incarnation of the Holocaust. While the Holocaust epitomizes universal Jewish experiences of anti-Semitism, both events fit into an extended Jewish history of persecution.

Amy, Steve’s and Eleanor’s daughter and a college undergraduate at a small liberal arts school in the Pacific Northwest, was five years old when the synagogue was attacked. She did not mention the Holocaust outright, but she did define the arson as an explicit act of anti-Semitism. “Anti-Semitism at that point had only been in stories,” Amy said. “Since then, I’ve

26 Ibid.
gotten ‘kike’ and ‘you’re going to hell’ and that kind of fun stuff... But that [the arson] was really my first personal experience with anti-Semitism.”

Like Hope, Amy connected her experience of anti-Semitism to her increased dedication to Judaism:

I think it did bring me closer to Judaism, if only as a reactionary polarizing force. It’s kind of how if you get in an argument and the very argument polarizes you. If one person has started off on one side, you sort of just take the other side. Once I learned that there was this polarizing force, once I learned how much people hate Jews, it brought me closer to my religion, to my community.

She articulated a strange but undeniable link between Judaism and anti-Semitism. Dealing with anti-Semitism is an implicit part of being Jewish. For Amy, the arson and her other experiences with anti-Semitism reinforced her commitment to Judaism. Jews’ stubborn insistence on being Jewish despite the many efforts to destroy them has an historical precedent. Among nineteenth-century German Jews, the concept was deemed *Trotzjudentum*, or “Jewishness out of spite.”

B’nai Israel members’ tenacious resolve in the face of hardship seems consistent both with *Trotzjudentum* and with American “victim culture” sparked by the identity-politics movement of the 1980s. Although some B’nai Israel members experienced the arson as a sad reminder that Jewish communities can always be the targets of hatred, others did not identify as victims. Instead, they expressed that the arson compelled them to reaffirm and strengthen their commitment to Judaism. They integrated their experience of violence into a collective Jewish history of persecution and perseverance. By mentioning the Holocaust in conjunction with the arson, B’nai Israel congregants inhabited a shared Jewish American narrative to make sense of the hate crime committed against them.

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29 Ibid.
30 Novick, 7.
Driving to Noor’s home, I passed through the stretch of Joplin left flattened and barren from the 2011 tornado, through the part of town dotted with newly built chain restaurants, past the hospital complex, to the hilly suburbs where many Islamic Society families live. In each cul-de-sac, neatly shaped hedges surrounded fresh, green, precisely manicured lawns. Mimeographed copies of two-story brick homes sat evenly spaced around each circle. When I rang the bell, I heard the eager scrambling of small feet racing to be the first to greet me. One of Noor’s daughters answered the door, her little brother trailing behind her, both yelling for their mother to come upstairs.

It was hard to tell whether Noor, a mother of three children under the age of twelve, looked relieved to take a break from the day’s task of spring cleaning or if she seemed inconvenienced. While Noor and I talked, her eldest daughter sat sandwiched in between us, absentmindedly playing on the family iPad. Relating the story of the arson, Noor said it was a test from God, that “we are always being tested.” I asked her to explain the subject of the test. “Patience and acceptance of hardships,” she said and then told me a story from Surat al-Kahf. “The Cave” is a Meccan sura, the eighteenth in the Qur’an, and contains several seemingly disparate tales. Noor focused a section known as al-Khidr. In this story, Moses

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31 I cannot be sure if, or how, Noor’s daughter’s presence may have affected our conversation. However, I do wonder if Noor still would have told me the story of al-Khaf if her daughter not been seated with us, possibly listening.

32 Noor, interview with author, 4/19/2014.

33 Because Noor declined my request to record our conversation, I noted down the name of the sura rather than frantically trying to copy by hand everything Noor said, exactly as she said it. I also wrote down the main points Noor made during her retelling of the story, and when I went home, I was then able to look up the story to get a better sense of the story as it is recorded in the Qur’an.

34 This section runs from verses 65-82. Al-Khidr is a mystical figure in Islam, described in the Qu’ran as a knowledgeable servant of God. Al-Khidr is left nameless. His only definitive trait is that he possesses great wisdom.
encounters a knowledgeable man of God who promises to take him on a journey, under a single condition: Moses is not allowed to question any actions taken by the unnamed man of God. En route, the man of God drills a hole in their boat, kills a young boy, and rebuilds a crumbling wall for a village of people who refused to share both shelter and food with Moses and the man of God. Shocked and appalled by such strange behaviors, Moses breaks his promise, objecting to each action. He repeatedly challenges the man of God, and repeatedly he receives the response: “Did I not tell you you would not be able to bear with [have patience with] me?”

Finally, al-Khidr tells Moses that their journey has come to an end, and he explains his questionable actions:

“This is the parting of our ways,” he said. ‘But I will now explain the things you could not bear: That boat belonged to poor people who used to toil on the sea. I damaged it because there was a king after them who used to seize every ship by force. As for the boy, his parents were believers, but we feared that he would harass them with defiance and disbelief. We hoped their Lord would give them a substitute better than him in virtue and goodness. As for that wall, it belonged to two orphan boys of the city, and their treasure was buried under it. Their father was an upright man. So your Lord willed that on reaching the age of maturity they should dig out their treasure as a favour from their Lord. So, I did not do that of my own accord. This is the explanation of things you could not bear with patience.”

In this sura, both men are men of God, considered to be prophets or angels, and yet al-Khidr’s actions reveal him to be an exception to religious law. But with what purpose? As I listened to Noor tell the story, I found myself joining Moses in asking why al-Khidr would do such terrible things.

36 Ibid., 257.
Interpreting *Surat al-Khaf*, Qur’an scholar Ian Richard Netton categorizes Moses as a Campbellian archetypal hero, who journeys in the name of a quest, finds himself tested, and eventually learns a lesson.\(^\text{37}\) In contrast to the elusive mysticism of *al-Khidr*, Netton argues, the Moses of *Surat al-Khaf* demonstrates characteristics to which the average person might relate: the desire for more knowledge, a dedication to the pursuit of that knowledge, an at-times intrusive curiosity, and impatience. Moses initially views and experiences the incidents on his journey as disorder. The damage to the boat, the death of a child, the rewarding of unkind people—these events could certainly be classified as cruelty and injustice. Those reflecting on the story are drawn to identify with Moses. They feel his confusion, his frustration, and his outrage. And when *al-Khidr* explains his actions, they, like Moses, are humbled.

Noor linked the burning of the mosque to *al-Khidr*’s actions. As were *al-Khidr*’s actions in *al-Khaf*, the arson was shocking and prompted strong emotional reactions and angry questions. And as in *al-Kahf*, Noor (and many other Islamic Society members) explained, the arson was God’s will. But what was God’s intention in the mosque-burning? Why did Noor and other Islamic Society members invoke this story and its messages in recalling the arson?

*Al-Khidr and the Mystery of God*

“God made it happen,” Imam Lahmuddin told me of the arson. “God is in charge,” he said frankly. “We need to take the message.”\(^\text{38}\) It is this point that Noor was making in telling me


\(^{38}\) Imam Lahmuddin, interview with author, 4/16/2014.
the story of *al-Khidr*. Even if we do not know God’s intentions, Noor and the imam emphasized, we do know that God orchestrates our lives.

While most Islamic Society members did not specifically reference the *sura*, nearly all expressed its message in telling their stories of the arson. Like Moses in the story of *al-Khidr*, their immediate reactions to the arson were typically feelings of sorrow, fear, confusion, and anger. The members of the Islamic Society, like Moses, were infuriated and saddened. However, *al-Khidr* explains the underpinning order and harmony of his seemingly unmerited actions. He acted on God’s behalf. Islamic Society members likewise seemed to interpret the arson as an act of God’s own making. They pronounced their faith in God, claiming that the arson was a “trial from God.”

Islamic Society members saw the arson as a test of their abilities to resist the pull of frustration and outrage and the desire to question God’s actions. Though Moses fails God’s test in *Surat-al-Khidr*, he grows as a person through his travels, experiences, and even the failure itself. He eventually learns the reasons for *al-Khidr*’s actions and realizes that “God’s ways are certainly not man’s ways, and may, indeed, be far beyond his comprehension.”

Islamic Society members learned from, rather than mimicked, Moses’s failure to “bear with” the man of God. Instead, they drew from this story, and other Islamic teachings, to reframe the arson as a test of

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39 The Qur’anic scholar Ismail Albayrak writes that classical exegetes of *al-Kahf* unanimously agree that *al-Khidr* “has a knowledge of the hidden, *ghayb*.” However, these scholars remained troubled by a critical element of the story: “What can and cannot be done on the basis of this [hidden] knowledge?” In other words, which actions are validated by hidden knowledge of God’s wishes? Like the classical Qur’anic commentators, Albayrak finds no reasonable answer to such an urgent ethical problem. Instead, he offers, “God knows best…” Ismail Albayrak, “The Classical Exegetes’ Analysis of the Qur’anic Narrative 18: 60-82,” *Islamic Studies* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 315.

their ability to have faith in God and in God’s plan, as well as a test to overcome their anger and instead to practice patience.

Islamic Society members presented the arson as a trial from God that was meant as an opportunity for them to evolve and grow. “Patience and acceptance of hardships is a good deed,” Noor said. “It’s service to God.”41 Because God has plans for people, it is the Muslim duty to submit to God and to bear with God’s actions and not, she explained, necessarily to question the nature of God’s intentions. Islamic Society members’ stories of the arson frame patience as a religious obligation and its practice as worthy of God’s reward.

Many share Noor’s perspective. Some thought they remembered that the imam spoke about patience during a Friday khutbah, or sermon, after the arson.42 Others, including Imam Lahmuddin himself, said that they could not remember what the imam said after the arson, claiming that they privately developed their perspectives on patience. Receiving little additional explanation of the “test of patience” beyond the story of al-Khidr, I turned to the writings of a scholar frequently referenced by Islamic Society members.43 Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali, an eleventh-century Persian Muslim theologian and philosopher, distinguishes between two impulses: the “impulse of desire” and the “religious impulse.”44 Al-

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41 Noor, interview with author, 4/19/2014.
42 Osman and Shaheen, interview with author, 5/2/2014.
43 Members of the Islamic Society of Joplin did not invoke Al-Ghazali in speaking to me about the arsons. However, they alluded to him at other points in our formal interviews and informal conversations, and during the time I spent at the mosque, I regularly heard people reference him. Subsequently, when I reflected on how people understood the concept of “patience,” I looked to Al-Ghazali for commentary.

Islamic Society members said that God tested their patience and that the answer to that test was continued faith in God. They needed to resist the impulse of desire and instead adhere to the religious impulse, thereby exercising their patience with God. After telling me the story of \emph{al-Khidr}, Noor summarized her understanding of the text in light of the arson: “Patience helps you, if you have loss in your heart. Losing someone or something you love... any loss... it’s not a loss.”\footnote{Noor, interview with author, 4/19/2014.} Noor’s words indicate her trust that the arson was part of God’s greater plan. Through that trust, she emphasized, it is possible to endure any hardships.

However, Islamic Society members’ words, and al-Ghazali’s counsel, take on new meaning in light of the circumstances faced by Muslim Americans in the twenty-first century. The events of September 11, 2001 instigated years of military engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan that have led to mounting terrorist attacks, primarily at the hands of the Islamic State. Many Americans associate Islam and Muslims with terrorism and brutal violence, and as a consequence, American Muslim communities have been forced to grapple with widespread Islamophobia. Members of the Islamic Society of Joplin likewise must manage daily micro-aggressions, hateful language, and physical violence. When vehement anger or even outwardly exhibited distress may provoke further violence, patience becomes the most prudent response.
Thus, for Islamic Society members, who strove to avoid fueling anti-Muslim agendas, patience was the only option.  

MEMORY AS MISSION

In the face of trauma, “a ‘we’ must be constructed via narrative and coding,” Jeffrey C. Alexander claims. “And it is this collective identity that experiences and confronts the danger.” B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members drew on distinct narratives as they formed collective memories about the arsons. These memories then helped them to contend both with the damage the arsons had caused and with the threat of future danger that the arsons suggested. In constructing their collective memories, both communities turned away from personal memories that made them relive the arsons by reinvigorating the still-powerful emotions associated with the attacks. Communal stories do not erase individuals’ capacity to relive memory, but they do contain those memories and privilege master narratives. In part, it is through their collective memories that communities confront and manage violence.

Thus far, this chapter has discussed the ways in which congregants of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society narrated both their individual and collective versions of their communities’ arsons. Both groups’ descriptions of the hate crimes evinced distinct frameworks through which they remembered and managed the violence against them. While B’nai Israel congregants had recourse to the now-dominant American Jewish memory of the Holocaust, Islamic Society


48 Alexander, Trauma: A Social Theory, 3.
members had no such collective memory of trauma. Cognizant of the tenuous circumstances of being Muslim in twenty-first-century America, they thus turned to teachings that emphasize patience and trust in God. While the distinctions must not be ignored, the parallel effects of such frameworks of memory are significant.

Through the remainder of the chapter, I show that these frameworks not only de-emphasize people’s individual emotional memories but also call on congregants to engage with their communally invoked responsibilities in responding to the arsons. This was not a simple nor an absolute process. Individual adherents’ perspectives transformed gradually and often through not entirely resolved internal struggles. Collective memory did not obliterate the affective impacts of the arsons, but it did reshape them and ascribe to them meaning.

*Cultivating the Patient Self*

After the arson, many Islamic Society members pushed their fear and anxiety to the side to discern where to hold their services, whether to rent a temporary place to pray, whether and where to rebuild their mosque. However, a few people in the community chose to leave, while other Muslims who had been planning to move to Joplin changed their plans. Noor explained that it was too much for people. She lamented, “One year was the tornado, the next it was our masjid.” Each of these events was “a test from God.” “We are always being tested,” she told me. They’re tests of “patience, acceptance, not to be frustrated... just to be happy with what you have.” Taking on a didactic tone, she explained further, “Maybe I am a sinner, and this must be

49 Noor, interview with author, 4/19/2014.
cleansing, or maybe I am a good person, and more patience gives me more rewards.” But in Islam, she said: “Everything has a reward or punishment. Everything has consequences.”

Through this articulation of the mosque-burning, Noor revealed a theodicy consistent among Islamic Society members. “Nothing can happen that God will not let that happen,” said Farooq, a pulmonary and critical-care specialist. “It’s not like God did it, but God knows the future, okay? [...] It’s nothing we could have done to prevent it.” His words make clear that he feels that God allowed the mosque to be attacked. But why? Why would God want the Islamic Society to experience the destruction of mosque? Islamic Society members struggled both with the loss of their masjid and with understanding the divine reason for its demolition. Many community members emphasized that the loss was an intentional test from God, but if so, what was the desired outcome?

“Everything has a reward or punishment,” as Noor said. “Everything has consequences.” Likewise, Farooq expressed that, “after each calamity, there will be a period where you will get the compensation for that.” These responses express not only faith in God’s intentions but also faith in God’s justice. God’s justice becomes especially important given that, for over a year, the mosque arson was not named as an arson. Rather, government officials declared it a suspicious fire. Moreover, the arsonist was not apprehended until October 2013, and he has yet to be charged and tried. With no assurance of justice through the American legal system, Islamic Society members turn to God. As Imam Lahmuddin said, “God knows who did it,” and one day, when that person dies, he will be accountable to God. In this view, God would mete out justice

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50 Ibid.
51 Farooq, interview with author, 7/14/2015.
52 Imam Lahmuddin, interview with author, 4/16/2014.
to the arsonist, regardless of authorities’ discovery of a perpetrator or of the local court’s retributions.

However, while God would judge the criminal, Islamic Society members also regarded the arson as an opportunity for God to appraise the quality of their belief and content of their character. Noor’s statement that “maybe I am a sinner, and this must be cleansing, or maybe I am a good person, and more patience gives me more rewards” indicates that the arson opened all involved to the potential of rewards. The criminal (“maybe I am a sinner…”) could reap rewards through repentance, while the Muslim community (“maybe I am a good person…”) could gain rewards through the practice of acceptance and patience.

Community members framed the arson as their chance to improve themselves and to earn rewards for their personal growth. Rather than responding with anger or being frozen by paralyzing sadness, Islamic Society members saw the arson as a catalyst for self-refashioning. It was an event that necessitated practicing individual reflection and self-advancement. Congregants also spoke about the arson as a reminder from God that in every element of life, they should be preparing for death. This perspective offers Islamic Society members a way to think about how to live their lives. Noor mentioned that, in part, God’s test addresses “acceptance.” 53 Acceptance involves trusting God’s actions and intentions as well as acknowledging human mortality and its implications for human lives on earth.

“God led us here,” Imam Lahmuddin emphasized. 54 He explained that God puts people in particular places, at particular times, to undergo particular experiences so that they have the

53 Noor, interview with author, 4/19/2014.
54 Imam Lahmuddin, interview with author, 4/16/2014.
opportunity to do good deeds. “We don’t have to search for them [the opportunities],” he said. “They’re right here in front of us.” When people endure suffering through obedience to the religious impulse, people receive rewards after life. Thus, when Islamic Society members stood before their burning mosque, they had two options: give in to the impulse of desire, respond rashly, and face punishment either from God or from other people or abide by the religious impulse and receive rewards.

Al-Ghazali notes that, “Patience with the harm [done] by men is among the highest grades of patience, for in it are combined both the religious impulse and the impulses for desire and wrath.” In this circumstance, in which another human being committed an act of violence against the Islamic Society, choosing patience designated the Muslims of Joplin as particularly worthy of reward. Despite the shock and emotionality of the situation, people took the arson in stride. They chose composure. As Imam Lahmuddin explained:

Religion tells us we need to prepare for death. All we do in this life relates to what happens in the next life. We have to watch the things we say, do, and think, in preparation for death... When you die, you die only with yourself. [...] The angel descends and starts questioning you, not about what you own but about what you’ve done in your life, about your submission to God, about your actions.

Reflected in these words are emphases on the religious impulse, on patience, on self. By regarding everything in life as heading toward death, Imam Lahmuddin underscored that what matters in this life are each person’s actions, each person’s answers to the tests from God. Members of the Islamic Society considered the arson a test from God; obeying the religious impulse by exercising patience, they passed the test, receiving rewards in the next life. This

55 Al-Ghazali, On Patience and Thankfulness, 40.
56 Imam Lahmuddin, interview with author, 4/16/2014.
stance not only shaped their memories of the arson and informed their reactions to it. It was also an important instruction for how to live as a Muslim in contemporary America: to maintain calm and to find ways to develop their relationships to their communities. Framed as a test of patience, memories of the arson became a means for cultivating the self, through a collective outlook and personal actions.

Imam Lahmuddin told me that he frequently contemplated why God wants people to be here on Earth, enduring all of the trials, the pain, the anger, the sorrow that humans confront daily. His thoughts always lead back to the same conclusion, he said: “God loves you, that’s why He gives you a test.”\footnote{Ibid.} Because God loves people, God gives them tests — and thus gives them the opportunity to develop themselves, growing through times of tribulation. The violence against their masjid was a difficult circumstance set before them by God, to remind them to maintain composure to remain safe in this life and to receive rewards in the next.

Rebuilding Bigger and Better

Within the first five minutes of my conversation with former journalist Sherrie, she pronounced with certainty: “The Holocaust is something I think about every day. It’s just a responsibility for me.” A child of two Holocaust survivors, Sherrie grew up attending a Conservative synagogue, studying at Sunday school, learning Hebrew. But her experiences were fraught. She told me she remembered sitting in synagogue on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, as a young adult, thinking, “What do I have to repent for after what happened to

\footnote{Ibid.}
everything, to my family?” She admitted, “I was mad at God for a while.”58 One of the many members of B’nai Israel to bring up the Holocaust in our conversation about the arson, she was one of the few to mention her relationship with God.

Both B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society drew upon their collective memories in the course of discerning their responses to the arsons. Islamic Society members in part turned to Islamic teachings to understand their action: the call for patience. But what kind of guidance, then, did B’nai Israel congregants cull from their collective memory? In what ways do collective Jewish American memories of the Holocaust shape B’nai Israel members’ responses to the arson? B’nai Israel members read the arson as the broader Jewish American imagination reads the Holocaust: a call to remember. It is seen as a call to “never forget” the anti-Semitism, persecution, and violence of Jewish history.

Despite Sherrie’s troubled feelings about Judaism, she and her husband decided to raise their children at B’nai Israel when they moved to Sacramento. She recounted her earliest memory at the synagogue, sitting in the sanctuary listening to the music of the prayers, with her then-three-month-old daughter sleeping in her arms. Through her children’s joys at B’nai Israel, she said, she was able to find an enjoyment of Judaism that she had not previously found. In a voice heavy with emotion, she said, “I’m very proud of my heritage, but it’s been a real struggle for me to... enjoy the pride of being Jewish without the fear being there.”59 The Holocaust haunted Sherrie. Although she did not directly suffer through the Holocaust, her parents’

58 Sherrie, interview with author, 2/11/2014.
59 Ibid.
experiences weighed on her and plagued her feelings about Judaism. For Sherrie, being Jewish meant being fearful – and legitimately so.

On the morning of the arson, Sherrie received a phone call from a journalist friend who told her, “Your temple’s on fire.” Immediately, she said, she hopped on her bike and rode across Land Park, arriving to see flames and smoke coming from her synagogue. “It was just surreal for me,” she said so softly that I could barely hear her across the table from me. “I think really, just being the child of Holocaust survivors, [I thought], ‘It would never happen here…’” She recalled being approached by a local television reporter who asked if she was a member of the temple, and then what her reaction was. She responded without hesitation, telling the reporter: “You know, my parents are Holocaust survivors, and we’ve been through a lot, so we’re going to be fine.” Thinking back, she nodded, reaffirming herself. “We're going to get through this just fine.”

Sherrie’s narration of the arson settles out into fine layers: the unreality of the scene, the recognition of fear realized, the surprise and sadness of the attack, and the equally surprising but entirely certain statement to the reporter that they would be fine. The sense of alarm that rested at her core had reason to surface. And yet, her sense of dismay paired with feelings of confidence and strength. Despite her commingling, shifting emotions, Sherrie helped wherever and however she could. She collected remnants of library books, took pictures of the aftermath, directed fellow journalists to the best camera shots for the news. And she herself reported a story for the Law Enforcement television network. Using the money from that freelance job, Sherrie gathered

60 Ibid.
local Holocaust survivors and children of survivors for a dinner, which she named “From Generation to Generation.”

Sherrie is one among many in the community who moved from fear to resolve. Congregants routinely expressed the need to remember the arson as they remember the Holocaust, as part of a continuum of Jewish persecution. However, they were bound not only to remember the violence but also to persist in their commitment to Judaism. “From Generation to Generation,” the name of Sherrie’s dinner, implies both a collective history of persecution and the impulse to continue regardless. In framing their memories of the arson through those of the Holocaust, B’nai Israel members placed themselves within a longer trajectory of Jews dedicated to moving forward despite every aim to obstruct or obliterate them. In so doing, B’nai Israel reiterated its place in the broader American Jewish community.

On Forgetting

Both communities’ frameworks of collective memory suggest possible responses to the arsons, ways of reacting to the violence and making sense of it. However, these narratives are saddled with mixed emotions. Many B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members struggled to subdue their personal, sensorial memories in favor of more-streamlined collective memories. Several Islamic Society members confided that they sometimes fail to manage their negative feelings. Active anxieties and latent sorrow complicate their ability to focus on practicing patience. In direct contrast to some Islamic Society members’ continuing worries, there are certain B’nai Israel congregants for whom the arson was simply never a significant concern.

Rida and her daughter Salma are among the Islamic Society members who shared with me that they continue to feel hurt, worried, and angry. “As years pass, you really feel the loss,”
Rida said. “I try to be a positive person, but it hurts.” Salma, Umar’s and Rida’s younger daughter and a politically active college undergraduate, expressed a different feeling. “It just riles me up!” she exclaimed. “I think about it [the arson] sometimes, and it really angers me and frustrates me.” She was particularly upset that the Islamic Society had experienced several hate crimes before the arson but that no one had, in her words, “fixed” it. She remembered thinking, “I can’t believe this happened on like, so many separate occasions.” She expanded on her thought process for me. “You know,” she said, “we could have seen this coming.”

With these words, Rida and Salma indicate a struggle that other Islamic Society members may share but did not feel comfortable expressing aloud. Emotional responses like pain, sorrow, anger, and fear seem to be held in tension with the practice of patience and composure. The appropriate action was to practice patience, not to dwell on the arson. Rida was emphatic that the arson not be relived every year, giving me the example of the Shi’a tradition of memorializing the death of Hussein, a descendent of the prophet Muhammad, through annual ritual performance. Instead, she said, the community should remember the arson as a positive thing, a time where “we moved on and rebuilt.” Rida’s perspective was one that other Islamic Society members, including her daughter Salma, also expressed.

“Now that we have a new mosque, I think it’s easier to put it in perspective.” Salma explained. I asked her to specify the “it.” “I guess the hatred about [the arson],” she said. “What I guess I mean is… If I always wanna think about it that way [angrily], I will never be happy with

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61 Rida, interview with author, 2/18/2014.
62 Salma, interview with author, 7/13/2015.
63 Ibid.
64 Rida, interview with author, 2/18/2014.
my family living here.” Salma acknowledged that she had to suppress her anger and frustration in order to find a way to continue living in Joplin. “I have to try and look at the positive side of it; otherwise it would really just get me down,” she said. Salma’s words gesture toward the other side of Islamic Society members’ emphasis on patience. Salma was inclined to feel angry, but she realistically understands the limited possibility of resolving the circumstances that prompted her anger. She saw positivity as the only way forward.

In remembering the loss of their masjid to the arson, most Islamic Society members focused on the many blessings of patience and on their own trust in God. But others continued to grapple with the strong residual emotions of the attack. Rida and Salma are two examples of those who outwardly expressed the tension between the lingering negative feelings and the need to cope in order to keep living in Joplin. A number of Islamic Society members endeavored to make the best of a bad situation. Rida, and many others, said that in a way the arsonist “did us a favor” because the Islamic Society has since moved to a better location and a better building. Her statement does not legitimize the perpetrator’s crime but instead reveals an effort to highlight the positive outcomes of the attack.

In direct contrast to Islamic Society members like Rida and Salma, who expressed continuing anger and pain, some B’nai Israel congregants communicated that the arson had never left them feeling unsettled or upset. One such person was Bernie Marks, a B’nai Israel member and a survivor of the Holocaust. Interestingly, he was one of the few community members who

65 Salma, interview with author, 7/13/2015.
66 Rida, interview with author, 2/18/2014.
67 Bernie Marks’ name is not a pseudonym, as he is a renowned public figure.
did not invoke the Holocaust in telling me about the arson. And it soon became clear that Bernie did not struggle to move on from the pain and power of the arson because he did not experience the arson as painful or powerful.

Bernie and I discussed his autobiography while hunched over the evening cups of tea he had carefully and ceremoniously prepared: peppermint for myself, strong black tea for him. Surrounded by piles of papers, in-progress projects, plaques designating awards he had received, and photographs upon photographs, I listened to him recount the well-honed narrative of his past. Born in Poland in 1931, he was transferred between numerous camps in Poland and Germany before arriving in the United States in 1947 under the care of the National Jewish Welfare Board. He lived in the Bronx briefly, then requested a move to Kansas City, lured by visions of cowboys, Indians, and gutters of gold portrayed in *High Noon*, starring Gary Cooper. Resettled in the Midwest, Bernie lived with a *shochet* (a kosher butcher) as his foster father; he recalled hearing the *thwack* of chicken heads being cut off as he worked on his applications to medical schools. Unfortunately, the Jewish quota at American medical schools were already filled, and he switched to engineering, entering the field after tours of duty with the military in Germany, Japan, and Korea. He met his wife at the Jewish community center in Kansas City and moved to Sacramento when he was offered a job in the area.68

Bernie’s story descriptively catalogued his life in the United States after the war but skipped over his years interned in Eastern Europe. And yet his experiences of World War Two feature centrally in his present-day life. He teaches classes on the Holocaust at community colleges and lectures on the Holocaust at schools across the country and around the world. He

68 Bernie Marks, interview with author, 2/9/2014.
trains the tour guides at Dachau, and he leads Holocaust tours through Europe. He created a Holocaust memorial foundation, which runs an annual international essay contest for children. Although he was eighty-three years old at the time of our conversation in 2014, he told me he rarely goes to bed before two in the morning (as evidenced in his nightly cups of strongly brewed black tea). He leads a full and busy life in which he sustains the Holocaust as a living memory.

From the vibrant, colorful, and detailed way that Bernie recounted his personal history to me, it seemed that his life began after the Holocaust — and yet his current everyday involves active remembrance of it. Given the imposing stature of the Holocaust in his life, I was especially curious as to how he would respond to my questions about his experiences with hate crimes in America and about his memories of the arson at B’nai Israel. Of the former, he described an incident from roughly three years prior, when he found the word “Jew” carved into the hood of one of his vintage 1950s Jaguars. He said he wasn’t necessarily agitated by the crime itself as much as he was frustrated by the response from the police, who told him to go online and file a report. With regard to the 1999 arson, his main concerns were for the sanctuary, the Torah, and the synagogue’s historical documents. But, he said, the sanctuary was fine. The Torah were saved. Anyway, “it’s only physical damage to begin with,” he said.69

Bernie’s relative disregard for these American hate crimes is both perplexing and understandable. Initially, I was surprised that the vandalism and arson did not raise a red flag for someone who had lived through the Holocaust. I thought that these hate crimes would remind Bernie of the years preceding the containment and murder of the Jewish populations of Europe, the years during which Jewish stores were vandalized and looted and synagogues were burned.

69 Ibid.
However, because Bernie’s youth was consumed by the extreme genocidal violence of the Holocaust, it makes sense that he diminished violence against property. Though the arsons affected B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society, the violence was undoubtedly easier to manage because it was violence against material objects, not against people. No one was hurt or killed. As members of both religious communities pointed out to me, the loss of books and buildings pales in comparison to the loss of human lives.  

A story Sherrie told me affirms this radical difference between the memories of most B’nai Israel congregants and those of the Holocaust survivors in the community. In taking an active role in media and service after the arson, Sherrie gained the attention of local newspapers. She was in the midst of preparing to leave for a family vacation to Oregon when the FBI called, asking her to come down to their Sacramento headquarters. There was a new development in the arson case. She recalled the fear of having no idea what was happening and the sense of alarm she felt when the FBI agent informed her and a small group of other people that they were on the perpetrators’ hit list. She was a target. Although the FBI assured Sherrie and the other people named on the list that they would have personal protection from the local police at their homes, she was still ill at ease after the meeting. A Holocaust-survivor friend noticed, she said. She imitated his clunky Polish accent for me, smiling as she repeated his comforting words to her: “Don’t be afraid. The police are on our side this time.”  

The name Sherrie chose for the dinner she organized after the fire denotes an important distinction in responses to the 1999 B’nai Israel arson: “From Generation to Generation.”

70 Interviews with various members of both communities.
Although Sherrie had worked to suppress her childhood fears of Judaism, the arson resurrected the underlying disquietude of being Jewish. Whereas Sherrie experienced the arson as a shocking reminder of the Holocaust’s continued presence in the world, her Holocaust-survivor friend and Bernie both emphasized the distinctions between the arson and the Holocaust. In sobering juxtaposition to the murders of the Holocaust, the arson had caused only material damages. And while the German police had been complicit in the violence of World War Two, Sacramento law enforcement was highly responsive to the needs of the quite-politically involved B’nai Israel community. They actively investigated the perpetrators and helped congregants to feel secure and protected. Authorities in Sacramento were present to help, not hurt, the Jewish community.

These stories reveal discrepancies in the communities’ narratives of the arsons. Taken together, they exhibit generational shifts and perspectival differences. Though many B’nai Israel members turned to the Jewish American memory of the Holocaust to make sense of the arson, Bernie did not. The Holocaust had become an essentialized moment of anti-Semitism, but for Bernie, it was a moment in history, distinct from other acts of anti-Semitic violence, including the arson. For Holocaust survivors, the arson was an unfortunate loss. But for many B’nai Israel members, it was a shocking act of anti-Semitism that disrupted the relative calm of their Sacramento lives.

**REWRITING THE NARRATIVE**

B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society cultivated distinct collective memories of the arsons. These collective memories shaped their understandings of the violence committed against them. Moreover, the frameworks of these memories suggested modes of responding to the arsons and of moving on from them. By recalling their arsons through the American Jewish script of the
Holocaust, B’nai Israel members vowed never to forget. Remembering, they conveyed, would strengthen their own Judaism and encourage them to empathize with and aid others affected by violence. Islamic Society members, on the other hand, remembered the arson as a test of their patience and a prompt to practice composed resolve. Though both communities had been helpless to the violence again them, they regained a semblance of control through the processes of constructing collective memories.

Despite discussing the arson in relation to the Holocaust, Nazis, and the anti-Semitism of the mid-twentieth century, B’nai Israel members rarely used the word “victim.” Those who spoke about victimhood did so explicitly to insist upon the need not to act as or be seen as victims. Lisa, a former B’nai Israel president and a State Superior Court judge active in the creation of a local Hate Crimes Task Force, repeatedly told me that she and other community members were deeply concerned that the Sacramento Jews not adopt a victim mentality. “There was this issue of rebuilding, coming back stronger and better but not making ourselves a public victim,” she said. “That was the tension. In other words, I was always concerned that we didn’t appear, sort of, ‘Woe is me; we need help from everybody in the world.’” Lisa made very clear the importance of actively confronting and dissipating images of the Sacramento Jewish community as victims. She also directly connected this sentiment with the need to exhibit fortitude in the face of adversity.

Lisa’s message is characteristic of those conveyed by other B’nai Israel members. B’nai Israel congregants are largely upper-middle class and highly educated, and many are involved in politics. They hold positions at city and state levels, as senators, councilmen, judges, and

72 Lisa, interview with author, 2/20/2014.
lawyers. Knowing that their reactions to the arson would be highly publicized, they underscored the need to demonstrate their fortitude as a Jewish community. As previously discussed, they would do so by reconstructing their religious place to show “the world” that they would not be defeated. Rabbi Michal Loving, a previous assistant rabbi for B’nai Israel, explained that rebuilding the synagogue bigger and better demonstrably asserted that they would not capitulate to violence. “There’s such pride in ownership in it [the synagogue], because it wasn’t just rebuilding because the building was old,” she said. “It was rebuilding because someone tied to destroy us, and in that, we became stronger as a community.”

Unlike B’nai Israel members, Islamic Society members were aware of their own vulnerable position as Muslims living in homogeneously white and politically conservative Joplin. They understood that the hate crime was part of being a religious and racial minority in this particular town in the southern Midwest. As Salma said, it was “just part of a broader pattern of people who aren’t white or Christian trying to live in Joplin, Missouri.” To some extent, they felt that the hate crime was an inevitability. While people like Salma understood this primarily within a socio-political frame, other Islamic Society members came to terms with the violence by reminding themselves that everything, not just the arson, is beyond their control.

Though at first it may seem antithetical, Islamic Society members regained control by surrendering themselves and their lives to Allah. Framing the arson as a test from God reminded them of the limits of their own control over any situation. Interestingly, most people noted that

73 As the Capital Campaign study read: “As the oldest synagogue west of the Mississippi and with the Jewish world watching for its reaction to the firebombing, CBI is clearly at another of its critical and historic crossroads.” CBI Campaign Planning and Feasibility Study, 4, B’nai Israel archives.
74 Rabbi Michal Loving, interview with author, 2/19/2014. Her name is not a pseudonym, as she is a public figure.
75 Salma, interview with author, 7/13/2015.
God’s test of the arson arrived at a difficult time, during the holy month of Ramadan when Muslims fast from dawn to sunset and natural impulses toward hunger, anger, impatience, and frustration are already heightened. As Imam Lahmuddin told me, “Ramadan is always a test of our patience, a time to manage our hunger, our anger.” He was actually thankful, he said, that of all the times the arson could have happened, the mosque was destroyed during Ramadan. It was occasion for him and for the rest of his community to work to reach higher levels of patience in a trying time.

Imam Lahmuddin employed a teaching metaphor to explain his thought process further. If a teacher is working with a student who is in middle school, the teacher does not give the student a test as though he is an undergraduate in college, the imam explained. The teacher gives the student a test for a middle schooler. In other words, “God gives you a test according to your ability to deal with that test.” God presented the Islamic Society with the arson of the mosque during Ramadan because God knew that the community could manage the test, that people could pass it. “You have the ability; you are capable,” Imam Lahmuddin told the members of the community. But they did not do it without some help. “Thank God, everyone was calm, and God helped us to move forward,” he said to me. “Being patient is part of our obligation.”

The arson became additional cause for members of the community to practice personal reflection during the already-trying month of Ramadan. During this time, the imam implied, God served as the community’s helper and guide in persevering in the face of violence. Community members likewise underscored their trust in God and God’s plan, whether God’s plan was for the

76 Imam Lahmuddin, interview with author, 4/16/2014.
77 Ibid.
community to build a better mosque or for God to mete out justice to the criminal. A number of people told me that they didn’t pay attention to what happened to the arsonist, whether he went to trial, how he was punished. “God doesn't want us to focus on that,” Joanna said. “So we didn’t.” She had trouble understanding how someone could do this to the Muslim community, but, she said, Islamic Society members decided early on that they were not going to focus on any kind of revenge. “Even when news-people would say, ‘What do you hope happens?’ or, ‘If they catch this person, what do you think [should happen to him]?’ and we would always say, ‘It’s up to God, just let God decide that.’”78 While people expected Islamic Society members to harbor negative feelings and to react with anger and vindictiveness, they instead restrained their emotions and exhibited patience, in a savvy political move grounded in Islamic teachings.

It was the imam who led his community in remembering to surrender control to God. He told me that he sees his function as helping people to bring God into their daily lives, in their thoughts and actions. “We don’t get mad at people,” he underlined. “God knows who did it.” He added: “We shouldn't take revenge… Each takes care of his own responsibility.”79 Someday, he explained, the person who committed the arson would die and be accountable to God. Likewise, each person in the community needed to heed that thought: that each of them would one day die and then stand before God.80 Imam Lahmuddin was far more concerned with the actions of his community than with the repercussions for the perpetrator. After the arson, when many were

79 Imam Lahmuddin, interview with author, 4/16/2014.
80 This perspective parallels that of al-Ghazali. The philosopher wrote that, “The true blessing is the happiness of the Hereafter.” In his view, everything that leads to the true blessing of the next life is a “sound and true blessing, because it leads to the real blessing.” Otherwise put, all human lives should aim toward their death, which is the paramount blessing. Al-Ghazali, On Patience and Thankfulness, 121.
angry, fearful, and worried, the imam counseled them, saying: “You can’t control people. You are here, and you have your own mission. God led you to be here.” In this way, he reminded people of their limitations and urged them to concentrate on their own lives.

Ultimately, the imam’s appeal to trust God with an ultimate plan seemed to encourage community members to focus on themselves and the way forward. Many Islamic Society members articulated the arson as a time for them to demonstrate their faith in God, to resist the power of strong negative emotions, and to retaliate not with rage but with equanimity and strength of character. Rather than responding with anger or fear, they practiced patience. They described the arson as a moment of difficulty in which they experienced hostility and responded with the self-restraint necessary for countering rather than furthering anti-Muslim sentiments.

**Never Forget**

Through their particular frameworks of collective memory, both communities found new ways in which to understand the arsons. These memories underscored their responsibilities to respond not only in thoughts but also in actions. In detailing their memories of the hate crimes, members of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society emphasized a call to community engagement. B’nai Israel congregants felt that they needed to remember the arson both as a part of a shared American Jewish experience and as an experience that linked them to other minorities’ experiences, and even to large-scale global atrocities. As such, they were obligated to remember so that they could empathize with others and perhaps play a role in preventing future violence.

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81 Imam Lahmuddin, interview with author, 4/16/2014.
Jeanne, a therapist and self-described “Jewish spiritual director,” and Eric, a state worker for the Department of Housing, raised their children in the Sacramento suburb of Elk Grove, a predominantly white, Christian neighborhood about a thirty-minute drive from Land Park and B’nai Israel. When the synagogue was attacked, they told me, their children were deeply angered and sad. However, they worked with their children to transform those profound emotions into a reinvigorated commitment to Judaism and a greater sensitivity for others. They were particularly proud of their son’s instrumental role in creating a Jewish Student Union and a Muslim Student Union at the local high school. Jeanne and Eric emphasized that the best thing that could come out of the arson would be that children are taught not to hate, that they learn to stand with those who are targets, that they stand up for justice, equality, and tolerance. For Jeanne, Eric, and their children, being Jewish and experiencing the 1999 arson meant understanding intimately what it means to be a minority.82

Members of B’nai Israel saw the arson, like the Holocaust, as a reminder that they are hated because they are Jews. For many, the arson also connected their Jewish community to other minority communities who suffer violence at the hands of the majority. Demographically, Jews are still a minority group in the United States. Moreover, the FBI reports that American Jews are still the community most subject to hate crimes.83 And yet, American Jews in general, and B’nai Israel in particular, tend to be white, upper-middle class, educated, and typically

82 Jeanne and Eric, interview with author, 6/10/2014.

accepted as American.\textsuperscript{84} That some B’nai Israel members saw the arson as representative of a
generalized hatred of difference, as an experience that they shared with other minority
communities, overlooks the particularity of difference.\textsuperscript{85} B’nai Israel members assumed that their
experience of being attacked linked them to other minority communities’ experiences. In
response, they aimed to confront directly the hatred of any and all abject Others.\textsuperscript{86}

In supporting his Muslim high school friends, Jeanne’s and Eric’s son heeded the call to
social responsibility on a local level. But many members of B’nai Israel equated the arson and
the Holocaust with other acts of global evil and subsequently identified their social responsibility
to think of and aid all those around the world who are subject to hatred and cruelty. As I
concluded my interview with Lisa, I asked if she would want her eighteen-month-old
granddaughter to know about the arson later in life. Speaking clearly and loudly over the mid-
morning noise of the cafe, she looked me in the eyes and replied without pause:

I want everybody to know about it [the arson]. In the same way we want everybody to
know about the Holocaust or ethnic cleansing or Armenia, or what’s going on in Syria.
We want to educate our children to know all of these things... because history \textit{will} repeat
itself. It will. And if not in this context, in some other context. If not with Jews, then with
somebody else. So, yes.\textsuperscript{87}

Linking the B’nai Israel arson to centuries of global tragedy, Lisa called for remembrance and
learning. Moreover, she transformed the arson, the Holocaust, and other varieties of human
destruction into ethical lessons.

\textsuperscript{85} Chapter four and the conclusion examine at greater length the management of difference and diversity.
\textsuperscript{87} Lisa, interview with author, 2/20/2014.
Congregants of B’nai Israel emphasized the need to know about the arson in the same way that people need to know about the Holocaust and other atrocities committed against mankind. The Holocaust became a metonym for universal evil. By referencing the Holocaust and other atrocities, they linked their experience to other profound forms of violence and framed their encounter with anti-Semitism as an abstracted, universalized encounter with oppression and cruelty, a lack of tolerance and a fomentation of hatred. By the late twentieth century, the Holocaust had become a sort of moral compass in a lost world. The take-home message was simple: “Tolerance and diversity were good, hate was bad, the overall rubric was ‘man’s inhumanity to man.’”

The key to preventing another Holocaust was to inhabit fully the commitment to diversity and tolerance, values seen as exceptionally American ones. Where the Holocaust was brutally totalitarian, oppressive, and beyond discriminatory toward minorities, America was democratic, equal, free, and diverse.

This patently false binary between the horrors of the Holocaust and the freedom of America did not enter into B’nai Israel members’ explanations of their social-justice stance. Instead, they saw the injunction to “Never Forget” as an expansive directive. It applied to Jews to hold to their communal persecution narrative and to Americans to reinforce the values that they see as rendering them globally exceptional among global citizens. Moreover, B’nai Israel members integrated the instruction to “Never Forget” into the Jewish obligation toward tikkun olam, the repairing of the world. As Lisa said, “We want to educate our children… because

88 Novick, 259.

89 Young writes, “In being defined as the ultimate violation of America’s Bill of Rights and as the persecution of plural groups, the Holocaust encompasses all the reasons immigrants – past, present, and future – ever had for seeking refuge in America.” Young, 336.
history will repeat itself.” Following this logic, it is only through remembering events like the Holocaust and the arson that future violence may be prevented.

For B’nai Israel, remembering the arson is as important as remembering the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, the Armenian genocide, the Syrian civil war. Remembering leads to understanding, which leads to prevention. Susan, a former president of the synagogue’s sisterhood and the current manager of the synagogue gift shop, framed the arson as a lesson in tsedakah:

I think it’s important that when we teach our children [about the arson, about the Holocaust], we teach them about how other people stood up for us and how generous people were. With tsedakah, it’s important to teach them […] to stand up for each other. That’s even more important, to see what the positive side was, instead of [to] wallow and pity over the sadness of it.90

Susan reformulated the arson and the Holocaust as events of pain and tragedy in which righteous people emerged. Thinking of those individuals, she envisioned a better world, one whose broken pieces have been put back together. “Social justice is very much rooted [in B’nai Israel], and we can make a difference,” Rabbi Loving told me. “If this happened to us, it’s going to happen to other people, and therefore we need to help them even more. […] How many potential lawyers were created because of the arson?”91

Lisa, Susan, Rabbi Loving, and numerous other B’nai Israel congregants encouraged the reconfiguration of the arson into educational opportunities in the pursuit of a kinder world. Indeed, B’nai Israel is a congregation that prioritizes social justice, with an expansive network of “social action” opportunities and a newly formed “Racial Justice Committee.” B’nai Israel

90 Tzedakah can be roughly translated as “charity” but might be better articulated as broader contributions to society. Dave and Susan, interview with author, 2/19/2014.

91 Rabbi Loving, interview with author, 2/19/2014.
members see their congregation as one that is deeply invested in its city and its citizens. They thus fulfill their commitment to the Hebrew commandment zakhor, “remember,” by remembering in order to act.\(^\text{92}\) By sustaining memories of the arson, as with memories of the Holocaust, they demonstrate their commitment to the Jewish commandment of tikkun olam, the restoration of the world.

*Ten Other Doors*

While B’nai Israel congregants’ memories of the arsons guided them to “make the world a better place,” Islamic Society members’ collective-memory framework reminded them to compose themselves well in their ordinary everyday interactions with other people. Moreover, remembering to practice patience also encouraged Islamic Society members to look for the good in a difficult situation. They expressed that, by submitting to God and trusting in God’s plans, they were certain that the arson would prove itself to have unexpectedly positive outcomes. Many did not know immediately what those outcomes would be, but they trusted that good would come from the bad.

After the arson, Rabia, a convenience-store owner, searched for a way to dissolve her fear while rebuilding her sense of security. The arson had taken away her sense of community, her friendships, her family away from family. Striving to reconnect to her community and reestablish her sense of place, she also had to speak with her two boys, then ages thirteen and ten, to help them deal with their loss. “I always told them, you can’t be angry at others,” she said. “It’s that

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\(^{92}\) The Hebrew Bible issues this command no fewer than 169 times. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 5.
one single person’s act, and you cannot punish anybody else.” She continued, “If they grow up with this [prejudice and violence], then they have to be strong, and they have to show the difference between right and wrong.” Rabia took the arson as a reminder that she and her children will have to deal with intolerance and perhaps violence. However, she made a point to counsel them to react with respect and care, a response that speaks to Muslim Americans’ cautiousness in interacting with non-Muslim Americans. She urged her children to respond sensibly and carefully to the arson and to any future instances of feeling or being targeted.

While many Islamic Society members took the arson as an opportunity to teach their children about how to react to an increasingly Islamophobic society, others insisted that “something good will come out of this.” As Joanna said, “This happened for a reason, and something good will come of it.” Her sentiment was a widely shared one. Almost uniformly, members of the Islamic Society told me that the attack was “a blessing in disguise.” They spoke of God closing one door and opening another. It changed them for the better, they said.

“It happened – bad things happened,” Rabia said. “But I’m a firm believer that there is always good out of bad; God closes one door and opens another.” She told me that the arson resulted in increased interfaith work among local churches, the local synagogue, and the mosque. It also prompted people around Joplin to learn about other people, which she considered a much-needed shift. The attack actually “brought a lot of good out of the community,” she said.

93 Rabia, interview with author, 5/1/2014.
95 Rabia, interview with author, 5/1/2014.
96 The next chapter looks more extensively both at interfaith activities in Joplin after the arson and at the idea of learning more about each other.
Christians and Muslims and Jews learned about each other, she repeated. The arson brought people closer together. “The act of one person, such an evil act, brought so much goodness out of others,” she added. “Maybe that’s what God intended.”

Out of one negative action came a surge of support and love from the greater Joplin community, at least for a time. The Islamic Society received aid from Muslim communities across the country and around the world. Many participants pointed to loss of their mosque as an occasion to build a new, bigger, better mosque – and a purpose-built mosque at that. After the arson, Islamic Society members endeavored to highlight any and all positive outcomes of their loss. They emphasized that it offered the chance to connect with their fellow citizens, to reengage in interfaith dialogues and activities, to resituate themselves more centrally in Joplin. And as Noor said, it served as a reminder “just to be happy with what you have.”

Haneen is a Sunday school teacher and active Islamic Society member known for her cooking and baked goods, as well as her special Pakistani chai. Before settling in to speak with me, she spooned crushed pistachios into my pink chai and sprinkled salt into her own. “[The arson] changed us for the better,” she said. “We have been more closer.” “The Islamic Society?” I asked her. She shook her head – the whole Joplin community. “People got to know us more, and we got to know them more,” she explained. It was a time to build bridges between each other after the arson. The arson made the Muslim community feel “insecure,” she said, but people

97 Rabia, interview with author, 5/1/2014.
98 This was a view likewise shared by many in the B’nai Israel community. However, they had already been planning to renovate the sanctuary, library, etc. before the arson occurred. The arson afforded them a minimal payment from the insurance company, but otherwise they had to conduct the Capital Campaign originally planned in order to undertake the desired architectural and design updates.
99 Noor, interview with author, 4/19/2014.
reached out and “something so beautiful has come out of it.” She continued: “Every tragedy that happens comes along with something good. If God closes one door, He opens ten other doors. A hundred other doors.”

Haneen pronounced a shared perspective among Islamic Society members, that everything happens only with God’s permission and that God’s intentions are always good. “Things happen that you don’t have control on,” she told me. “You just move on and be strong and take good things out of it.” “How do you find the good things?” I asked her. “You don’t really have to look for it,” she answered. “You just have to see it.”

With few other options, Islamic Society members chose to see the arson as an opportunity. Despite lingering feelings of anger, hurt, and helplessness, they framed the act of violence as an event that propelled them toward the practice of patience and internal reflection and that reinforced their active trust in God. Finally, members construed the attack as an instance of coming together with their neighbors in Joplin. The collective memory that Islamic Society members created around the arson is a story of personal growth, community cohesion, and opportunity. But it is also a story that overwrites their lived realities and masks the emotions (including anger about past violence and continued fears of potential violence) of being Muslim in twenty-first-century America.

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100 Haneen, interview with author, 4/8/2014.
101 Ibid.
THE LANDMARKS WE CARRY

Through cultivating collective narratives of the arsons, members of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society attempted to make sense of the violence committed against them. Collective memory muted individuals’ emotional memories and suggested ways to restore purpose to their lives. While B’nai Israel members drew on pre-established Jewish American memories of the Holocaust to inform their arson narrative, Islamic Society members considered their socio-political circumstances and turned to Islamic teachings to frame the arson as a test of their patience, to counsel composure, and to prioritize the good. Both groups culled the resources of their distinct histories and traditions in order construct collective memories, through which community members could process and respond to violence.

“We ask how recollections are to be located,” collective memory scholar Maurice Halbwachs writes. “And we answer: with the help of landmarks that we always carry within ourselves.” Through their particular modes of remembrance, through their collective “landmarks,” Islamic Society and B’nai Israel members layered the arsons with meaning and purpose. The next chapter thus questions the extent to which the arsons affected social action and interfaith efforts among the religious groups and their broader Joplin and Sacramento communities.

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102 Halbwachs, 175.
CHAPTER FOUR

“In the Darkness, There is Light”

After Tahira, one of the Islamic Society’s Sunday school teachers, discussed her personal background and her memories of the Black Cat Road mosque and the arson, I asked her about her thoughts and actions in the weeks after the attack. “Well, I think the kids were really upset, you know, because it was hard for them to understand that, you know, we are American, and we are born here, so how— how can somebody do that?” she said. She continued:

So, I think it was a lot of meeting together, and just, you know, talking with the kids, and just making them understand that, you know, it can happen anywhere, and um, you know… that there are just— It takes only just one or two people, and you know, I mean, it was heartbreaking for every member of the community because it takes so much to build something, and it just took a couple of hours to completely, you know, destroy it.¹

Trained as an educator, Tahira had been one of the Islamic Society’s Sunday school teachers. After the arson, she prioritized working with the children, helping them to make sense of the violence against their community and directing them in their responses to it. Her words acknowledge the affective contradictions of confusion and comprehension, heartbreak and tolerance. She highlighted not only feelings of grief in losing the place they had built but also a shared sense of disillusioned bewilderment in being American and yet set apart as targets.

As previously discussed, the hate crimes forced members of both congregations to re-evaluate their collective religious identities and to reflect on their relationships to their religious praxis, to their fellow congregants, and to their places of worship. But, as I argue in this chapter, the arsons also prompted religious adherents to reassess their understandings of what it means to

¹ Tahira, interview, 7/15/2015.
be American, as well as what American religious pluralism entails. The arsons called attention to B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society; though the attacks themselves did not demarcate the communities as different, they designated Otherness as a weakness. The arsons exposed the vulnerability of being American religious minorities, with religious places susceptible to violence. Such violence denigrates religious difference, making it a problem to be solved. As this chapter shows, the normative panacea is the dual-action prescription of pluralism and unity.² Whereas the arsons vilify difference, pluralism lauds it and unity supersedes it.

In what follows, I examine the ways in which members of Congregation B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society of Joplin remember their local Sacramento and Joplin communities’ responses to the arsons. Members of both religious groups emphasized the overwhelming financial, logistical, and emotional support that they received. While some congregants experienced negative, or less-than-positive, reactions from their neighbors, people largely stressed to me the significance of the donations and other forms of aid given to them. Above all, community members vividly recalled the unity rallies convened after the arsons. They perceived the Sacramento Unity Rally and the Joplin Neighbors Rally as collective local demonstrations of solidarity in standing up against the hate manifest in the arsons.

This chapter also addresses why people especially highlighted their neighbors’ encouraging responses. By choosing to remember the particularly favorable and supportive reactions to the arsons, the members of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society affirmed their own senses of belonging in Sacramento and in Joplin. They also embodied their own beliefs in a

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better — more accepting, peaceful, and unified — America. Notably, the rhetoric around unity and enactments of solidarity after the arsons mirror a long American tradition of prescribed public religious pluralism. The rallies especially demonstrate a national commitment to benign interfaith engagement. In highlighting the discourses and practices of unity, members of both religious communities adopt and reiterate the normative values of American religious pluralism. Moreover, they emphasized their own responsibilities to render their religious traditions widely legible and publicly palatable.

The ways in which members of Congregation B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society of Joplin remember others’ responses to the arsons reveal their own devotions to local and national place, people, and principles. By underscoring the support they received, these religious groups communicated the somatic force of American religious pluralism and unity. Their memories of others’ reactions to the arsons articulate the affective experiences of American religious minorities targeted by hate crimes. In the wake of violence that told victims they did not belong, that implied they were not American, signs of solidarity renewed their faith in American tolerance, pluralism, and unity and emboldened them to work toward a future when American values would be realized fully.

In the course of this chapter, I first examine congregants’ memories of others’ responses to the arsons. To a large extent, these memories are very good ones, the “light” in the darkness of the arsons. Even when some people communicated less-than-positive experiences, they highlighted the positive ones. Through privileging their positive memories, members of both religious groups endeavor to reintegrate themselves into Sacramento and Joplin. The emphasis on unity links B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society to their neighbors, distancing everyone from the arsonists and accentuating communality. The second half of the chapter examines the
religious groups’ subsequent commitments to work toward religious pluralism and unity by helping others understand their religious beliefs and practices, by counteracting media misrepresentations, and by enhancing their interfaith work. Remembering their neighbors’ positive responses to the arsons, B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society reinforce their senses of belonging and unity while also reiterating their own responsibilities to make America the unified pluralistic nation they want it to be.

READING RESPONSES

In reflecting upon their experiences of the arsons, members of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society emphasized how overwhelmed they were by the extensive support of their neighbors in Sacramento and Joplin and by others around the country and world. It was “beautiful,” “amazing,” an “out-pouring,” a “very nice gesture,” “healing,” a “community feeling.” 3 Among both communities, people’s memories of their neighbors’ responses were almost consistently positive. For many, receiving assistance and support after the attacks was the “silver lining” of the violence. While B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members struggled emotionally with the arsons, and other forms of bigotry, they chose to focus on demonstrations of solidarity.

The arson of the B’nai Israel synagogue was both expected and unexpected for its congregants. Though an anticipated element of the universal Jewish experience, it was an unanticipated experience, an anomaly, in late-twentieth-century Sacramento. Thus B’nai Israel members choose to remember the arson as such: an “outlier” to their regular lives in the community. Although a number of congregants admitted that they had experienced forms of anti-

3 Interviews with various people from both communities.
Semitism at other points in their life, they largely expressed a shared feeling that, as Dave (the head of B’nai Israel’s Rebuilding Cabinet) said, “The Jews were not seen as other; we were not seen as a population separate from the rest of Sacramento.” As such, B’nai Israel members experienced the extensive public responses to the arson as reminders that they belong there.

In contrast, Islamic Society members conceded that others’ responses had not been uniformly positive. When I asked them what they remembered of people’s reactions to the arson, they first told me that people’s responses were very good. However, at other points in our conversations, they shared that they regularly heard bigoted words and endured discriminatory acts, both before and after the arson. People had driven by the mosque to yell at people; after their sign was burned, the replacement cement sign had been shot; and an attempted arson occurred earlier in the same summer in which the mosque was burned down completely. After the arson, Tahira said, people posted negative comments about them on the Internet, saying things like, “why the Muslims are here, and they should go back.”

Unlike B’nai Israel, the Islamic Society more frequently encountered hateful acts and crimes. And yet like B’nai Israel congregants, Islamic Society members stressed demonstrations of unity and solidarity. Though both communities were victims of hateful violence, they emphasized others’ tolerance. Moreover, congregants discussed the crimes’ perpetrators in ways that further isolated and distanced them from the mainstream. This discursive move absolves their neighbors of any wrongdoing and allows B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society to focus on their neighbors’ favorable actions. Through focusing their memories of the arsons on the positive

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4 Dave, interview with author, 2/19/2014.  
5 Tahira, interview, 7/15/2015.
outcomes, and tuning out the possibility of their neighbors’ culpability, they subverted their encounters with animosity and instead reasserted faith in a religiously pluralistic, united nation.

Support and Solidarity

Seated in what used to be the library and is now B’nai Israel’s boardroom, I looked across a heavy wooden conference table at Sherrie, a former journalist. We had been speaking for almost two hours, and I had just asked what she remembered of the media responses to the arson. Though she began to answer my question, she did so distractedly, the end of her short sentences trailing off, her usually direct language peppered with the fillers “um” and “uh.” I followed her gaze over my head to the tall, thin vertical window panes, rebuilt in the likeness of the former library’s window. Bare branches dotted with spring pink blooms tapped the glass. “That community…” Sherrie said thoughtfully. “It’s like a tree in a way.” She continued, her words stringing together in a rush, all at once:

And I see the tree— and… the trunk is the congregation, and then you have the Japanese-American League, and then you have, you know, the Methodist group saying, ‘We have a big donation we’re going to give at the [community] service,’ and then you have the law enforcement, you know? And then you have the international coming in, and the fundraising that’s coming in— somebody sent out a letter, and all of a sudden, it’s spread through the Internet, and money’s pourin’ in from all over the place, and then we get all these beautiful letters, and all these services, and parents volunteering to walk around the campus.6

Sherrie’s account reverberated among the stories I heard from members of both the B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society communities. Memories of the arsons paired with memories of their aftermath, including descriptions of the extensive local and global aid they received. People

extended to these communities their emotional, financial, and symbolic support through personal interactions, social and published media, and accommodations of religious events.

On June 18, 1999, B’nai Israel congregants gathered in Land Park across the street from their synagogue, smoldering and encircled by bright yellow police tape. Though shocked by the crime, board members leapt into action to make the necessary arrangements so that night’s Bar Mitzvah could continue as planned. Members of the Japanese American Citizens League were the first to check in with the community that day. B’nai Israel developed a close relationship with other minority communities in Sacramento six years prior, when a young man attacked multiple sites around the city. A Molotov cocktail launched at B’nai Israel’s stained-glass windows started a small brush fire but caused no damage to the building. Within the same twenty-four-hour period, the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the house of local Chinese-American city councilman Jimmy Yee were firebombed. Together, Sacramento’s minority groups led a Hate Crimes Task Force Enhancement initiative to lobby the Senate to change state legislation around hate crimes. Coincidentally, Yee was one of the first to see the 1999 fire at B’nai Israel, which he noticed while he was out for his early morning walk. He rallied the other members of the Hate Crime Task Force founded in 1993 to aid B’nai Israel and to recommit to the shared goal of battling hatred.

The Japanese American Citizens League was not the only community to reach out to B’nai Israel. On the weekend of the arson, the Northern California United Methodist Conference convened at the Sacramento Community Center. When the conference’s organizers heard about the synagogue, they offered the space to B’nai Israel for Shabbat services. By sundown on Friday

7 Richard Campos was the perpetrator of the 1993 hate crimes in Sacramento.
night, the local chapter of the Jewish Federation had set a time and place for a community-wide, interfaith “unity service,” and that Monday evening, forty-five-hundred people filled the rows at the Community Center Theater. An array of Sacramento’s religious and political leaders sat in folding chairs on the stage. Behind them hung a sign: Sacramento. United Against Hate. As in Sherrie’s recollection, the assistance offered by the Japanese American Citizens League and the Methodist conference and the support demonstrated in the Sacramento-wide solidarity rally soon grew to include international declarations of empathy and encouragement, as well as contributions of money and books.

Similarly, when Islamic Society members told me about the mosque arson, they always spoke at length about the outpouring of generosity from their neighbors in Joplin, as well as people around the country and world. St. Philip’s Episcopal Church hosted members of the Islamic Society for iftar dinner. Congregants of the South Joplin Christian Church, United Hebrew Congregation, First Community Church, and Peace Lutheran Church co-sponsored and attended the meal in support of the Muslim community. Local churches dedicated their Sunday collections to the Islamic Society to help them rebuild. Words of empathy and love flowed onto the Islamic Society’s Facebook page and into the comment threads of articles published about the fire. Eventually, people from around the world contributed money to the community when its leadership established an IndieGoGo site to receive donations to rebuild the mosque.

Then-pastor at the South Joplin Christian Church Jill Michel felt that Joplin’s devastating experience with the 2011 EF5 tornado contributed significantly to the Joplin community’s

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responses to the mosque arson. “So many individuals, churches, businesses — people who had never had to receive major help — have experienced what it is like just to have people come and offer a hand,” she said. “If tomorrow, if somebody said, ‘Come help rebuild the mosque,’ there are a bunch of people who would be willing to do that.”  

People connected with the shared experience of needing help, but they also felt particularly inclined to assist the Islamic Society since the mosque had been a relief center for tornado victims and because many Islamic Society members are physicians who supplied medical aid after the natural disaster. A college student from the neighboring Ozark Christian College felt moved to respond to the arson and organized the “Neighbors Rally.” At the end of August 2012, hundreds of people gathered at Landreth Park, in a field browned from the parching late-summer heat. Attendees wore white shirts that read, “LOVE: making things beautiful from things that aren’t.”

“That support helped to calm us,” Imam Lahmuddin said. Echoing Pastor Michel, he linked it to the 2011 tornado, which was “another big test for us as a community.”  

“I think we passed,” he admitted. During the months after the tornado, people worked together to clean up their city. In so doing, the imam told me, people learned more about the Islamic Society as they united to restore their Joplin home. Moreover, because many Islamic Society members are physicians, they had previously established relationships with their patients and the families of their patients. When the mosque burned down, many people in Joplin shared the Islamic

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10 Imam Lahmuddin, interview with author, 4/16/2014.
Society’s anger and sadness. Imam Lahmuddin explained that, though tragic, both the tornado and the mosque-burning brought the Islamic Society closer to the larger Joplin community.

*An Alternate Reading*

Members of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society routinely described to me their positive experiences after the arsons. Years after the attacks, they remained astounded by others’ shows of support, and they expressed their profound gratitude for the consolation and encouragement extended to them. The demonstrations of support calmed these communities, directly countering the messages conveyed by the arson attacks. And yet after the arsons, they also experienced moments that left them feeling unsettled, questioning the extent of their being wholly accepted and integrated into Sacramento and Joplin. While few B’nai Israel congregants mentioned such moments, numerous Islamic Society members shared stories of their continued antagonization.

Overall, B’nai Israel congregants seemed to share the sense that the arson was an aberration from their usual experiences as Jewish citizens of Sacramento. Sherrie and many others spoke at length about the ranging gestures of support from local neighbors and total strangers. “We saw a lot of good,” she pronounced, expressing a shared sentiment among B’nai Israel members. However, Sherrie and a handful of other congregants noted instances that left them uneasy. In narrating her experience of others’ post-arson support, Sherrie slid into a less-than-positive memory.

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11 A few people told me that some of their neighbors even called to apologize, regretful that the arson had happened.

The local newspaper, the *Sacramento Bee*, showed its support by publishing a full-page insert: the top of the page read “Sacramento Together.” An American flag floated above the words “United We Stand,” beneath which was a blue box containing the Hebrew letters *chet* and *yod*, spelling the word *chai* (“Hebrew for ‘life,’” the sign reads). The insert asked that people “please fold and place the above portion of this advertisement in your window at home, place of business or vehicle,” in order “to show unity and support.”\(^\text{13}\) It also invited the entire community to the “community solidarity gathering” at the Community Center Theater at 13th and L streets.

![Figure 13: “United We Stand” page of the Sacramento Bee. Source: Photograph by author.](image)

\(^{13}\)“United We Stand” page of the *Sacramento Bee*, B’nai Israel archive.
Though many B’nai Israel congregants told me about the sign as evidence of Sacramento’s widespread support, Sherrie found herself uncomfortable. “My father had told me that when the Holocaust happened, overnight his neighbors turned into enemies and they were wearing the Nazi uniform,” she said, taking a deep breath. “And so I walked around my neighborhood, and I saw so few of those [the chai signs] in the windows, and thought…” she trailed off, and her voice become a disappointed whisper: “Wowwww… you know? Oh well. A beautiful gesture by the Bee! But people were not so moved.”14 Invoking the lingering effects of her parents’ experience with the Holocaust (as discussed in the previous chapter), Sherrie’s memory reveals a divided emotional experience. Although she felt supported in so many ways, she retained anxieties and disappointments about the arson and others’ responses. In Sherrie’s view, Sacramento’s Jews were not as integrated nor as accepted as they thought they were.15

Islamic Society members more widely expressed the tension between loving their community and also feeling marginalized. Salma expressed a love of her town and an appreciation for her neighbors’ responses to the arson. “People afterwards were really nice,” she told me, “and I think they were very genuine.”16 After the arson, she found herself defending Joplin to friends on the Internet, detailing the extensive local, national, and international support the Islamic Society had received. However, Salma and other Islamic Society members also articulated a contrasting set of experiences that they claim are simply part of what it entails to

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15 Cantor Julie Steinberg shared that: “There actually came to be some anti-Semitism surrounding the Unity Council, where somebody who was on the board felt there were too many Jews involved… like, ‘Sorry, our synagogue was firebombed, and our…our apologies for being involved in doing something since we were victimized. Sorry, we’ll step aside, let you guys deal with it.’ So it was that, but that came much later.” Cantor Julie Steinberg, interview with author, 2/13/2014.
16 Salma, interview with author, 7/13/2015.
live in Joplin specifically, and the South in general, as a member of a minority group. As one Islamic Society member explained, “There were people who said negative things, too, but that goes with the territory, you know?”\textsuperscript{17}

Salma grapples with the desire to stand by her hometown despite her own negative experiences, as well as those of her fellow Muslims and other minorities. When we spoke in July 2015, she explained by referencing numerous other hate crimes, including the recent shooting of Bible study group members at the historically black AME Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina and the subsequent spate of black church-burnings in the South. Salma related the Joplin Muslim community’s experiences to those that the black community was enduring at the time. “After the whole Confederate flag business, I’ve seen people around here just driving down, like, predominantly African American neighborhoods with like, Confederate flags, just to incite fear,” she said. “That’s exactly what happens to Muslims here.”\textsuperscript{18}

I heard many stories from Islamic Society members that exemplified the sort of fear-incitement of which Salma spoke. Child psychiatrist Shaheen told me that, after the masjid was burned, she asked her daughter to go to the local Walmart to get something for her. “As she was crossing over to enter the 7th Street Walmart here,” Shaheen said, “a man in a truck called out to her.” (In an aside, she explained, “My daughter wears a hijab as well.”) She continued: “So a

\textsuperscript{17} Shaheen and Osman, interview with author, 5/2/2014.

\textsuperscript{18} Salma, interview with author, 7/13/2015. After the Charleston shooting, calls were made for the elimination of the Confederate flag from the front of the South Carolina statehouse. The flag was removed on July 10, 2015. This spurred a surge in pro-Confederate flag acts, which attempted to reassert the power of the flag but also served to further marginalize black communities of the South.
man yells out to her, ‘Take that rag off of your head!’ Um, of course, she ignored it and walked in, but… there is a minority of people who, you know, who basically don’t like us.”

Almost all Islamic Society members with whom I spoke shared similar stories. “When we moved to the temporary place, then we had these two mobs that showed up twice,” Salma’s father Umar told me. “They were young men in trucks. And they started shouting, ‘Get out of here!’ And ‘Get out of this country!’” Others said that on numerous occasions, people drove by to yell at them, shouting “terrorists!” and telling them to leave. The encounters frightened people so much that they petitioned for a sheriff to surveil the parking lot on Fridays during jumma prayers. Although Salma appreciates the positive interactions the Islamic Society has had with the other people in Joplin and she loves her home, she finds it “kinda hard to defend Joplin” due to the hate she and her community have encountered. As she told me, “There’s only so much you can say, without finding all these equally troubling instances of hatred.”

Nonetheless, despite their regular confrontations with hostile acts of bigotry, Islamic Society members explained that the hateful people were only a small minority. Pulmonary and critical-care specialist Farooq explained that they found their neighbors to be educated and “so welcoming.” Living in Joplin had been a “pleasant experience.” “You have the equal opportunities,” he told me, “so you don’t expect this thing [the arson] to happen in America.”

Though they were shocked by the crime, Islamic Society members emphasized that it was only a marginal fraction of the community that harbored negative feelings toward them. “It’s not like

19 Shaheen and Osman, interview with author, 5/2/2014.
20 Umar, interview with author, 7/10/2015.
21 Salma, interview with author, 7/13/2015.
22 Farooq, interview with author, 7/14/2015.
the whole city is against us,” Farooq said. “It’s maybe a small group of people. […] So it was as I said… People are welcoming, and they love the people who come from other cultures or from other countries.” Given the mixed nature of their experiences, why do these religious minorities emphasize their neighbors’ positive responses? And what do they gain by speaking of the hateful as a “minority,” as “crazy,” and as “outsiders”? The next section discusses the distance that such language places between the perpetrators and everyone else, a definitive line between those who are bad and those who are good.

Distance from the Darkness

Congregants’ narratives of the arsons inevitably included a chapter about the positive responses from people outside of their religious groups. Support came from other minority groups, from neighbors, from community members who recognized their doctors and lawyers, their political representatives and their children’s teachers. Aid even arrived from national and international donors moved by the news stories of the crimes.

In recalling their memories of the arsons years later, Islamic Society and B’nai Israel members were still visibly overwhelmed by the diverse contributions and modes of support. Furthermore, they adamantly reiterated that the perpetrators were outliers in two ways. Firstly, congregants made clear that the criminals were not normal. They were crazy and filled with hate. They were ideological deviants. And secondly, they were not from Joplin or Sacramento; they were physical outsiders to the communities. Through pairing the stories of their neighbors’ extensive support with their assessments of the criminals as crazy outsiders, B’nai Israel and

\[23 \text{Ibid.}\]
Islamic Society placed a critical distance between their neighbors and the attacks’ perpetrators, a distance that helped them privilege a narrative of unity over a narrative of hate.

Members of both communities frequently invoked the words “crazy” and “evil” in referring to the criminals. “In general, you know, we are—this is the United States, we are a safe country,” said Hope, B’nai Israel’s former director of education. “Basically, we are a good country with basically good people, but… There are crazy people out there.” Former B’nai Israel president Rena likewise expressed that, “There are crazy people in this world, and people will do things for crazy personal reasons.” When I began to hear this pattern, I started asking people why they used the language “crazy” to describe the criminals. For former Islamic Society Sunday school teacher Tahira, the answer was self-evident: “Uh, because they are crazy, you know?” Seeing my inquiring face, she explained further:

I mean, any person who is of sound mind wouldn’t be doing that sort of thing. If you destroy something, if you destroy lives of people, how can you be happy with yourself? […] The small portion of people who have this sort of belief—In my mind, they are crazy people.

The widespread insistence on perpetrators’ craziness was matched only by community members’ description of the criminals as out-of-towners, people who were from places outside of Sacramento and Joplin. As a member of B’nai Israel told me, “The people who did this [committed the arson] were not even from our community.”

25 Rena, interview with author, 2/14/2014.
26 Tahira, interview with author, 7/15/2015.
27 Ibid.
28 Dave and Susan, interview with author, 2/19/2014.
B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members framed the arsons’ perpetrators as psychological and physical outsiders. They were outside of the norm. They were neither citizens of Sacramento nor of Joplin, and they did not align with others’ shared values. In her book *Tough on Hate?: The Cultural Politics of Hate Crimes*, American studies scholar Clara Lewis points out that after hate crimes, communities find ways to isolate and segregate the perpetrators.²⁹ As such, hate crime narratives typically feature the figure of the “hater,” a character created for the purpose of being expunged from society. This character is often a white male who is situated in a lower socioeconomic bracket and is located on the periphery, both physically and socially. He is almost always an “out of towner.” The externalization of the hater in America resonates historically with depictions of lynchers in the 1930s. It also functions politically and symbolically, rejecting the white-trash criminal and emphasizing the community’s own blamelessness.³⁰

True to form, the Joplin and Sacramento arsonists were young white males from impoverished backgrounds and the “outskirts” of the community. The Sacramento perpetrators were from a rural farming area outside of Redding, California. Though news stories cited their neighbors saying they were polite and friendly boys, the media highlighted “classic” indicators of hate criminals. A 1999 article from *Salon* stated: “The two boys were not misfits of loners. There is no evidence of past mental illness in either, and no one can point to any incident that could explain a hatred of Jews or gay people.”³¹ Finding no explanation in mental illness or


³⁰ More recently, communities have taken to pointing out (even seeking out) the hater’s mental illness as a marker of his marginality. Identifying his cognitive problems allows people to underscore his difference from their normalcy.

depravity of character, the article’s authors turned to the boys’ religious upbringing, mentioning their “eccentric, religiously devout” father, who raised the boys to “live off the land in anticipation of the coming apocalypse.”32 The Joplin arsonist is a U.S. Army veteran who self-identifies as a “sort of homeless” politically conservative Christian. Islamic Society members mentioned that thought he had lived his whole life in Joplin, but he was so isolated he did not have any friends or neighbors.33 News articles often included a decontextualized quote from his profile on a dating website, MeetMe.com, in which he proclaimed himself “crazy as…”34

The cultivated acts of ostracizing what Lewis deems the “new folk devil” allow B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society to distance their neighbors from the criminals, their criminality, and the hatred that provoked the crimes.35 Bolstered by the media, congregants often demonized the perpetrators, calling them evil and full of hate. Former B’nai Israel president Rena recalled attending the brothers’ arraignment. “I was never so creeped out in my life,” she said, “and I never went back again to trial.” The visuals have clung to her for years: the older brother had grown a “little Hitler mustache,” she remembered. “He comes in with his orange jumpsuit, and he’s chained around his waist and his hands and his legs… And he turns around and looks at everybody in the audience, and just gives this— this creepy smile-sneer. … He was the vision of evil. He was like, the picture of evil.”36 Fellow congregant Tamar shared a similar story. When

32 Ibid.
35 Lewis, 65.
36 Rena, interview with author, 2/14/2014.
she went to see him in court, Tamar said, “It looked like he had the devil in him.”

She added that “when [the FBI] linked the crimes [the synagogue arsons and the murder of the gay couple] together, it was like, oh my god, these guys, they have so much hatred.” But, she continued:

How sad. You know, how horribly sad… What happened to these kids? You know, ’cuz they were fairly young; they were like in their early twenties, I think, when they hatched these plots and did these horrible things. And you know, it’s hard to understand what caused them to learn how to hate so much. You know? Um, you know, I think sadly that’s, you know— Hatred is learned. You know, like that South Pacific song, ‘You Gotta Be Taught.’”

Tamar’s emotional reaction surprised me. Only minutes before, she described these men as having the devil in them. But she also felt sad for the young men who were “kids.” They had been taught to hate. They had learned their hatred. Both moves – designating the perpetrator as crazy or a devil while also considering his hatred as a learned sentiment – serve to distance the criminal from the mainstream.

Lewis contends that the stereotypical accounts of the white-trash hater “implicitly argue that learning to hate is something that occurs on the criminal margins, well outside of tolerant mainstream America.” By depicting criminals as loser loners who are vastly different from everyone else in society, hate crime narratives separate and contain those whose hatred has boiled over into violence from the normal citizens. Lewis terms this the “double helix of recognition and denial.” The binary is set; he, the criminal, is charged with hatred, while we are absolved. The automated representation of the hater pairs with everyone else’s particularly cultivated emotional responses: the registers of shock, dismay, and sadness. Through their shared expulsion of the hate crimes’ perpetrators and in their shared affective language, community

37 Tamar and Micah, interview with author, 6/17/2014.
38 Lewis, 80.
members mobilized. The rhetoric and affects contribute to constructions of a Sacramento, a Joplin, and a nation unified against hatred.

The universal condemnation of hate crimes acts as a “noncontroversial call to action” that fits neatly into the sweeping mythology of American exceptionalism. As Lewis writes, “A great deal of energy has been exerted on the part of the news media and national politicians to symbolically cordon off hate crimes from an idealized America.”

Put differently, the American tale has no room for a story about continued problems with racial or religious difference. The reasoning is that most Americans are tolerant, so “hate crime” as a legal category offers up an official venue for dealing with the peripheral case of hateful violence. Likewise, the social trend of ostracizing the “hater” and the affective and performative emphases on unity reiterate the extent to which the average American is unprejudiced and open-minded. The very notion of a “hate crime” segregates the abnormal hateful individual from the vast majority of Americans who are anything but.

In characterizing the criminals as evil outsiders and crazed devils, B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members affirmed their neighbors as distinct from the criminals and their violent acts. And through their positive memories of their neighbors’ post-arson endeavors, B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members underscored the love and solidarity they experienced. Together, these narrativistic emphases chiseled a fixed line between the right-doers and wrong-doers, cementing the people of Sacramento and Joplin firmly on the side of the right.

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39 Ibid., 55.
40 Ibid., 62.
B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society set a critical distance between their neighbors and the criminals through language demonizing the perpetrators and a focus on their neighbors’ contributions of financial assistance, physical spaces for worship, and solidarity through rallies. Such critical distance effectively accentuates and reestablishes a shared sense of restorative communality emergent after the arson. I thus shift focus to the affective power of language and actions around unity and inclusivity. The question is not what institutions stand to gain from a purportedly unified commitment to religious pluralism. Rather, why do victimized communities remain intensely devoted to that unity ideal? And what do they feel the ideal requires of them?

A STRIKE AGAINST US ALL

B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members consistently emphasized how heartened they felt by their international supporters and the aid of their neighbors. Above all, they lauded the communally orchestrated unity rallies, which physically demonstrated the sense of inclusivity that had been incinerated in the fires. Remembering the arsons, congregants especially recalled how the mobilizing rallies established feelings of unity. The gatherings redefined the groups damaged by the arsons, expanding the “we” from “we, B’nai Israel” and “we, the Islamic Society,” to “we, the residents of Sacramento” and “we, the people of Joplin.” Members of both religious groups felt bolstered by these formations of the broader “we,” visible at the Solidarity Rally in Sacramento and the Neighbors Rally in Joplin. Islamic Society and B’nai Israel members discussed the rallies as moments in which their neighbors made clear to them that the perpetrators did not assault the Jewish community of Sacramento or the Muslim community of Joplin. Rather, they assaulted all Sacramento and Joplin citizens. They were neighbors united.
These acts of support and solidarity not only helped B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society to regain their lost costs and begin to rebuild but also encouraged them to reintegrate into the broader Sacramento and Joplin communities. By underscoring their neighbors’ extensions of goodwill and stressing the outsider status of the criminals, these religious communities reinforced the distinctions between their neighbors and the perpetrators of the arsons. Moreover, such modes of remembering allowed the victimized religious minority groups to band together with their local community members in the fight against hate.

**Staging Pluralism**

While both communities unanimously appreciated the post-arson financial and verbal support, they recalled with notable nostalgia the power of the rallies. In remembering the rallies with vivid detail and intense emotionality, B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members revealed, and reiterated, the importance of the demonstrations for their own senses of being integral parts of their communities. Many expressed overwhelming feelings of warmth and outwardly acknowledged the events’ role in their ability to process and heal from their traumas. As Sherrie noted, “It was a lot of healing, a lot of suffering and a lot of healing all at the same time, so… [it was] really good for the community.”41 The rallies served as spaces of healing because they were sites of recognition, reassuring B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society members that they were and are valued citizens of Sacramento and Joplin.

B’nai Israel member Mike said that his memories around the time of the arson were a blur. It was his son whose Bar Mitzvah had to be relocated from the synagogue to the community

41 Sherrie, interview with author, 2/11/2014.
center theater on the Friday of the arson. Making the adjustments for such an unexpected, unwelcome change happened “really, really fast,” he explained, but because of the support from the entire community, he felt “grounded and focused.” He told me how surprised he was when he looked out from the stage and saw the crowds filling the fifteen-hundred-seat theater. His son’s Bar Mitzvah had become a public event, in which congregants and non-congregants showed their support with their physical presence. Furthermore, he, like many other B’nai Israel members, specifically remembered seeing the curtains open at the Unity Rally. Looking at all of the local clergy gathered together, he experienced the event as a profound statement that, “Hey, this is not okay in our community; we’re here to support tolerance.”

Rabbi Alfi was on vacation in Croatia when she received news of the arson. She made an urgent return trip to Sacramento. After a ferry from Croatia, a drive to Munich, a flight back to San Francisco, and a drive to Sacramento, she arrived within half an hour of when she needed to be at the community center. “I hadn’t showered in two days, quickly got dressed, put on a suit, had no idea what the thing at the community center was going to be,” she said. “I thought it was the Jewish community coming together.” She continued:

So I went to the community center, go through the green room, just in time to go onto the stage with all the clergy in town: all the Jewish clergy, there was non-Jewish clergy, there was law enforcement… tons of elected officials […] So I go out onto the stage, not knowing what to expect, and the curtains open, and the entire room is overflowing, and it turns out that they also have a livestream of the service in the convention center next door because there were so many people who came that a couple thousand people were next door. And I don’t remember how many people the convention center sits, but it’s probably about five thousand or something like that. Um, and I was… completely overwhelmed. Completely blown away. There were religious leaders of every

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42 Mike, interview with author, 6/12/2014.
43 Rabbi Mona Alfi, interview with author, 2/7/2014.
denomination there, leaders from different ethnic groups, um, it was... an incredible and beautiful sign of solidarity. 44

Though her harried return to Sacramento likely contributed to Rabbi Alfi’s feeling of being “completely overwhelmed,” the show of force from clergy, law enforcement, elected officials, and more than five thousand Sacramento citizens was astounding. It was also necessary, as “an incredible and beautiful sign of solidarity.”

Other B’nai Israel members were similarly surprised by the grandiosity of the Unity Rally. “The mayor spoke, and Darrell [Steinberg, the State Senate Pro Tem] spoke,” explained Steve, the Sacramento Bee reporter. “It was a big deal. And it was very gratifying for the people at the congregation that people sort of rallied around them [and] didn’t just shrug their shoulders.” 45 The lieutenant governor, then-governor Grey Davis’ wife, city councilmen, and the mayor were all there, and “everybody spoke in unity,” former B’nai Israel president Joe told me. “Basically, the theme was, ‘Look, this wasn’t an attack on the Jewish community; it’s an attack on the Sacramento community.’” 46 B’nai Israel members expressed that the Unity Rally affirmed to them that their neighbors and government entities alike wanted them to feel supported, to be a body made stronger by numbers and by political backing.

The Joplin Neighbors Rally was far more informal and involved significantly less bureaucratic support than the Sacramento Unity Rally. Yet it conveyed similar sensibilities among Islamic Society members. Where the arson made the community “feel insecure,” as

44 Ibid.
45 Steve, interview with author, 2/9/2014.
46 Joe, interview with author, 2/18/2014. Numerous people noted that the only elected official not present at the rally was then-governor Grey Davis. He sent his wife in his stead. I will discuss this further later in this chapter, when I look at the relationship between these communities and the authorities after the arsons.
former Sunday school teacher Haneen put it, their neighbors’ responses, and the rally in particular, made them feel as though “something so beautiful has come out of it.”

Likewise, Shan, the president of the Islamic Society, proclaimed pride in the Muslim community: “The community of Joplin as whole, um, churches, synagogues, you know, uh mosque from other places got together. They invited us to their churches, you know, and encouraging us more.”

Shan related the mosque’s arson to the burning of a family’s home, saying that they might be scared that they were being watched. But though the arson worried them, he said that they were not scared. “We were with the rest of the Joplin people, you know? Rallying… I think it boost up our inside, you know, feeling that we can do things.” The rally gave Islamic Society members comfort and strength and a sense of pride in their neighbors.

Although Islamic Society members expressed such feelings about the Neighbors gathering, they remembered few of its specificities. Most recalled that it was well-attended and took place in Landreth Park. Otherwise, however, their memories were generic and abstract. They vaguely recalled that it was organized by a girl from a local college, that it was mostly people just coming together, that there were some speeches and activities, though they did not remember details of either.

Farooq recounted two of the interfaith learning activities from the rally; he remembered doing the azhan, the call for prayer, and explaining “what do you do before you come to the prayer, like we do ablution.” He paused, or maybe it was “the role of water in

48 Shan, interview with author, 7/19/2015.
49 People did not remember which college: one person said that she went to Missouri Southern State University; another that she went to Crowder College (a community college in nearby Neosho, Missouri); and a few correctly remembered that she went to Ozark Christian College.
different religions, like in terms of purification."\(^{50}\) Despite his specific memories of these learning moments, Farooq was unsure whether they took place at the Neighbors Rally or at another community event. Additionally, very few Islamic Society members could recollect the rally’s speakers or their subject matter, and those who did remembered only the content of a speech made by one of their fellow Islamic Society members. As Tahira told me, “She actually made a speech… that Muslims are here, and they have been here for so long, and they are here, and they are in the fabric of America.”\(^{51}\)

Sana, a dentist in her early thirties who was born in Pakistan but has lived in Joplin for much of her life (nineteen years), told me it was hard to hear the speeches unless you were paying explicit attention to them. “Just the amount of people, volume, noise… Unless you were up close or you didn’t have kids screaming in your ear, it was a little tough to pay attention,” she said.\(^{52}\) Like many others, Sana brought her two small children with her to the rally. When I asked her what they did there, she responded, “Nothing really.” She continued: “We just talked, got to meet other people, so they made a special effort in um, introducing, so that people of the same faith wouldn’t like, stick together.” I asked her what her children thought of the event. “They just thought they were there at a park for a good time,” Sana replied. “What about you?” I prompted. She thought for a moment:

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\(^{50}\) Farooq, interview with author, 7/14/2015. I am interested especially in the significance of the possible interfaith discussion of water or purification in religions, given that the rally was in response to a hate crime that utilized fire as a form of destruction. However, I could find little information on the order or intention of the events at the rally that would support or further explain Farooq’s memory.

\(^{51}\) Tahira, interview with author, 7/15/2015. The next section returns to this statement to address the emphasis on the religious minorities’ place in America, as well as their responsibility to make themselves visible and legible to other Americans.

\(^{52}\) Sana, interview with author, 7/15/2015.
It was a pretty good thing to do in order to ex—Basically spread the word of what had happened, and that um, that it’s really nobody’s fault, and that everybody is supporting the fact that what had happened was not right. I think that was the whole gist of it, that ‘we know this occurred, it was wrong, and we do not support it’ type of thing. [...] The recognition of it was great, that people were recognizing that it had occurred, and it was wrong, and that you can’t undo the wrong, but we can prevent it from occurring again.\textsuperscript{53}

Little happened at the rally, and the specific details of who spoke about what dropped out of the Muslim community’s memories. But Islamic Society members continually emphasized that they appreciated the recognition. As Muslim Americans contending with twenty-first-century Islamophobia, they needed to underscore how important it was to them that their neighbors acknowledged the crime and expressed love over hate.

The community rallies conveyed others’ consciousness of the crimes committed against these religious minority groups and reiterated the deplorability of the criminals and their hateful acts of violence. Furthermore, members of both congregations expressed that the rallies and other physical demonstrations of support reassured them that they were not alone. They were not isolated, ostracized victims. Perhaps most importantly, B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members stressed, the gatherings allowed the Sacramento and Joplin communities to come together in shared public spaces to emphasize solidarity and to reaffirm unity. How and why, then, is “unity” intentionally constructed in the wake of hate?

\textit{Unity}

Members of both religious communities affected by the arsons were most struck by the physical exhibitions of consolation and encouragement that set the groundwork for the

\textsuperscript{53} Sana, interview with author, 7/15/2015.
Sacramento and Joplin unity rallies. While Islamic Society members discussed the impact of other religious groups’ willingness to share their places of worship, many B’nai Israel congregants spoke emotionally about a material show of support: the “United We Stand” page in the Sacramento Bee. “Those were everywhere,” Rabbi Alfi said. “Those were in store windows, in restaurant windows, people’s houses… It actually makes me want to cry, thinking about it; it was… unbelievable.” She continued: “It was very clear that everyone wanted to send the message, ‘Not in Our Town.’ And the people who did it were not from our town.”

Rabbi Alfi’s words reflect emphases on the perpetrators’ outsider status and on the Sacramento-wide unity.

Islamic Society members underscored the significance of the rallies in providing a sense of solidarity in times of crisis. “That’s the perfect scenario, that people should help each other,” said Rabia, a convenience-store owner. “But [the rally] did. It did. I don’t know how much percentage of the people, but that’s what they showed, and that’s what I wanted to believe.”

Although Rabia was unsure about how many people from Joplin actually came to the rally, what was most important to her was that the rally took place. Echoing Rabia, former Sunday school teacher Tahira noted that the whole point of the rally was “just to show solidarity.” Similarly, B’nai Israel website stresses that “religious, ethnic, political, and law enforcement leaders viewed the fires as attacks against the entire community and condemned the arsons.”

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54 Rabbi Mona Alfi, interview with author, 2/7/2014. Interestingly, Rabbi Alfi’s experience directly contrast that of Sherrie, as discussed in an alternate reading.

55 Rabia, interview with author, 5/1/2014.

56 Tahira, interview with author, 7/15/2015.

they did so publicly and collectively at the Unity Rally, in a great show of solidarity. Such memories convey both congregations’ feeling that the rallies’ central was to exhibit unity.

B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members specifically remember the rallies as visceral physical manifestations of collective unification. These gatherings made congregants feel supported through visible demonstrations that their communities stood with them. Through the rally, the people of Joplin “showed support to us,” Imam Lahmuddin said.58 The rally made it clear that Joplin’s citizens were angry with, and intolerant of, the kind of hatred that motivated the arson. As child psychiatrist Osman told me, by organizing and attending the rally, “people from all walks of life” emphasized that “this is not America… we don’t support this [hatred], we don’t condone that [act].”59 The rally made members of the Islamic Society feel, in the words of Imam Lahmuddin, “that we are not alone in here.”60

B’nai Israel congregants communicated similar feelings. “If there was any silver lining to this [the arson],” Sacramento Bee reporter Steve said, “there was a sense of rolling up your sleeves and people pulling together.”61 However, it was not simply working together to rebuild the synagogue or to provide verbal condolences to the Jewish community. Reminding me that he was born in Sacramento and has lived there all of his life, former B’nai Israel president Joe remarked: “Sacramento came together as a community like I’ve never seen it come together before… The rallying together… just took your breath away.”62 The feeling of pulling together,

58 Imam Lahmuddin, interview with author, 4/16/2014.
59 Shaheen and Osman, interview with author, 5/2/2014.
60 Imam Lahmuddin, interview with author, 4/16/2014.
62 Joe, interview with author, 2/18/2014.
coming together, being together gave B’nai Israel members strength in a time of vulnerability. One member described the feeling as “kind of the mini-version of the immediate post-9/11 thing… where everybody just kind of felt connected to each other.”

In 1999 Sacramento, 2012 Joplin, and 2001 New York City, crisis generated cohesion. People sought out opportunities to connect with those around them and created resilience through that unification. The rallies served this purpose for B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society. “It [the rally] had that kind of intensity to it,” said Carol, a former B’nai Israel president and co-leader of the synagogue’s Capital Campaign. “And in some ways,” she added, her voice softening, “it was more intense for some of us ’cuz it was just immediate, and it was here.” Carol rooted the intensity of the feeling of unity in the crisis’s immediacy. “It was here,” she said. Imam Lahmuddin, too, noted the importance of physicality, stating that the rally gave them the feeling “that we are not alone in here.” Numerous others from both congregations pointed to the here-ness of arsons and the rallies.

Although the crimes happened in Joplin and Sacramento, the perpetrators were not from nor part of the cities; rather, these spaces were home to united communities, and it was the rallies that physically manifested that wholeness. Joplin and Sacramento are the chosen homes of the Islamic Society and B’nai Israel. But the arsons set them apart from everyone else, pushing the Jews and Muslims to the periphery. Congregants conveyed that the unity rallies directly countered their feelings of alienation by underscoring solidarity. The arsons and rallies were both symbolic events. Where the arsons physically exemplified hatred of the Other, the rallies subsumed the Other into the whole. “Coming just months before our 150th anniversary, the

63 Carol and Rob, interview with author, 2/12/2014.
overwhelming support for the community was especially meaningful,” reads B’nai Israel’s online history. “Congregation B’nai Israel was embraced.”64

Together, the arsons and the rallies reflect the American struggle with religious diversity. In his discussion of Western secularism and religious pluralism, political theorist Rajeev Bhargava points out that as nation-states developed, they expelled subject communities of faiths other than the religion of the ruler. Although America and other Western nations “found some place for toleration in their ethical space,” that toleration “was consistent with deep inequalities and with humiliating, marginalized, and virtually invisible existence.”65 These places emphasize either the expulsion or the often-hesitant toleration of the religious Other. Bhargava instead turns to India’s management of religious communities. Religious diversity is a starting point, he writes. “Multiple religions are not extras, added on as an afterthought,” as they are in the West.66

The arsons of the synagogue and mosque were efforts to expel the Jews and Muslims from Sacramento and Joplin. Although the religious groups were only temporarily displaced, the crimes’ symbolism was clearly communicated: these groups were unwelcome religious Others. The rallies, however, were exhibitions of solidarity. And yet they relayed an unspoken but equally troubling message: that the people of Sacramento and the people of Joplin are the ones to extend unity to religious Others. They tolerate. Much as the unity rallies may have been


66 Ibid., 77.
affectively powerful for Islamic Society and B’nai Israel members, but they also displayed that
the people of Joplin and Sacramento chose to “embrace” the religious Other.

Former Islamic Society member Jameel told me a story about the Joplin Neighbors Rally
that reveals this hesitant toleration of the minority. When a member of the Islamic Society gave a
speech at the rally, he said:

She gave a good example of some people visiting a kingdom, and the sultan […] asked
them, ‘How are you guys gonna assimilate in this area?’ And the visitors told him that…
If you add salt to flour and make bread out of it, so it just gives its taste, and it adds to it.67

The speech, given by a member of the Islamic Society, by a religious Other, reveals the
complexity of their experiences of the arson and the rally. They are visitors who must assimilate.
They see themselves as adding to the kingdom, like salt added to bread.

Islamic Society and B’nai Israel members remember the rallies as affectively powerful,
symbolic messages of unity in the face of violence. The publicly held rallies confirmed the
gravity of the arsons and legitimized the religious communities’ pain, but perhaps most
importantly, they attempted to bring these victimized communities from the margins into the
center. As Sana said, the “whole purpose of [the rally] was obviously different faiths and people
coming together and holding hands,” in a show of solidarity.68 Subverting the hateful message of
the arsons, the rallies demonstrated unity, reaffirming the Islamic Society as part of Joplin and
B’nai Israel as part of Sacramento. But the taste of bread often overwhelms the taste of salt, and
as the second half of this chapter shows, these religious Others must allow themselves to be
absorbed by America’s religiously pluralistic loaf.

67 Jameel, interview with author, 4/30/2014.
68 Sana, interview with author, 7/15/2015.
**SHAPING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY**

B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members conveyed that they were moved by the unity rallies orchestrated after the arsons. The rallies physically demonstrated local citizens’ unity with the victimized communities, reaffirming these religious minorities as part of Joplin and Sacramento and relocating them from the periphery to the center. Congregants felt grounded and supported by their cities’ exhibitions of solidarity. They again felt a sense of belonging. However, congregants’ language about the rallies suggests that they understand the form and functionality of American religious pluralism, as well as their own roles in maintaining it.

While the first half of this chapter evaluated the ways in which B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members remember their neighbors’ responses to the arsons, as well as why they remember as they do, the second half of the chapter examines these religious groups’ understandings of American religious pluralism and unity and their subsequent commitments to work toward the realization of these ideologies. They do so in three (non-sequential) ways: first, by developing connections with political and law enforcement officials; second, by counteracting media misrepresentations; and third, by helping others understand their religious beliefs and practices through interfaith involvement.

Islamic Society members in particular have especially struggled to weave themselves into the pluralist fabric. They continue to endeavor toward normative expectations of American religious diversity even as they combat the rampant suspicions and Islamophobic hostilities characteristic of post-9/11 America. By contrast, B’nai Israel’s longer history in the United States, the community’s political alliances, and its pre-established interfaith coalitions and hate crime task force facilitated their efforts toward pluralism. Nonetheless, both congregations
acknowledge that they are religious minorities, viewed by many as accretions to the American religious landscape.

Islamic Society and B’nai Israel members’ thoughts and actions after the arsons reflect historical traditions of American religious pluralism that establish particular ways of being religious minorities. This section begins by assessing the language of tolerance and the visual coding of religious pluralism, both of which possess distinctly American historical lineages. I then turn to congregants’ understandings of the official channels for enforcing American religious pluralism before examining how they participate in — or rather, practice — American religious pluralism. To take part in this American tradition involves care on the part of these religious groups to understand its substance and to take up its discourse and praxis. Through establishing relationships with governing authorities, managing the media, and engaging in interfaith work, the Islamic Society and B’nai Israel work to render themselves legible and knowable to other (non-Jewish or non-Muslim) Americans.

“Civic Religion”

The unity rallies in Sacramento and Joplin conveyed a sense of strength and solidarity to members of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society. These demonstrations were affectively forceful due to their emphasis on rejecting hatred in favor of tolerance, as well as the power of their aesthetic representations. The language and the visual coding possess an historical lineage that encourages consensus around a form of religious pluralism consistent with America’s Judeo-
Christian secularism. If pluralism is America’s “civic religion,” tolerance is its ideology and the unity rally its practice.\textsuperscript{69}

Though diverse forms of support collectively heartened B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society, it was the unity rallies that reaffirmed congregants’ sense of belonging and reassured them of their value as neighbors and citizens. They found themselves surrounded by hundreds and thousands of friends, acquaintances, and strangers, listening to speeches by political and religious leaders and community activists. They prayed across faiths, finding common language for shared pain and anger. Together, they adamantly declared their commitment to a collective mission to fight hatred. The solidarity gatherings offered comfort and consolation but also served as paradigmatic signifiers of inclusivity, based in shared liberal values. However, as conversations with congregants revealed, the unity rallies patently exemplified American religious pluralism and the ethos of tolerance; congregants’ everyday lives were suffused by it.

Osman, his wife Shaheen, and I sat in a booth at Panera, sipping iced teas. Osman spoke to me about his experiences living in the United States, comparing them to his experiences in his native Pakistan, in Canada, in England. “I would say that people here in the United States are more friendly than anywhere else,” he said.\textsuperscript{70} “Why do you think that is?” I asked. “I think because there is more diversity here,” he replied instantly. “I think people are more accommodating because they have come from all different backgrounds, so it is a nation of

\textsuperscript{69}The rallies exemplify what I call the “civic” (rather than sociologist Robert Bellah’s “civil”) religion of America. Anchored to the nation’s self-narrative around diversity, American civic religion relies upon the universal instillment of an ethos of tolerance, implicitly tethered to Western liberalism. American civic religion insists upon the practice of pluralism, performed according to particular scripts. Finally, American civic religion asks its adherents to project their pluralistic values and to engage actively and openly with other practitioners across lines of diversity.

\textsuperscript{70}Shaheen and Osman, interview with author, 5/2/2014.
immigrants of people who came to the United States because they were persecuted in their own land like those— What do you call those people who came over on the Mayflower ship?”

(“Pilgrims,” I supplied.) Shaheen interjected:

I also think that the United States has seen the bias against African Americans, so um… They had this struggle that they had to go through, which, things obviously are a lot better for them. So I think when a nation has already gone through something like that then their understanding for other cultures, or other skin colors, or other religions, it tends to improve.

Osman nodded, affirming her words. “Yeah, because first it was Native Americans who suffered tragedy, and then came the slaves,” he continued. “So over all these so many years and centuries people have become more tolerant.” He paused. “That’s the word I was searching for. Tolerant… than any other nation.”

Tolerant. Understanding. Friendly. From my conversation with Osman and Shaheen, it seems that being American entails upholding a set of affective modalities around the fact of diversity. While diversity involves the co-existence of people distinct from one another in any number of ways, pluralism implies an intentioned emotional and ethical orientation toward diversity. As discussed previously, American religious pluralism is grounded in tolerance, which political theorist Wendy Brown defines as an “ethos of respect for others’ rights to exist and to believe or to practice as they do.” However, as Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini point out, American “tolerance emerges out of a specifically religious history that may not be directly named, but that remains powerful.” That “specifically religious history” is a Protestant one that

71 Ibid.
continues to dictate that there are those “who are central and those who are marginal, but tolerated.” Tolerance sustains hierarchy and discrimination, and it does so insidiously, taking form as discourse and practice by those who are marginal, those who are tolerated.

Like Brown, I am less interested in individual ethics of tolerance and more concerned with the “how and why individualism, secularism, enlightenment, civility, and tolerance are all linked in civilizational discourse.” Such questions are particularly critical in light of the arsons in Joplin and Sacramento, cases in which both language around and representations of tolerance abound. Congregants frequently mentioned their goals of working against intolerance and toward tolerance. Speeches given at the unity rallies likewise reiterated these objectives. An artist crafted tolerance pins out of Friendly Plastic to sell at the Sacramento unity rally to raise funds for rebuilding the synagogues, and state representatives began to discuss plans for a Museum of Tolerance in downtown Sacramento. These examples confirm that “contemporary discourses of tolerance comprise a set of normative operations that often hide themselves as such.”

The citywide unity rallies orchestrated by local citizens after the arsons in Joplin and Sacramento are one such normative operation, a featured practice of America’s “civic religion” of religious pluralism. Defining pluralism as “a commitment to recognize and understand others across perceived or claimed lines of religious difference,” religion scholars Pamela Klassen and Courtney Bender explore pluralism in practice, “as a set of tools, projects, and political claims.” While tolerance served as the ideological platform for religious pluralism after the arsons, the unity rallies were its practices. The rallies exhibited a prescriptive set of visual codes

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74 Brown, 18.
75 Ibid., 20.
76 Klassen and Bender, 2.
that allow B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members, as well as the rallies’ other attendants, to live their imagined ideal of an ordered, inclusive, cohesive society comprised of diverse citizens living in harmony. In this model, people encourage unity by highlighting shared experiences of religious diversity and emphasizing moralistic commonalities.77

As American history reveals, the post-arson rallies function prescriptively, rather than descriptively.78 In 1893, organizers of the Chicago Columbian Exposition arranged the first Parliament of the World’s Religions, displaying the globe’s diverse religions gathered together on American soil. Subsequent American fairs, such as the 1939-1940 New York World’s Fair, continued to exhibit the similarities and differences between religious groups. These public demonstrations of religious pluralism constructed a “visual code for the diversity of religious paths, as long as they converged under the U.S. flag.”79

Both post-arson unity rallies echoed such “visual coding,” which depicted America’s diversity by foregrounding an array of multiracial, multi-religious individuals. In the days after the Joplin arson, the local newspaper, the Joplin Globe, published an ad taken out by a group of some eighty-five religious communities and concerned citizens from in and around Joplin. The ad read: “Deeply saddened by recent events, the faith communities of the Joplin area stand by our neighbors from the Islamic Society in their time of tragedy. We believe that ‘Love Thy Neighbor’ has no restrictions.”80 Below these words is what looks to be a stock photograph of a

77 This move elides individual traumatic experiences of the religious communities victim to the hate crimes and disregards historical and contemporary discrepancies of power.


79 Ibid., 204.

80 Joplin Globe ad.
group of men and women standing in a circle with their arms extended toward the center, hands overlapping. Reiterating the ad’s message of diversity, newspapers published numerous pictures from the rally of hijab-wearing Pakistani and Indonesian women standing alongside young white women in their LOVE t-shirts. Together, these images present a story of harmonious racial, cultural, and religious pluralism.

While features of the Joplin response and rally clearly paralleled elements of America’s historical depictions of religious pluralism, the Sacramento Unity Rally directly mirrored the tableau of the 1893 Parliament of Religions. At the 1893 Parliament, audience members remarked upon the majestic scene: representatives of the world’s religions, each cloaked in his native religious garments, sat in rows upon a dais under the flags of the nations in the Chicago Art Institute’s grand Hall of Columbus. When those who attended the Sacramento unity rally recalled the service, they emphasized the rally’s staging, echoing the spectators of the 1893 Parliament. Sherrie said to me about the ceremony: “I was very impressed, I remember we had some religious leaders who came up, and we got a big check from a Methodist group, a woman came up…” she trailed off, thinking back to 1999. “I just think the visual for me is more the religious leaders, who put on those gorgeous religious garbs and stood up on that stage,” she determined. “Just that, a strike against this one is a strike against all of us.”

Other members of B’nai Israel recalled how “packed” the community center was and how astonished they were when “they drew back the curtains and all of these members of the

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82 Sherrie, interview with author, 2/11/2014.
clergy were there, and it was like, ‘Oh my God.’” The aesthetics of the event were as important, if not more so, than the content of the event. Messages of unity and love were impressed upon people through speeches but also through the physical presence of their neighbors, the visual impact of clergy in solidarity, and the words themselves imprinted on t-shirts, posters, banners, pamphlets, bookmarks, pins, and signs. American flags merged with hearts, illustrating the shared love between fellow Americans.

Local community members’ responses to the arsons merely amplified an already normative mode of engaging with diversity; they traversed a well-worn path formed by two hundred years of an American promise and pride in its religious liberty and equality. My conversation with Osman and Shaheen demonstrates that these ideals are pervasive ones; the language of pluralism and tolerance reverberated throughout my interactions with B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society congregants and even through my experiences at the rebuilt synagogue and mosque. The values of religious freedom and acceptance are not isolated to the responses after hate crimes but are integral to the story these religious minority communities tell about themselves. The language and images of the unity rallies in Sacramento and Joplin clearly emerged from the particular American history of intentioned religious pluralism. The established philosophy of tolerance and visual affirmations of unified diversity serve only to enhance these messages for religious adherents victim to the arsons.

83 Mark, interview with author, 2/20/2014.
84 Some scholars call into question the deliberate nature of America’s religious pluralism. In writing about the 1893 Parliament, Richard Hughes Seager writes that, “a pluralist current, torrent, or undertow has been flowing right along with the shifting fortunes of a consensus-seeking mainstream for many, many years.” His words imply that religious diversity is actually an uncontrollable, and perhaps unwanted, force. Richard Hughes Seager, “Pluralism and the American Mainstream,” in A Museum of Faiths, ed. Eric J. Ziołkowski (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 218.
Members of the Islamic Society and B’nai Israel privilege their positive memories of their neighbors’ responses to the arsons, making clear that the general local, national, and international support, and particularly the local unity rallies, allowed them to heal from the arsons’ hateful violence. In conversations with me, congregants consistently reiterated the messages of tolerance and their experiences of unity, and in so doing, demonstrated that they are embedded within the discourses and practices of American religious pluralism. They are all practitioners of American “civic religion.” However, they are shaped not only by the history, ideologies, and experiences of religious pluralism; their civic religiosity is also constituted by governing bodies. By developing the proper relationships with political and law enforcement officials, B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society ensure that they fit within normative understandings of American religious diversity.

As previously discussed, Congregation B’nai Israel is tightly connected to the governing authorities, state and federal alike. Their congregation’s deep history in Sacramento lends them both respectability and power. Moreover, members retain political standings, from the cantor’s husband’s previous post as State Senate Pro Tem and a former board member who, at the time of the arson, was the U.S. District Attorney to State Superior Court judges and city councilmen. Rabbi Alfi served as the State Senate chaplain from 2008-2014.85 Appointed through the cantor’s husband when he became Pro Tem, she was part of a lineage of B’nai Israel senior rabbis to serve as chaplain, she told me. “Most of the senior rabbis since World War Two, or any rabbi that they have in the Senate has been a senior rabbi of our congregation—um, in the Assembly

85 “Chaplain History,” Senate Chaplain web site, http://chaplain.senate.ca.gov/content/history.
actually either.”86 She thought about B’nai Israel’s political involvements for a moment, then said, “Every Jewish elected official in town is a member of our congregation.” Although there are other synagogues in the area, B’nai Israel sees itself, and is seen by many others, as the city’s political Jewish congregation.

Through their involvement in the local and state political scenes, B’nai Israel members cultivated extensive networks with a wide range of institutions and developed close relationships to other officials. Rabbi Alfi explained that, “Sacramento politics is very small-town; everybody knows everybody else.” Consequentially, she said, “I think there’s very few people in the capital who have not been here [B’nai Israel] for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah.”87 Transitioning the conversation to the topic of the arson, I began to ask, “How do you think that that [the political relationships] influenced…?” But before I could finish my question with “the responses to the arson,” Rabbi Alfi interrupted. “They picked the wrong place,” she said firmly, matter-of-factly.88 She repeated it with greater emphasis, “They picked the wrong place.” She continued:

Like I said, the U.S. District Attorney and— And one of his lieutenants were both members of our congregation. The U.S. District Attorney was on our board. Um, Darrell Steinberg [the cantor’s husband] was the Assemblyman. Uh, I’m pretty sure Steve Cohn was on city council even then. So… it was very personal. So we’re also dealing with law enforcement. We’ve always had a really wonderful relationship with law enforcement here in Sacramento… This was not our first attack. Um, maybe fifteen years earlier, there had been a Molotov cocktail thrown, over on the grassy area, but it did not detonate. So we’ve always had a really close relationship with law enforcement because on High Holidays, they come and bring their police dogs to sweep the area for bombs and stuff. Um, and whenever we need extra security, they’ll do extra drive-bys or post a cop.

86 Rabbi Mona Alfi, interview with author, 2/7/2014.
87 Ibid.
88 “They” refers to the perpetrators of the 1999 Sacramento synagogue arsons.
Rabbi Alfi made clear that congregants’ own positions in the political sphere helped to establish critical connections. Moreover, the congregation had already formed relationships with the police due to the previous attacks on the synagogue.

Joe, who was the synagogue’s outgoing president at the time of the arson, had already developed close contact with law enforcement agencies and officials prior to the 1999 arson. He knew well the Sacramento police chief and the sheriff, with whom he had worked when there were other threats or attacks to the congregation, such as the aforementioned Molotov cocktail in 1993. The police helped orchestrate additional protections for B’nai Israel members, even going so far as to provide bulletproof vests for the clergy after one particular threat. Because of these pre-established relationships, Joe told me: “This was more than just another fire for the ATF, more than just another fire for the FBI, or the Sacmo [Sacramento] police department, Sacmo fire department, or the sheriff’s department. They all had this look in their eyes, like, ‘Oh fuck. Shit. Are you kidding me?’” After the arson, the Sacramento police chief and sheriff, the head of the FBI’s Sacramento office, and the head of the local division of the ATF became part of a task force working to find and prosecute the criminals behind the attack. Though three synagogues had been attacked, Joe was “the only non-law enforcement person” on the force.

Like Rabbi Alfi and Joe, many other B’nai Israel members mentioned the congregation’s connections to political institutions and individuals, as well as to the law enforcement community. Often, in so doing, they also implied or even outwardly acknowledged that such relationships were not standard. Officials’ responses to the arson were potentially situational, dependent upon the place (and thereby the community) attacked. For example, by declaring that

89 Joe, interview with author, 2/18/2014.
“they picked the wrong place,” Rabbi Alfi suggested that B’nai Israel is unique in its relationships to those in positions of power. Similarly, Carol said, “I think we were really lucky because we were here, you know, members of our congregation were on the city council, so you know… We had all these ‘in’s to do things.” Hearing her words, she quickly added on, “I think our city is good enough that they would have done it anyway, but it sure made it a lot easier, figuring out how we’re gonna do this.”

The B’nai Israel community takes pride in its historical and political ties to Sacramento. Congregants understand themselves as both shaped by and shaping the city. By establishing themselves in political postings, community members have access to influence state and city, and they have strengthened the support for their religious community through cementing relationships with bureaucratic powers. Although, as Carol intimated, the city would likely respond similarly to attacks committed against other communities, B’nai Israel has “‘in’s to do things.” Their affiliations with political officials and heads of law enforcement ensured thorough investigations and complete backing after the arson. “I can’t imagine what it would be like for a community to go through something like this and not have that basis of support,” Carol told me, teary-eyed. “I mean… everybody talked about it, everybody responded to it.”

Islamic Society members’ experience of official responses to the arson of their mosque were markedly more mixed. Some, like Joanna, felt that, “we had a lot of support from the FBI, a lot of support from local law enforcement.” Others worried about the extent to which authorities were working to find and prosecute the crime’s perpetrator. And, much to the

90 Carol and Rob, interview with author, 2/12/2014.
91 Ibid.
confusion of many Islamic Society members, the fire marshal initially ruled the arson accidental, despite the fact that, the month prior, security cameras captured images of a man throwing an incendiary device onto the mosque’s roof. In comparison to B’nai Israel’s connections to governing authorities, members of the Islamic Society expressed contradictory feelings about legal and political responses to the attack on their community.

Not a single member of the Islamic Society communicated having relationships to political figures. Moreover, it is clear that they are still in the process of establishing trust with the local and federal law enforcement communities. As previously discussed, Islamic Society members were committed to establishing a “proper American mosque” recognized by the government as a legitimate religious institution. “It’s a modern mosque,” like any non-profit organization, founding member Rida told me. This involved not only formalizing a constitution and bylaws and electing a board but also developing a transparent relationship with the FBI and local law enforcement.

While Islamic Society members need to monitor themselves internally for their own safety, Rida said, they also have to be vigilant because a local FBI agent was assigned to the Islamic Society to keep an eye on things. Rida’s husband Umar reiterated the importance of taking care within the Muslim community but also of establishing an open relationship with the law enforcement community:

We were constantly under vigilance from the FBI… We had agents that were in the area, and they were always visiting. We actually invited them ourselves, you know, to have food with us and see what we do. We always had a close relationship with them.95

93 Rida, interview with author, 4/18/2014.
94 Rida gave me the example of the Islamic Society’s rule that no one can stay at the mosque overnight; it cannot be a guesthouse. This way, the mosque never harvests anyone who could even potentially be a problem in the future.
95 Umar, interview with author, 7/10/2015.
From their descriptions of the Islamic Society’s relationship to the FBI, it is clear that Rida and Umar understand that they are being watched. They are aware that they are under surveillance. However, they both also seem to feel compelled to submit to being surveilled. Rida indicated a desire to aid the FBI by self-monitoring within their own Muslim community, while Umar invited agents into their community to eat with them and “to see what we do.” Knowing Rida, Umar, and much of the Islamic Society, I do not doubt in the least their genuine desire to establish amicable relationships with anyone; however, the move to do so with FBI agents underscores the Islamic Society’s broader efforts to render themselves visible and knowable to those outside of community, particularly to those with power.

Members of the Islamic Society are cognizant of their fledgling relationships to the people of Joplin, as well as local and national law enforcement. Osman said that the Kansas City FBI chief and the local sheriff met and told the Islamic Society that “they would not leave any stone unturned to investigate this.” Osman added that the local police also told them, “Whenever you need something, if you see any suspicious activity, call us immediately.” Law enforcement officials communicated to Islamic Society members that they were doing their best to understand the fire, and later, to indict the criminal. They also assured the Muslim community that they would support them throughout.

In our conversations, a few people, like Joanna and Osman, conveyed that they felt that the aforementioned official responses were supportive. However, many others, even Joanna, acknowledged suspicions about the investigative follow-through. Joanna shared with me that she

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96 Shaheen and Osman, interview with author, 5/2/2014.
was surprised by the fire marshal’s ruling that the fire was accidental. “I thought it was really broad,” she said. “What kind of accident do you mean? Was it electrical? We don’t have any candles or anything. What could it possibly have been?” Authorities eventually determined that the fire was an arson and therefore would be treated as a hate crime. They began investigations, but after several months, Islamic Society members began to wonder why the FBI and police could not find the perpetrator or perpetrators. As Tahira said, “We were disappointed […] that nobody was caught, although there were, you know, images and all that.” She explained further: “They had the picture… from the video surveillance. […] So it was surprising, it was disappointing. I mean, we were like, ‘You have a picture of that guy, you know, how could you not find him?’” Ultimately, the police found a man who had burned down a nearby Planned Parenthood. In questioning, he admitted that he had also committed the mosque arson. Shaking her head, Shaheen said, “The FBI wouldn’t have known, had he not confessed.”

The Islamic Society and B’nai Israel have distinctly different relationships to political authorities and law enforcement officials. While B’nai Israel members have a long history of being tightly connected to both bureaucratic entities, Islamic Society members are still endeavoring to develop a similarly intimate relationship. However, law enforcement seems to be as equally suspicious of the Islamic Society as the Islamic Society seemed to be of their investigative efforts after the arson. An aura of scrutiny underpins and shapes their interactions

98 Tahira, interview with author, 7/15/2015.
99 Shaheen and Osman, interview with author, 5/2/2014.
100 It cannot go without saying that it may not be that B’nai Israel received extensive support largely due to the relationships they have cultivated with governing authorities. The B’nai Israel community is also white and benignly (read: invisibly) Jewish. Moreover, the Islamic Society is likely only partially suspect because they are less known to the local Joplin community. They are both brown-skinned and clearly foreign, as many members wear traditional
with these powers, even as the Muslim community of Joplin continues to work at being a “proper, American mosque” and a legitimate American religious minority, transparent and rule-abiding.

**REINSCRIBING UNITY**

Although the Islamic Society and B’nai Israel were already woven into the fabric of American civic religion, the arsons prompted them to reaffirm their commitment to it. They could have retreated into themselves, finding ways to recover and rebuild on their own. Instead, they chose to work as an integrated unit, collaborating with their neighbors and with local and national governing authorities. They could have reacted angrily or vindictively, but they chose to focus on unity amidst diversity, on the potential for the harmony of difference. The unity rallies physically reminded B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members of the significant power of practicing the religious pluralism so central to their identities as Americans. Years later, they continue to highlight these cooperative interactions and concentrate on realizing the unity ideal.

Yet the unity rally is only one of the many venues in which Americans may observe their “civic religion.” From interfaith panels and celebrations to collaborative volunteer work and social justice advocacy, American religious communities came together across faith traditions to connect “despite” the differences that separate them. Even before the arsons, B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society had established interfaith traditions to bond their communities with other religious groups. They instated regular interfaith group meetings and meals. They opened their Pakistani or Middle Eastern garb. Their non-whiteness and their Muslim Otherness render them more suspect. Throughout my discussion of these hate crimes specifically, and American religious pluralism more generally, the issue of race skulks in the background.
holiday festivities to the public and planned and participated in social action events. Among both religious groups, a distinct priority emerged from the arsons’ ashes: the need for continued and enhanced interfaith work.

After the arsons and rallies, B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society worked to build upon their relationships with people outside of their religious communities, with their neighbors, with political figures, and with law enforcement officials. They increased the frequency of their interfaith activities and expanded advertising of these activities in attempts to extend their reach and bring more people to interfaith events. They focused not only on meeting and becoming acquainted with their neighbors but also on educating others about their religious ideologies and practices. In the immediate wake of anti-religion violence, members of the Islamic Society and B’nai Israel concentrated on making themselves, as religious adherents and as individuals, known to their neighbors.

As time passed, however, B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society diverged in the degree of their efforts. B’nai Israel’s extensive interfaith work only lasted so long, while Islamic Society members remain dedicated to interfaith involvement. Although more time has passed since the Sacramento arson, and therefore one might expect the Islamic Society’s efforts to wane over the next few years, a comparison of conversations with congregations indicates that divergent degrees of religious legibility largely accounts for the discrepancy in these two communities’ efforts toward interfaith relations. While B’nai Israel is a known community, with intimate relationships to local leadership and news outlets, the Islamic Society of Joplin continues to struggle with its neighbors’ misunderstandings and with widespread media misrepresentations of Muslims. Consequently, whereas B’nai Israel is more interested in celebrating the perspectives
and values they share with other religious groups, the Islamic Society remains deeply dedicated to making themselves known to their neighbors.

Interfaith, Before and After

Even before the arsons, B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society members sought to make their religious communities legible to the public. They explained that because education is at the root of understanding, they need to teach other religious communities about who they, as Jews and Muslims, are. They also stressed the need to demonstrate reciprocal efforts to understand their neighbors’ religious traditions. The arsons only intensified the need for interfaith work and understanding through education. Immediately after the attacks, both congregations intensified their efforts, amplifying and extending their pre-existing interfaith activities.

Members of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society expressed the importance of mutual religious understanding with their broader Sacramento and Joplin communities. Years before the arson, Umar formed an interfaith coalition in Joplin with one of his friends, a fellow physician at the hospital and a member of the Joplin Jewish congregation, United Hebrew. The idea was that “what brings closeness between community members is when you know who they are, where they are, what they do,” Umar said. “So I think the first thing on our mind was that we should know all other faiths, and the only way we can remove estrangement is by knowing each other.”

101 I asked him how one comes to know someone of another religious group. “By going

visiting,” he responded. “Interaction, talking, dining, and prayer service… See what they do, and you’ll find nine out of ten times that all people in the world are the same.”

Rabbi Alfi’s thoughts on inter-religious education parallel Umar’s motivation for initiating an interfaith group. “Education is the only thing which can bring people closer,” she told me. “That’s what we need, people learning about other people, and it’s not just Christians about Jews and Hindus learning about Muslims; it’s important for us to learn about all the others, too.” People need to go to others’ holiday celebrations and find respect for others’ religions, she said. “It goes both ways.” Both Rabbi Alfi and Umar make clear that community and understanding develop through actively interested and engaged encounters, in which all parties are present to learn and to develop new relationships.

Before the arsons, both the Islamic Society and B’nai Israel were involved in interfaith work. B’nai Israel hosted interfaith community celebrations of holidays like the Yom Kippur break-fast, a pre-Passover mock seder, and an annual Hanukkah party. The congregation is also known for having an internal interfaith group, for B’nai Israel’s own interfaith couples and families to discuss topics in Judaism and Jewish practice. Social action events are also popular interfaith activities, bringing together people from around Sacramento for blood drives, river clean-ups, and soup-kitchen work.

In Joplin, Umar’s Joplin Interfaith Coalition holds regular interfaith panels, in which representatives from several religious groups (usually two or three local Christian churches, United Hebrew, the Islamic Society, and the Baha’i community) discuss a given topic. In the

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102 Later in the chapter, I will explain why it is that learning about other religious traditions becomes equated with learning the shared nature of being religious and of being human.
103 Rabbi Mona Alfi, interview with author, 2/7/2014.
past, topics have included fasting in faith; thoughts on death, dying, and the afterlife; and major festivals or feasts. They hold semi-regular multicultural dinners and have an annual Interfaith Prayer Service. The Islamic Society also invites “neighbors and other communities and church members and synagogue members” to attend an *iftar* dinner during Ramadan, Osman informed me. “In fact, we had an interfaith meeting just a night before the event [the arson] happened.”

The community even invited “all the law enforcement people, the sheriff, and the police chief” for that dinner, Osman said, because someone had attempted an arson in early July and they needed the extra surveillance.

In the months after the arsons, and their respective unity rallies, both religious groups amplified their interfaith efforts. In Sacramento, B’nai Israel members joined community interfaith groups in increasing numbers. Board members established an annual Unity Run/Walk in Land Park, which was held for a few years after the arson on the anniversary of the attack. People came in droves with their children and pets to run, walk, and stroll around Lake Park, a physical demonstration, as Rabbi Alfi put it, of “the tremendous amount of good and brotherhood and solidarity that came out of the fire.”

Finally, then-Assemblyman Darrell Steinberg (the cantor’s husband who later became State Senate Pro Tem) proposed building a Capital Unity Center, to be constructed at 16th and N streets in downtown Sacramento. It would be a similar experience to the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, which houses exhibits about the Holocaust and hate crimes to raise awareness about difference. The goal was to have it be part of the experience of visiting the state capital, for

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104 Shaheen and Osman, interview with author, 5/2/2014.
105 Rabbi Mona Alfi, interview with author, 2/7/2014.
school-age children and their families. However, despite conducting extensive research, outlining a plan for the space, and raising some initial funds, the idea fizzled. “It was just a beautiful idea at the time; it wasn’t just for Jews, you know,” Sherrie said, emphasizing that this would have been a place to talk about difference and tolerance of all communities. “But we don’t have a lot of corporate sponsors in Sacramento, and everybody’s going to the same person for money… We’re a government town, really.”  

In Joplin, interfaith work was marginally more constrained, limited to individual congregational interactions rather than large-scale citywide events. The Islamic Society continued to collaborate with other religious communities for celebrations, prayer, social action efforts, and educational panels. They had an exhibit in the city library, and they maintained an active Facebook page, reaching out to other religious communities to wish Jews a happy Rosh Hashanah or Christians a Merry Christmas. Islamic Society members “got more involved in the Interfaith Alliance, and we started breaking out of our little shell,” Joanna told me. “People wanted to talk to us and learn about Islam; I can’t even tell you how many schools and churches and groups I have gone to to talk about it!” Both the Islamic Society and B’nai Israel markedly intensified their interfaith efforts after the arsons, but, as the next section shows, their approaches to inter-religious activities have shifted with the passing of time since the attacks.

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Although both B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society emphasized enhancing their religious legibility to those outside of their communities, the groups diverged in their techniques over time. In the years after the arson, B’nai Israel eventually shifted focus to increasing interfaith efforts when necessary, for example, when another minority community is attacked. Moreover, when they do engage in interfaith activities, they tend to reiterate sameness, specifically regarding their common values. Alternatively, Islamic Society members continue their regular interfaith activities in efforts to teach their neighbors about Islam, while they also strive to learn more about their neighbors’ religious traditions.

In the course of speaking with B’nai Israel congregants fifteen years after the arson, I found that they felt that interfaith activities have dwindled. “We don’t do a lot formally with other congregations,” Dave, the head of the Rebuilding Cabinet, said to me. Some members remain involved in a wider community group called the Interfaith Service Bureau and another called Area Congregations Together, his wife Susan added. “But in the life of our congregation,” Dave said, “it is a small thing, the amount of contact.” Susan again interjected to point out that individual B’nai Israel members are involved in their own informal interfaith activities, from social-action work to political efforts. While Dave agreed, he admitted that, “The truth is, the energy that is put in tends to wane as time passes, and people get more caught up in their own situations.”

Although active interfaith efforts faded into the background, warm feelings still existed among the different religious communities of Sacramento. Carol expressed that the ties with

108 Dave and Susan, interview with author, 2/19/2014.
other minority groups “are still in existence, I think… probably not as intense… but the sense that this is all a community.” Her husband Rob chimed in, “I don’t know what the strength of those bonds had been, but I assume that they’re still strong enough that if anything ever happened again…” Carol interrupted, emphasizing, “to anybody.” “To anybody,” Rob confirmed, “that everybody would stand up.”

Rob and Carol identified a shared sentiment, left unproven, among congregants of B’nai Israel. Even though regular interfaith work has ebbed, they generally maintain that if anything happened to anyone, there would be a collective sign of support from the Sacramento community broadly. Former city councilman Steve Cohn confirmed the sentiment, saying, “Today, you know, any time any act of hate, intolerance occurs, you have a coming together.”

Or they come together in commemoration of an act of hate. On June 18, 2014, the fifteenth anniversary of its arson, B’nai Israel hosted an interfaith event called, “The Arson Fires of 1999, 15 Years Later: A Night to Look Back — A Night to Plan Ahead.” The evening involved the viewing of a documentary film called *An American Mosque*, which tells the story of the 1994 arson of a mosque in Yuba City, California (just about forty-five minutes north of Sacramento). The film was made by David Washburn, a childhood member of B’nai Israel who now lives in Oakland, California. As Washburn told me:

> What it does come down to is that people are really busy. It’s super difficult to get interfaith things off the ground and people to come out and do anything, and so it only happens when something really bad happens. And people always talk about, ‘Why don’t we get together when something bad isn’t happening? Why don’t we do this more often? Why is this only when there is like, tragedy that we get together?’

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109 Carol and Rob, interview with author, 2/12/2014.
110 Steve Cohn, interview with author, 6/10/2014. His name is not a pseudonym.
111 David Washburn, interview with author, 6/18/2014. His name is not a pseudonym.
Washburn’s words clearly express B’nai Israel members’ attitudes toward interfaith activity. Since the 1999 arson, congregants have largely carried on, returning to their normal busy lives. They have mostly left interfaith efforts to disappear — until another hate crime occurs, and inter-religious cooperation again become a necessity.

In contrast to B’nai Israel, Islamic Society members continues their regular participation in the Joplin Interfaith Coalition and in monthly interfaith ladies’ lunches. They also regularly host interfaith meals, such as the interfaith iftar I attended at the end of Ramadan 2015. Congregants of United Hebrew and members of the local Disciples of Christ Church came to the new mosque to meet and spend time with members of the Islamic Society. Before they shared in the iftar meal, law student Sadeeq gave a speech, citing the Qu’ran and philosophizing to apply various suras to their lives. He explained the ideologies of Ramadan, saying that fasting is enrichment. He quoted sura 94, “Verily, with every difficulty, there is relief.” When we help each other, he expounded, we overcome. Not just Muslims, but all of us.112

Sadeeq’s interfaith iftar speech reiterates the idea that people find strength through struggling together. Like Sadeeq and many other Islamic Society members, Rabia feels that the arson was a reminder to engage in any and all interfaith opportunities. Through the arson, “Christians and Muslims and Jews […] learned about each other,” she reported. “[The arson] brought people closer… The act of one person, such an evil act, brought so much goodness out of others.”113 Reminiscent of Steve’s highlighting communal responses to the arson as a “silver lining,” Rabia reiterated the importance of continued practices of pluralism, of using the post-

112 Fieldnotes, 7/12/2015.
113 Rabia, interview with author, 5/1/2014.
arson momentum to drive further inter-religious education and engagement. Salma, Umar’s and Rida’s daughter, concurs with Rabia and Sadeeq. “I think the fact that the mosque burned down was a wake-up call for a lot of people who lived here,” she told me. “Even though it’s [the arson is] bad, I still think the end of, like, the story of our community can still be a positive thing… Joplin is perhaps getting better. Hopefully.” However, she added, “There’s… a lot of work to be done around here.”

While the arson was a “wake-up call” for many, and the post-arson responses were typically positive, Islamic Society members insist that the work is not done. As Salma explained, “There are people here who try to, like, put fear in all the minorities who live here.” And even if they do not explicitly harass minority groups, they fail to acknowledge their privilege. “They’re like, ‘Oh, that doesn’t affect me,’” Salma remarked. “It’s like, well, yeah, of course it does!” she said. “Like, just the fact that you can go to church and not worry that somebody might come and do something awful to your place of worship, like, that’s already like a kind of a privilege that you have living here.” As Salma made abundantly clear, she and others at Islamic Society recognize that there needs to be a great deal more interfaith work in order to level the playing fields of religious equality in Joplin. In the next section, I examine the discrepancies between B’nai Israel members’ and Islamic Society members’ approaches to interfaith activities today.

114 Salma, interview with author, 7/15/2015.
115 Ibid.
Religious Legibility

As the arsons became more a part of the past, B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society of Joplin have diverged in their interfaith efforts. This is largely due to the two religious groups’ differing relationships to their local and national communities. As a result of its extensive history in Sacramento, Congregation B’nai Israel has cultivated established relationships with bureaucratic authorities, media outlets, and other religious communities. By contrast, the relatively young Islamic Society of Joplin is still developing connections to Joplin and its citizens, even as they struggle to counter negative media portrayals of Muslims. While B’nai Israel members are already part of America’s Judeo-Christian pluralist landscape, Islamic Society members are working to fit themselves into the terrain.

B’nai Israel’s religious pluralism and interfaith involvement are intrinsic. Firstly, B’nai Israel counts a number of interfaith couples as members, supporting them through the congregation’s own internal interfaith group. Moreover, as previously discussed, the congregation benefits both from members’ careers as political and public figures and from their close connections to other government and law enforcement officials. Likewise, the congregation receives significant support from the media. And perhaps most importantly, B’nai Israel and other local religious communities enjoy long-established relationships built upon their shared Judeo-Christian qualities.

Among Sacramento’s Jewish communities, B’nai Israel is not only the oldest area congregation and its largest Reform synagogue, but it is also especially known for its inclusivity, open to LGBTQ members and interfaith families. While Sacramento Bee reporter Steve was raised in a conservative Jewish family, his wife Eleanor grew up in the Presbyterian Church. Through B’nai Israel’s interfaith program, the couple found their way into the community. “We
went to a meeting, and it felt very comfortable,” Eleanor said. She laughed, thinking back to their early encounters with B’nai Israel’s interfaith group:

I remember at the end of the meeting someone said, ‘Okay, who wants to bring the bagels to the next meeting?’ and we [she and Steve] looked at each other and said, ‘Okay, we’ll do it.’ That was sort of how we became as involved as we are. One box of bagels.116

Within months, Steve and Eleanor formally joined B’nai Israel, just about a year before the arson. After that, they increased their involvement at the synagogue, where Steve served as synagogue president and then spent a decade serving on the board of trustees.

Like Steve and Eleanor, a number of other families have been drawn to B’nai Israel through the congregation’s interfaith families program. The fact that there is an interfaith families program at B’nai Israel, let alone the fact that it is popular, demonstrates that the congregation is innately focused on inter-religious activities, conversations, and interactions. B’nai Israel’s attitude toward interfaith families also indicates an overall trend among Jewish communities in the United States. While intermarriages in general are significantly more common today than in the past few decades, the 2013 Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews found that forty-four percent of Jewish respondents are married to non-Jewish spouses.117 The data suggests that Jewish communities intermarry at higher rates than comparably sized religious minority communities in the U.S.118

116 Eleanor, interview with author, 2/14/2015.
118 It must be noted that there are some problems inherent to religion surveys generally and this intermarriage survey in particular. We should take care not to lean too heavily on the data, given the lack of statistics from earlier in the twentieth century; increasing racial/ethnic/religious intermarriage as a whole across the country; and the relatively small size of the U.S. Jewish population. However, the numbers are still significant if we compare them to similarly sized American religious communities, such as Mormons (13% intermarried) and Muslims (16% intermarried).
Rates of Jewish intermarriages only tell us so much about B’nai Israel’s interfaith efforts, but they do prompt us to take into account the extent to which the American Jewish community at large has assimilated into the nation’s religious landscape. Jews are an understood population in much of the United States, and B’nai Israel is an especially known Jewish community with an integrated presence in Sacramento. B’nai Israel members are, and have been, politicians, lawyers, judges, and even the State Senate chaplain, while other congregants work for local media. Subsequently, when the arson occurred, their established influences prompted substantial governmental responses and considerable media attention.

B’nai Israel benefited from congregants who worked as media professionals, from Steve, a reporter for the Sacramento Bee; to a member who worked for a publishing company; to a member who, according to Carol, helped coordinate journalistic coverage of the arson at a local news station. Across the board, B’nai Israel members felt that the media was more than simply conscious of the attacks; the media was instrumental in helping the community through the attacks. “I thought the media was right on target,” Sherrie said. “It [the arson] was not a blip on the screen for them. It was a huge story internationally.”²"The newspapers were incredible,” Carol said, echoing Sherrie’s sentiment. “They were phenomenal in keeping this in the news and keeping people aware of what was going on and what people could do to help.” She laughed, adding, “And this was pre-Twitter!”²¹

B’nai Israel members remembered media responses “as overwhelming boons at the time. Such responses confirmed their place in Sacramento,” Dave noted. “We became the center of

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¹¹ Carol and Rob, interview with author, 2/12/2014.  
¹¹ Carol and Rob, interview with author, 2/12/2014.
attention for the city in a big way, for a period of time.” He continued: “By this time in Sacramento’s history, the Jews were not seen as the Other; we were not seen as a population separate from the rest of Sacramento. We were within the fabric of the city." B’nai Israel is established in Sacramento, almost rendering unnecessary any community emphasis on its religious legibility to political figures, the media, and neighbors. However, as we recall from B’nai Israel’s collective memories of the arson, community members frame the attack as a reminder of their own religious obligation to make the world a better place, *l’taken et ha’olam*. In their eyes, they can make the world better by navigating the problem of (religious) difference, through recognizing and highlighting the similarities among themselves and their neighbors.

As former congregation president Joe told me, “We may pray differently, we may observe different holidays than you do, but at the core of our value system, we’re the same.” Joe’s words reveal a shared sensibility among B’nai Israel members, and many Americans, that everyone holds a set of common values. Different religions are distinctive in their individual trappings — their rituals, their theologies, their festivals, their liturgies, their traditions. But ultimately, the idea holds, the underpinning moral codes are same. This sentiment was physically manifested at B’nai Israel’s fifteenth-anniversary commemoration of the arson.

After the screening of *An American Mosque*, a panel of “prominent Sacramento religious leaders” discussed their views on “interfaith cooperation.” The panel included Rabbi Alfi, the imam of the Sacramento Salam Islamic Center, the reverend of Trinity Episcopal Church, and the

122 Dave and Susan, interview with author, 2/19/2014.

123 *Tikkun olam* means the “repair of the world”; “*l’taken et ha’olam*” means “to repair the world.”

124 Joe, interview with author, 2/18/2014.

125 Flyer for the “Fifteenth Anniversary Commemoration of the Arson,” June 18, 2014, B’nai Israel.
pastor of Capital Christian Center, who together discussed the importance of fighting misconceptions and instead finding one another as people.\(^\text{126}\) We need to be intolerant of those who are intolerant, the pastor joked, prompting laughter and applause. As the event came to an end, the audience stood together in unity — but beneath the applause, I heard a murmur. Two rows behind me, a B’nai Israel congregant wearing a Holocaust Memorial t-shirt whispered wryly under his breath, “Hooray for us!”\(^\text{127}\)

The sardonic comment from the congregant behind me at the interfaith commemoration event implies a dubiousness about the efficacy of such interfaith activities. To a certain extent, such activities do “back-pat” more than they actively instate change. Events like the interfaith commemoration reinforce, rather than create, change. They encourage the celebration of shared values over grappling with the challenges of difference. As Joe explained to me, it is possible to “[knock] down the walls of hatred by attacking the ignorance that feeds into the hatred, or upon which the hatred is founded.”\(^\text{128}\) In other words, education has the power to dispel the hatred generated by ignorance. He offered an example of the ways that education might undo ignorance by encouraging people to learn and think:

Not that you’re gonna be successful, but you make people think about things, like, ‘Well, maybe, okay so, they say prayers in Hebrew instead of in English.’ Well, sometimes Catholics say prayers in Latin. I don’t know Latin, I know Hebrew. But that doesn’t mean I hate you. […] If you look at Catholicism and Judaism, um I’d posture— I’d say there’s

\(^{126}\) Interestingly, the reverend spoke about how holiness comes from unity and that the devil deals with division. Here is already a notable theological discrepancy from Judaism, which see separation/division as constructive of holiness. Even if anyone else noticed, no one pointed out these discordant views.

\(^{127}\) Joe, interview with author, 2/18/2014. When I spoke with David Washburn, he expressed similar thoughts about the doubts conveyed in the whisper. “The interfaith stuff, too, that’s not so solution driven,” he said. “That’s just a smaller form of all patting each other on the back a little bit. I mean, I don’t want to pooh-pooh, and we’re doing something here, that’s fine. Um, I mean having done enough interfaith stuff in this area and Yuba City, it’s like, it’s the same. I mean the very same people who come out to it are the ones that are open to the message.” David Washburn, interview with author, 6/18/2014.

\(^{128}\) Joe, interview with author, 2/18/2014.
more similarities than there are dissimilarities. We know the point of departure, between
the Old Testament and New Testament. We know the role that Jesus occupies in
Catholicism. Okay, accept all that. But if you look at the Old Testament and how they
study Old Testament, and how we study Old Testament, there are more similarities in our
belief system than there are dissimilarities. Absolutely.129

Joe’s words illustrate the belief that teaching and learning about religion lead to understanding
the commonalities among religious groups and imply that it is those similarities that breed the
communality and unity necessary for peace. In other words, B’nai Israel’s interfaith efforts
subvert hatred of difference by emphasizing similarities and disregarding diversity. Such
interfaith work fortifies the common moral codes characteristic of the Judeo-Christian secularism
that grounds American religious pluralism.130

The language of shared values resonates softly among members of the Islamic Society, as
well. Umar employed the metaphor of a soccer team to illustrate his vision of interfaith
understanding. All religions use their feet, head, and chest to work toward the same goal. They
might use their bodies in different ways, but they share similar parts. And most importantly, they
share the same endpoint. “They have the same emotions, same aspirations, same goals, same
goodness, righteousness, same as a human being,” Umar explained. “We are all the same. We
want goodness, we want righteousness, we want faith.”131 Regardless of your religion, Umar
continued, you have the Ten Commandments. Through the analogy of the soccer team and his

129 Ibid.
130 As Elizabeth Shakman Hurd writes, “Most importantly, Judeo-Christian secularism is not necessarily the basis of
Western governance; it is a powerfully imagined cultural worldview.” Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, “The Politics of
Secularism,” in Rethinking Religion and World Affairs, ed. Timothy Samuel Shah, Alfred Stepan, and Monica Duffy
131 Umar, interview with author, 7/10/2015.
example of the Ten Commandments, Umar dissolved the major distinctions between religious traditions in order to privilege their shared characteristics, and above all, their shared values.

However, even though many members of the Islamic Society have come to hold these beliefs, they have yet to be accepted into Judeo-Christian secular America. The Islamic Society is relatively new to Joplin, and the community has very few interfaith couples as members, both indicators that they are differently assimilated into Joplin than B’nai Israel is in Sacramento. Where B’nai Israel had the extensive support of local, national, and international media, the Islamic Society had trouble getting media attention and, along with the rest of the international Muslim population, currently combats widespread, harmful media misrepresentations. Thus, as much as Islamic Society members have adopted the messages of shared American values, they are still working to make themselves known to their neighbors and to validate their place in the American religious landscape and in Judeo-Christian secular society.

Islamic Society members either felt unsupported and ignored by the media or explicitly undermined by it. A number of people told me that after the arson, they received no national recognition. “We got no media attention after; we felt like no one was covering it,” law student Sadeeq said. “Like, I went to CNN, couldn’t find it on their website, and so it was pretty frustrating.” Islamic Society president Shan confirmed that he had difficulties prompting national news to acknowledge their mosque’s destruction. “I called CNN… And they received the call, and when we told them about the mosque, they hang up on us,” he told me. “They hung up on you?” I repeated, sure I heard him wrong. “Mhmm,” he confirmed. “So we called them again, and I said, ‘Hey we had this happen, we need to have it on media, on television. So it went

132 Sadeeq, interview with author, 7/12/2015.
to the voicemail, we left a message. Nobody called us.”  

Soon after the arson, the Islamic Society was contacted by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), which eventually prompted CNN and other news outlets to focus on the Islamic Society. Shaking his head, Shan said disappointedly, “It’s so sad that one of our national, um, television that people listen to, you know, not take a call from a group of American citizens.”

Other members of the Islamic Society were surprised by local news’ sparse coverage of the attack. Former Islamic Society member Jameel remembered that when the *Joplin Globe* and local television channels covered the event, they addressed previous hate crimes and the arson’s devastation. However, there was “really nothing about the person who did it,” Jameel said. “And I feel like in our news today, that’s all we hear after [a crime].”  

Shaheen acknowledged that the *Globe* at least made efforts to be more careful in its reporting of the arson. “In the past,” she said, “the *Joplin Globe* has printed materials that has, you know, inflamed people’s emotions, negative emotions, towards Islam.” She added that the media in general needs to be cautious about not “insinuating people to take actions against other people.”

Shaheen’s point is widely shared among Islamic Society members. The media conjures in them an overwhelming feeling of disheartened infuriation. Shan said, “We have a Fox News, we have CNBC, you know… If a person with a Muslim name, Muhammad, did something [bad], it gets so much air, and it gets so big-time popularity.”  

When Muslim terrorists execute attacks, Shan and I spoke just days after Muhammad Youssef Abdulazeez committed a mass shooting at a U.S. military recruiting center and reserve center in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

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133 Shan, interview with author, 7/19/2015.
134 Jameel, interview with author, 4/30/2014.
135 Shaheen and Osman, interview with author, 5/2/2014.
136 Shan, interview with author, 7/19/2015.
“American people, they are living in the villages, and they don’t know much,” he continued. “They will say, ‘Oh, these people [Muslims] are bad.’” Islamic Society members largely feel that the media, especially the radio and the television, creates major problems for Muslim communities by inciting hatred.

Immediately after the arson, members of the Islamic Society gathered at the home of Umar, Rida, and Salma, heartbroken over the loss of their mosque and angered by the act of hatred. “People were all over the living room and the kitchen,” Salma recalled. She continued:

I remember like, all the women were getting really upset… [one said], ‘The media, this is the media’s fault. Like, everyone here in the town is xenophobic, ‘cuz like, look at what CNN, all these people, and Fox News, look what they say about Muslims.’ And people would just get all riled up like, ‘Yeah, that’s why!’ […] There’s just a certain, a certain culture and politics in this region that’s obviously making it really difficult [to be Muslim in America].”

Her father Umar agreed. “Islamophobia is a reality,” he said frankly. “And Muslims are being labelled as terrorists. And I think the Islam is under attack… People are being radicalized about Muslims and Islam.” He worried about the quick spread of media’s messages, the rapid transformation of anger into action, and the ease of access to weapons. “What happens… You listen to Fox News and… you can just get upset. And then you get enraged and angry, and then we have a lot of weapons in this country. So you can pick up your gun, and you can go and shoot anybody.”

The stark juxtaposition of B’nai Israel’s post-arson experiences of the media with those of Islamic Society members reveals a major distinction between the two religious minority groups.

137 Ibid.
138 Salma, interview with author, 7/13/2015.
139 Umar, interview with author, 7/10/2015.
While B’nai Israel retains support from political figures and the media, the Islamic Society struggles to submit itself to the suspicious gaze of the government while it also works to counteract the media’s damaging misrepresentations of Muslims. As much as Islamic Society members want to espouse the “shared values” rhetoric of Judeo-Christian secularism, they are grappling with mitigating emphases on the danger of their Otherness. In contrast to B’nai Israel’s placid maintenance of Judeo-Christian religious pluralism, the Islamic Society engages in interfaith activities and education in order to undo the media’s harm and to enhance their religious legibility to their neighbors.

“We were kind of in a comfort zone, nothing is going to happen to us,” Osman said. “We cannot be so complacent; we have to be diligent and spread the message that, ‘Look, we are not bad people.’”\textsuperscript{140} Tragically, the arson reminded Islamic Society members that they have to take responsibility for their own safety. The onus is on the Muslim community to prevent others from attacking them by helping non-Muslim Americans understand them. Farooq confirmed this responsibility, saying:

After that incident [the arson], […]we had more frequent [interfaith] meetings… just to learn and know each other, just to— So that they don’t feel like we are, like, we are doing something different, we are plotting something against the— the whole Joplin, so that it’s better they know us rather than living as a stranger.\textsuperscript{141}

Farooq and Osman convey that Islamic Society members feel the need to educate their neighbors to assure them that they have nothing to hide. Noor wants people to know that the Islamic

\textsuperscript{140} Shaheen and Osman, interview with author, 5/2/2014.
\textsuperscript{141} Farooq, interview with author, 7/14/2015.
Society of Joplin, and Islam in general, is not a secret cult or raising *jihadis* in Islamic schools. “Let people come and see for themselves what we’re teaching and doing!” she declared.142

When I asked Shan to tell me about interfaith activities, he emphasized the importance of interfaith meetings, of going to churches and synagogues, and of inviting other religious communities into the mosque. He told me he tries to explain his beliefs to staff at his office and to contextualize the media’s misrepresentations of Muslims for his non-Muslim friends. As he thought through my question aloud, he ended up explaining to me his correctives of general misconceptions about Islam, including treatment of women, war and death, and terrorist acts in Islam’s name. “If you look at it,” he concluded, “there’s nothing wrong with Islam.”143

Islamic Society members clearly share a strong sense of their own responsibility to educate others, in large part to protect themselves. “I felt like, look, this is our cross to bear,” Sadeeq said. “We can be evil in their eyes, or we can be ourselves in their eyes, and you know, being yourself might require taking a beating, but it’s our responsibility… to make it easier for another Muslim to be Muslim.”144 By being physical presences in Joplin and by demonstrating love and acceptance, Sadeeq explained, the Islamic Society would eventually be integrated into the community. Sadeeq and many other Islamic Society members believe fully in the power of interfaith education and activities to find a way to be united. “We are American, too, and we need to be working together,” Shan asserted. “That is why America is so good, because it accepts every religion, every culture, every color, you know? […] That’s why people come here.”145 But

142 Noor, interview with author, 4/19/2014.
143 Shan, interview with author, 7/19/2015.
144 Sadeeq, interview with author, 7/12/2015.
145 Shan, interview with author, 7/19/2015.
the real is far from the ideal, and being Muslim in Joplin — being Muslim in America — is “technically [being] a citizen and yet not being treated as a full member of American society.”

A sophomore in high school at the time of the arson, Salma was “super into Reddit at the time.” She posted an “Ask Me Anything” page, writing, “I am, like, a part of this community whose mosque was burned down.” She explained: “I just kind of left it there. I just, like, posted it, and then I got distracted and like, came back several hours later, and there were already like, seven-hundred comments on it.” She found herself trying to defend Joplin, saying to people who posted, “Even though this happened, like, people here are really welcoming to us,’ and all of this.” Inside she was still suspicious, she admitted. “I felt like I was lying in some ways, like maybe Joplin isn’t that nice to us, and maybe people here really have a legitimate reason to be afraid.” And yet, she said:

I was still really trying to defend why— You know, ’cuz a lot of people are like, ‘Oh, if you’re a Muslim, why would you even live in Joplin?’ And it’s like, that’s not the right thing to say either. Like, we have the right to live here, and like, be Muslims and practice here. […] I was also interviewed for an online Al Jazeera story, just saying like, ‘People in Joplin are responding positively,’ but it was kinda hard to say that sometimes, ’cuz… it’s easy to be positive once the place gets burned down, it’s easy for people to come forward and like, donate then. But would they have come to visit the mosque before that happened? Would they come and try to see what we’re like after we get a new place? I'm not sure.

While Salma tried to defend Joplin as her home and attempted to explain the right that she, her family, and her Muslim community have to live in Joplin, she also grappled with her own doubts about being safe and being welcome as a Muslim in Joplin. Her words exemplify both the

146 Jakobsen and Pelligrini, 49.
147 Salma, interview with author, 7/13/2015.
148 Ibid.
149 Ibid.
Islamic Society’s desire to be part of Judeo-Christian American secular society and the discriminatory barriers placed they face. Members’ interfaith efforts are not only about disproving the media or becoming acquainted with their neighbors. Above all, Islamic Society members aim to render themselves visible and religiously legible, and in so doing, to carve out a space for themselves in the America religious landscape.

AMERICA’S GREATNESS

Although Rabbi Loving, the former rabbi-educator at B’nai Israel, was not yet part of the B’nai Israel congregation at the time of the arson, she noted that the far-reaching support they received has had a lasting impact. In part, this is due to the material reminders of the arson at B’nai Israel. The conference room retains a locked shelf of books that were saved from the arson because they were overdue at the time; the art discussed in chapter three hangs outside of the library entrance; and bookplates on the inside cover of most library books feature individual donors’ nameplates. The nameplate design depicts a tree with books hanging from its branches. In the middle of the page, the donor’s name floats above a statement that, “This donation was made in generous response to the arson fire of June 18, 1999.” And at the bottom of the nameplate, above the name of the library, are the words, “And from the ashes…a library grew.”

The books in particular reinvoke congregants’ memories of the arson and underscore the importance of communal support. “If I’m preparing for a Tot Shabbat, and I open up a kid’s book, and it says, you know, ‘This was donated by so-and-so in a random part of the United States after June 1999,’” Rabbi Loving said, “it’s very powerful.”

150 Rabbi Michal Loving, interview with author, 2/19/2014.
arson preserve the arson’s affective power. Just as B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society transformed painful sensorial memories into productive collective memories, they also continue to reinforce an unexpected benefit of the arson: connections to other people. As Rabbi Loving said, “That’s probably another lasting impact: [it] brings us out of ourselves.”

Through emphasizing their neighbors’ overwhelmingly supportive responses, B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society transform the violent acts of the arsons into moments of unity with others. The unity rallies in particular physically exhibited American religious pluralism, guiding both communities in the embodied experience of being multicultural, modern citizens living in harmony with their neighbors. Congregants emphasized that the demonstrations of religious pluralism mattered, that these events offered them comfort, support, and inclusivity. But the affective power of rallies did not generate actual change. The post-arson demonstrations of solidarity invoked a harmoniously diverse America that does not exist.

As religious minorities, B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society are set apart and yet persist in being recognized as fully American. Both the arsons and the subsequent exhibitions of solidarity highlighted these religious communities as different; while the arsons demanded the expulsion of the Other, interfaith efforts called for the incorporation of the Other into the mainstream. Religious pluralism here is less about the presence of diversity and more about the proper kind of diversity. Thus, members of B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society find themselves reinforcing their Judeo-Christian secular common values, affirming their belonging and cementing their place in the American religious landscape. The rabbi of B’nai Israel at the time of its arson once said to me: “This is the greatness of America, religious freedom. […] While we

151 Ibid.
all live in different worlds, we inhabit the same ground." The question is: what do we stand to gain and lose when we live in both at once?

152 Rabbi Brad Bloom, phone interview with author, 8/27/2014.
CONCLUSION

In this work, I have shown that the arsons committed against Congregation B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society of Joplin were not simply hateful acts that destroyed places of worship. They became moments of critical self-reflection. The religious edifices had been demolished, and the religious communities were left raw and exposed. Like their religious spaces, they were ravaged and fractured. Yet the physical and emotional devastations were matched by an urgent and powerful need to rebuild.

As much as the arsons necessitated the reconstructions of the synagogue and mosque, they likewise engendered emotional and psychological repairs. The process was a struggle; the arsons unmoored religious adherents and left them grasping for understanding, for meaning, and most of all, for communal cohesion. Confronted with their ruined places of worship, B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society questioned their priorities and identities as religious communities. They needed to cohere their understandings of themselves and concretize their visions for the future in order to create the religious places that would define them for years to come. In negotiating architectural blueprints and interior designs, they were actually negotiating their collective character and aims. Although for a time after the arsons the communities were fragmented, they eventually found their way toward consensus. Internal discord was not resolved but softened. With their spaces rebuilt, their communal unity was no longer in jeopardy.

Congregants also came together as distinct religious communities through the shared narratives and common lessons of the hate crimes. Over time, potent individual sensorial memories of the arsons waned, and uniform community memories gained traction. The frameworks of these collective memories gave new meaning to violent acts, transforming
traumatic moments into opportunities to fulfill religious obligations. By identifying and adhering to these religious responsibilities, individual adherents united as religious communities. Shared senses of purpose — for the Islamic Society, the dictate to practice patience, and for B’nai Israel, the injunction to repair the world — reconnected them to their co-religionists.

B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society were divided by violence but bound together through remaking their places and memories. However, efforts toward unity extended beyond B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society to the larger communities of Sacramento and Joplin. Islamic Society and B’nai Israel members deeply valued their neighbors’ expressions of support and solidarity in the immediate wake of the arsons. Passionately committed to the American ideals of religious freedom and religious pluralism, both religious minority groups endeavor to establish lasting interfaith dialogue and understanding. They feel that the onus is on them to render themselves accessible and intelligible to others.

Historically, politically, and publicly integral to the Sacramento community, B’nai Israel implicitly abides by American religious pluralism. Yet B’nai Israel members expressed that their interfaith work is never done. They insist on the need to continue to cultivate religious pluralism and tolerance. Unlike B’nai Israel, the Islamic Society is chiefly a new immigrant community still working toward feeling fully and comfortably at home in Joplin. But similar to B’nai Israel, Islamic Society members recognize their obligation to create inter-religious understanding and to promote religious tolerance. To be accepted as American, they cannot only abide by Judeo-Christian secularism; they must become part of it by dedicating themselves to pluralism.

Religious “diversity” and religious “pluralism” are often used interchangeably. However, the former is about religious difference, while the latter is about what to do with religious difference. The commonly held belief is that, “America’s rich religious pluralism today is a
direct result of our commitment to religious freedom.”¹ Religious freedom is taken as a fundamental human right integral to American Judeo-Christian secularism and to liberal democracies more generally.² The assumption is that, as a secular democracy, America is necessarily a religiously free, and therefore religiously pluralistic, nation. However, religious pluralism is less an actualized reality than it is, as Pamela Klassen and Courtney Bender write, a “powerful ideal, meant to resolve the question of how to get along in a conflict-ridden world.”³

After the synagogue and mosque arsons, the powerful ideal of religious pluralism operated in two entirely contrary but concurrent fashions. Religious pluralism both rectifies the problem of religious difference and attempts to obfuscate religious difference. Consider the post-arson rallies in Joplin and Sacramento, the emblematic moments of religious pluralism fully realized. Where the arsons condemned religious difference, the post-arson rallies legitimized and supported religious difference. But the post-arson rallies were also solidarity rallies, unity rallies. They served to bring everyone together, regardless of religion, race, gender, and age. The message was that difference made no difference.

How can religious pluralism both promote and erase religious difference? As Janet Jakobsen claims, “We are trapped between a politics of representation… and a politics of


Religious pluralism resolves a problem it has constructed: that of religious diversity. In so doing, Bender and Klassen write, it “articulates and naturalizes the very boundaries of difference that it seeks to diminish, overcome, or mediate.” But while religious pluralism naturalizes difference, it also neutralizes difference. It casts “prescriptive norms of identity and engagement.” For B’nai Israel and the Islamic Society, this entails both adhering to and outwardly practicing a common-ground Americanism rooted in Judeo-Christian secular values. Moving on requires glossing over the violence they endured. Lingering pain and fear are covered up by religious pluralism and its compatriot, “post-difference citizenship.”

Citizenship designates not only legal status but also belonging. As such, Clara Lewis defines “post-difference citizenship” as “the media process whereby members of historically marginalized groups and their allies are given access to public support by condoning post-difference ideology.” In other words, B’nai Israel, the Islamic Society, and other minority groups in America gain access to inclusivity through the mandatory acceptance of post-difference ideology or values. Post-difference ideology accentuates common experiences and shared morals and overlooks or covers any “potentially stigmatizing attributes” or “unfavorable aspects” of identity. It muffles distinct voices in favor of harmony.

Religion scholar Isaac Weiner recognizes this post-difference tendency in his discussion of the 2004 disputes over the adhan, or Muslim call to prayer, in Hamtramck, Michigan. By

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5 Bender and Klassen, 15.
6 Ibid., 1.
7 Clara S. Lewis, Tough on Hate?: The Cultural Politics of Hate Crimes (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 91.
comparing the *adhan* to Jewish *shofars* and Christian church bells, Weiner contends, Hamtramck Interfaith Partners “risked effacing differences altogether by diminishing their significance.”

Pluralist discourses effectively level disparate traditions, suppressing religious particularity and the distinct histories and power discrepancies inherent in those particularities. As Lewis claims, “Full citizenship rights to belonging and recognition are earned by disowning specific minority grievances.” This is evidenced in the way that Shan, the president of the Islamic Society of Joplin, described how the Joplin community came together after the arson: “When one group is suffering, the other group is there. It’s just like having a part of your body hurt or injured. Your whole body hurts, and this is what is America.” Shan absorbed the Islamic Society into the rest of Joplin. The Muslim community’s experiences and pain were not its own but shared.

Notably, B’nai Israel and Islamic Society members “nourish a post-difference worldview.” Whereas Weiner ascribes post-difference values of religious pluralism to the Hamtramck Interfaith Partners, religious minority groups subject to hate crimes also espouse post-difference ideology. By waiving the particularities of their traditions and communal experiences, religious minorities gain access to properly performed religious pluralism and to full American citizenship. But this is not only about religious difference. It is about difference of any kind. “This isn’t just a religious issue,” Sacramento city councilman Steve Cohn said of the Capital Unity Council. “It’s an issue of being respectful and tolerant of other humans. […] We

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9 Lewis, 91.

10 Shan, interview with author, 7/19/2015.

11 Lewis, 91.
are not going to allow voices of hatred to divide us. So it isn’t just religion. Race, sexual
preference, ideology, whatever… We’re going to stick together in a positive way.”

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes that, despite continuing practices of
discrimination and oppression, most white people in the United States assert that they “don’t see
any color, just people.” While Bonilla-Silva focuses his work on white claims to color
blindness, it is clear that many Americans, white and non-white, adhere to color-blind principles
and to post-difference values more generally. The post-difference worldview expands the
language of color blindness from racial difference to differences of all kinds. As Shan explained:

It doesn’t matter what group you’re from. We are all American, and we need to work
with each other. We need to make America stronger, make it look better for the outside
people. You know, everybody is looking at America, how they do things. And you say,
‘Oh, this is this person, this is black, this is white, this is Muslim, this is Christian, this is
this.’ It doesn’t work like that. This is why America is so beautiful, that we don’t have
anything against each other. We’re united. No matter what color we are.

Post-difference ideology is the point of entry to American citizenship. It is the normative mode
by which political recognition and social acceptance are possible.

Particularly after September 11, 2001, the language of unity beyond difference —
“united we stand” — has become a regular component of American discourse in the wake of
violence. It is repeated by news anchors, emphasized in school classrooms, underscored with
hashtags on Twitter. It is also manifest in public adoptions of sayings that directly identify with
the victims. People of diverse backgrounds, races, and religions take on the identity of the
targeted individual, and the space between the public “we” and the victimized “them” disappears.

12 Steve Cohn, interview with author, 6/10/2014.
13 Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in
14 Shan, interview with author, 7/19/2015.
“We are Mike Brown.”\textsuperscript{15} “Je suis Charlie.”\textsuperscript{16} Even after the Sacramento arsons of 1999, then-mayor of Sacramento proclaimed: “I was born and baptized a Catholic. A proud Catholic, don’t know how to be anything else. However, when I heard about the firebombings, when I heard about the synagogues being torched and burned, I am a Jew.”\textsuperscript{17}

When practicing religious (or racial or gender or ethnic) pluralism implicitly entails a “forced unity of presence,” how do people publicly inhabit their differences?\textsuperscript{18} For that matter, how do they inhabit their differences in private? Stripped of the categories that define them, what does difference become? Furthermore, what are the consequences of assimilating diverse encounters with hate crime violence? What does it mean when those who are subject to hate crime violence no longer own their own pain? Particularly in the wake of anti-difference violence, what does the collapsing of difference do for the reconstruction of difference?

Although the answers to such questions are beyond the scope of this project, either to ignore or to highlight categorical differences does a disservice to violence’s victims. As Lewis points out, “The experience of hate crimes victimization is lived both within the actual moment of the crime and again within the broader world of community, citizenship, and everyday life.”\textsuperscript{19} People commit everyday micro-aggressions when they treat differences as static categories that must be either dismissed or overcome. Even seemingly benign pursuits like unity rallies and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} “We are Mike Brown” was a phrase taken up by protesters after the August 9, 2014 fatal shooting of Michael Brown, an eighteen-year-old black man, by a police officer in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri.
\item \textsuperscript{16} “Je suis Charlie” was a slogan adopted by supporters of freedom speech and freedom of the press after the January 7, 2015 shooting at the offices of French satirical newspaper \textit{Charlie Hebdo}.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Mayor Joe Serna’s speech from Sacramento Community rally on June 21, 1999.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Bender and Klassen, 23.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Lewis, 108.
\end{itemize}
interfaith groups quietly assume both the need for and the attainability of harmonious resolution. But what else is there? If not interfaith, then what?

“The word ‘interfaith’ bothers me,” declared Umar, a founding member of the Islamic Society. Interfaith meetings should not be about different religions coming together, he explained. “It should be an open forum, an open place where we can freely discuss.” In other words, they should be simply meetings, wherein people bring all that they are to the table, absent of categories, full of particularities, including the “unfavorable” ones. And for that to happen, people first must create the conditions for free discussion. They must create an “open place,” an intersection for the many changing forces to pass through, whirl around, mix, dissolve, and indeed, even to explode.

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20 Umar, interview with author, 7/10/2015.

21 Iris Marion Young suggests that “a strong communicative democracy” must “draw on social group differentiation, especially the experience derived from structural differentiation, as a resource.” In other words, difference becomes part of the conversation, as a reality to incorporate rather than as a problem to be solved. Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 83.


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Hello, as you know, my name is Ariel Schwartz, and I am a graduate student researcher at Northwestern University. I am working on a project that addresses the effects of hate crime violence on religious communities in the United States, and I will be interviewing members of your community in (Sacramento/Joplin). Before we begin the interview, let’s go through the consent form, and if you have any questions, comments, or concerns, we can address them.

(Look over, discuss, sign consent forms.)

Could you please share with me your name, age, and profession? This information will be coded after our interview.

As the consent form stated, the interview will be audio-recorded, but it is optional. With your permission, I will now turn on the audio recorder. At any point during the interview, you may request that I turn it off, either temporarily or permanently.

- How long have you been affiliated with B’nai Israel/the Islamic Society?
  - In what capacity are you currently related to B’nai Israel/the Islamic Society?
- How did you become affiliated with B’nai Israel/the Islamic Society?
- What do you remember from your first experiences of the community?
  - What do you remember from your first experiences of the synagogue/mosque when you first visited it?
- Could you tell me about your relationship with your religious community?
  - What were your relationships with your religious community like before the arson?
  - What about after?
- Could you please describe for me the arson as you remember it?
  - How did you find out about the arson?
  - What do you remember feeling at the time when you learned about the arson?
- Did you see the synagogue/mosque in its damaged state?
  - Under what conditions/with what reason?
  - Can you tell me what that was like for you?
- Can you recall your feelings in/experience of the synagogue/mosque after the arson?
- What was your relationship to the local Sacramento/Joplin community before the arson?
  - What kind of involvement, if any, did/do you have with the local Sacramento/Joplin community?
  - What about with the local government?
  - Can you tell me about your relationship with your neighbors after the arson?
  - What about with the local government?
- How did your community’s synagogue/mosque come to be reconstructed?
  - Were you involved in any capacity with the reconstruction? In what ways?
• Have you experienced any other hate crimes, either before or after the arson
  - Can you tell me your memories of the incident?
• What were the media responses to the arsons like?
  - How do you feel about these responses?
• Have you lived or spent time in any other countries? What was that like?
• Is there anything in particular that speaks to you and/or to your community about the kind of hate crime that occurred?
  - In other words, what does it mean to you that these crimes were acts of arson?