



Think of us as a human family in a global community.

Good afternoon everyone and thank you for taking the time to come to the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia's first ever Solidarity Sunday picnic.

I will begin my speech with story of a man I met name Steve Abdullah. Steve was released from prison the day I met him in the metro. I wore hijab. He greeted me with “Assalamu alaikum.” Humbled I responded, “Walaikum as-salaam.” A delightful introduction. He asked everyone to help him pay for a meal, but his voice drowned out in the crowd of morning commuters.

I was on my way to DC to the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) office. The, SMNE, is a family. Everyone is welcome. Think of us as a human family in a global community. I sat next to two Ethiopian women new to the US. A young Muslim sister who had lived in Alexandria for one year and a Protestant Ethiopian Christian woman who had arrived two months ago. They were new to each other, their friendship only a week old, and already they supported each other in their job search. I gave them both my SMNE card and said we can help you get situated in this area to make it your home.

Steve returned to where we sat and asked me directly for a few dollars for a meal. I was reluctant, because I didn't know where the money was really going so I offered him a bagel and coffee. I invited him to exit with me at my stop, Farragut West, where I planned to meet Obang Metho, the Executive Director of SMNE. I wanted to treat Steve like my brother. And I did.

Steve spoke the same Arabic I did. He said, “Shukran meaning thank you.” He blessed me with “Jazak Allah Khair or may Allah reward you with goodness.” Long story short, while we waited for Obang to meet us at the metro, Steve asked me for lotion. I said yes. Then he asked me for a couple dollars. Again, I said, “Breakfast, yes. A blank check, no.” He broke down and requested money to purchase a harmful chemical substance. I care about Steve. I don't want him or anyone to suffer from addiction. I said, “I'll only buy you a good or a product.” Then something beautiful happened.

He began to pray with me. We recited Al-Fatihah together, the opening Surah to the Quran. We bonded. He memorized as much Arabic as I had committed to memory. He is no different than me. He is no different than us all. In Islam, we're taught that this world, this dunya, is much like a prison and one day we'll be released to our true home – mansions in paradise and we'll see gardens under which rivers flow.

As Obang, Steve Abdullah and I walked to a café to buy a bagel and coffee, Steve Abdullah whose name means “servant of God” said something interesting to me. I asked if he were Muslim

and he protested, “Oh, I’m Jewish.” I laughed from my soul. Steve had a very similar journey to mine. I study the Abrahamic faiths – Islam, Christianity and Judaism. My name is Yerusalem, the Indonesian way to say Jerusalem.

It’s similar to the Ethiopian way, only in Amharic, the national language of Ethiopia, you say Eyerusalem. I hope I simplified it. Please call me Yeru or Ru. Ruh, I say it with an accent. Ruh with an “h” at the end is the Arabic word for spirit or soul. Ruach in Hebrew is the word for spirit. Christian believe in Ruach HaKodesh, the Holy Spirit. In English, the spirit is what lives on even after our physical death.

While we’re alive, we can feel the spirit. We can feel each other’s spirit. May we all have resilient spirits, indomitable spirits, peaceful spirits. And may we share that spirit with everyone we meet. I personally believe in heaven or paradise. The Islamic greeting in paradise will be “Assalamu alaikum.” Maybe this interaction with Steve was all a dress rehearsal for a future reality where Steve Abdullah will great me with a blessing of “peace be upon you.” Maybe the road to paradise is paved with good deeds or the Hebrew mitzvot. Pure intentions are important too. This whole interaction took place on Eid, a Muslim holiday, where more than 700 Muslim pilgrims lost their lives in Mecca. May their souls reach Jannah, Arabic for paradise. They had the right intention to make Hajj, a pillar of Islam. We must live by our beliefs. We aren't promised tomorrow.

The peace we’ll experience in paradise far surpasses the peace we see here. As it’s written in Christian Scripture we should be anxious for nothing and in Philipians 4:7, we learn that “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard our hearts.” So, let us thank God and ask for help when we need it. May God guide us and may we bring out the best in each other – giving every good gift.

This is just one small example of a person SMNE helped. Steve received breakfast, a metro card, a prayer and a spiritual hug on the blessed holiday of Eid. Let’s make our requests known. As the Psalmist King David wrote, “Delight thyself in the Lord and He will grant you the desires of your heart.” Let’s open our hearts to God and share what’s in our hearts with others. The heavens will open up and we’ll find ourselves standing or sitting in the midst of good company in peace and solidarity.

Our work at SMNE is to *put our humanity before ethnicity* and to remember that *no one is free until we ALL are free*. So let’s free our consciousness from any negative associations. Thus, we can embrace our true selves and extend that love, that compassion to everyone we meet.

Thank you.

For more information, contact Yerusalem Work, Director of Operations, SMNE DC Office
Email: Yerusalem@solidaritymovement.org