

Hadassah Presents: Women of Vision Episode 1: Interview with Dr. Mehnaz Afridi

Voiceover:

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Zev Brenner:

Thank you for tuning in to TalkLine with Zev Brenner, the TalkLine networking in conjunction with Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America is pleased to bring you a new radio series. *Hadassah Presents: Women of Vision*, a series of interviews conducted by Hadassah CEO Janice Weinman, which highlights women whose visionary leadership and innovative approaches to the challenges in their respective fields have resulted in noteworthy success for their organizations. And now your host, Janice Weinman.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Hello, everybody. I am so pleased to have as my first guest for this series, Dr. Mehnaz Afridi. I have known Dr. Afridi for a long time, and I've always been exceptionally impressed and inspired by her work, her courage and her commitment to explain antisemitism. Dr. Afridi is a Professor of Contemporary Islam and Holocaust at the New York City's Manhattan College and Director of the Holocaust Genocide and Interfaith Education Center, known as HGI. On the college's website, she describes herself as, "A Muslim who believes that we should focus on trying to understand other faiths and beliefs." In the introduction to her 2017 book, *Shoah Through Muslim Eyes*, Dr. Afridi, an observant Muslim, credits Islam as the model through which she relates to and teaches genocide. Her work to dispel antisemitic stereotypes in the Muslim world has won her admirers, even among those who initially opposed her 2011 appointment as Director of HGI.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

We are told by experts in the field that Dr. Afridi is believed to be the only Muslim teacher of the Holocaust in the United States and likely the world. So having said that, Dr. Afridi, how do you become interested in the Holocaust? How did you become interested in the Holocaust?

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

Well, first of all, Janice, thank you so much for having me here. I'm always so excited to talk to you and Hadassah, and I've done a series for you on Zionism and how to understand the perceptions of Zionism. So, how did I become interested in the Holocaust. I know it's kind of strange and juxtaposed for a Muslim woman to have this kind of interest, but I was raised in Western Europe, born in Pakistan, and I also spent time in the Middle East. I was always raised with Christians, Jews, Hindus. When I got to the Middle East, there were no Jews. There were only Christians. So as a child, you become curious about, "Hey, what happened? What happened to my Jewish friends?" I remember in London, my parents letting me go to my friend who was a Russian Orthodox person that I loved and we had such a wonderful relationship, and I would go

to her house and she would come to my house for Iftar, which is during Ramadan and break her fast with me.

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

I was shocked there were no Jews. Not only that, but my books were devoid of the word "Israel" or "Jew," and supervisors would come and they would block out the word "Jew" or "Israel." That got me very, very curious. So why the Holocaust? You asked me. When I was an undergraduate at Syracuse University, I was a teaching assistant for Alan Berger who is a Holocaust scholar. Through his class, I became fascinated with the Holocaust. I knew about it, but just in black and white pictures, but this was very, very different for me. It really, really took me on a different level of understanding, not just of the Holocaust, but we did Jewish history. We talked about theology. We talked about Torah. Then when I was a master's student, I actually studied the book of Exodus.

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

Then I went to Israel by myself for a five-week course at the Hebrew University where I met many Jews, Israelis, Muslims, Arabs, British, all kinds of people. I was able to come back with the feeling that I felt that Jews and Arabs really wanted the same thing, and that was peace, stability and human dignity. So I wanted to be somebody who wanted to understand what it means to be Jewish, what it means to have the state of Israel, and that's how my whole journey began. I started to interview survivors in Los Angeles and then write my book, *Shoah Through Muslim Eyes*.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

That's so interesting. It really is, and it shows the progression in your life that ultimately ended up the way it did. So that brings me, though, to the next question, which is how do the other non-Jewish communities understand the Holocaust? You went through this experience, but many of them did not. So tell us a little bit about that.

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

Well, one of the reasons I wrote my book is that there really is a need for Muslims and Arabs in the world, in Asia, in Africa, in the Middle East to understand what the Holocaust was. My frustration is that there's too much relativization of the Holocaust, not denial necessarily because denial is blatantly in the country of Iran, but relativization, that the Holocaust was just a fog of war. I've had people say things to me like, "Oh, only two million Jews died," and I became so frustrated, Janice, with just this kind of lack of information, the lack of knowledge, lack of education about something that was so tragic and catastrophic for Jews. So I think that non-Jews really don't have much knowledge about the Holocaust.

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

A lot of students of mine, they're Catholic in a Catholic college, also don't have much knowledge about the Holocaust and it's really, really important that Catholic students do have this knowledge because of the history of antisemitism that occurred in the church, in the Catholic church and how it wasn't until [inaudible 00:06:40] ... that people started to think about Jews and Muslims differently in the church itself. So I really believe it's my mission to teach people the history, what the Holocaust was about and especially to

non-Jews. I think it's so important for non-Jews to actually do this kind of work because you can reach larger audiences and different ethnic groups through this kind of education.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

That's wonderful. It's really inspiring, as I said before, to hear you. So you mentioned in your first response, the words "peace, dignity and understanding." What perspective does someone of the Muslim faith bring to an understanding of the Holocaust for future generations?

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

Yeah, I focus on a verse in the Koran, the Muslim Bible, that talks about how you must speak out against any kind of injustice, even if it's against your own people. If you witness injustice, if you witness false truths, you must speak out. That, to me, is a very powerful verse. Another verse in the Koran that has led me is that God would have made us all the same, but he decided to make us different tribes so that we will be challenged by difference. I think, to me, that message says, "Wow. We are diverse. We need to accept each other." I think the third thing for me in terms of how Islam informs me is that everybody is made equally. In the Koran, Jews are spoken to directly. Christians are spoken to directly. Jews are the children of Israel in the Koran.

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

I'm teaching a senior seminar at my school and my Catholic and secular and Muslim students are amazed at how open and diverse the Koran is and how it addresses Jews and Christians in the Koran. I think it's so important for us to read each other's texts, and not just to define each other through the texts, but also to see the rich history of people that are actually Abrahamic faith referred.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Mehnaz, you have referred quite often to your students. I wondered how the academic community, though, has reacted to your focusing on what has traditionally been the domain of Jewish scholars?

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

Well, it's been actually mixed, Janice, and understandably. People don't expect a Muslim woman who is originally from Pakistan trying to do Holocaust work as well as teach Islam. It's a very strange combination, but I think what needs to happen in the field of Holocaust, and this is something I'm trying to do, is to broaden the field. I'm trying to make it more relevant globally. To be honest, I want it to be less male white dominated. A lot of the scholars are not Jewish. They are Christian scholars. So that's one of my goals. The other goal for me is to be able to be an expert where I can take women, like I did a couple of summers ago, the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom, to Auschwitz and I was their teacher. I took them to Berlin where I told them the history of Jews, but also the history of contemporary Islamophobia. I think those things are so important and they're real experiential things that we need to experience, but with somebody who really is an expert in this field.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

You just said that the field has traditionally been populated by white males. You are a woman, a non-Arab Muslim, a Pakistani and an academic. What role do you think these different worlds play in your work?

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

I think I want to just quote Amin Maalouf who has written a book called *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, and he says that we are made up of many different things and we experience very many different things in our lives. For us, it's really important to understand difference and to be comfortable with difference, but not to make it the same. I think my background, Asian, Muslim, woman, Pakistani, and I'm an American really essentially, and grateful to be an American because this is the only country that would allow me to do the kind of work that I'm doing. It's really amazing. If there's any hope we have in the United States, it's about saying we have religious freedom. We have people like Mehnaz who is a Muslim heading a Holocaust center at a Catholic college. These are stories that need to be told around the world, and I think more people should be doing exactly what I'm doing.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Thank you, again. Women in leadership roles have often had mentors. What role has mentorship played in your career and how have you served as a mentor for others?

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

That's a really important question because I think mentorship that I feel the last few years with my students has been lacking. I try to garner that. I try to talk to my daughter about mentors and who she admires as women. For me, a [inaudible 00:12:01] woman, we've had so many Pakistan, Turkey, Senegal, Uzbekistan as well as Bangladesh. So you have all of these wonderful leaders, but yet you have this patriarchy in these countries. But the freedom to lead as a woman has always been there in my heart. Our prophet Muhammad married a business woman who was way more powerful than him. She proposed to him. She is a kind of icon for me for thinking about Mary in the Koran, Miriam. She's an icon to me. So there's religious, political.

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

I had some great professors when I was an undergraduate who were a feminist scholars. I had great professors when I was a graduate student who were Orthodox Jewish scholars. So I've been surrounded by beautiful and amazing mentors, and I try to do the same with my students at school. A lot of women work with me. I've had an assistant work with me for four years and she says, "Oh my God. Dr. Afridi, you're like a mentor to me," and that's a beautiful sentiment. I think women are nurturing, but also professional and caring in a way that's really important.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

We know that you may have had many detractors as well as admirers in your career and your life. How have you dealt with the challenges of the people that have criticized or doubted you?

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

Yeah. That's a really good question, Janice. Honestly, when I joined Manhattan College in 2011, I was frightened. I think my husband was more frightened for me physically, but I was scared. Coming to new environment from Los Angeles, I didn't know what to expect and there was a lot of pushback against my position because I am not Jewish. There was a lot of mistrust between, and there is sometimes, mistrust between Muslims and Jews. But really, I think what hurt me the most was when people would say things like, "I wish you had hired a neo-Nazi and not a Muslim." That really, really made me pause and I thought to myself, are we this badly off, Jews and Muslims, that we can't even trust each other in terms of one's history?

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

I'm not at all talking about survivors or carrying on their memory. But I did my work. I've been to the death camps. I've worked with people like Michael Berenbaum and Alan Berger. These are renowned people who supported my position. Then to have that kind of pushback was very disappointing. But I will say something, though, in the last almost 10 years, those detractors have been quoted by people and they have said, "If we could only have someone like Afridi, then everything would be wonderful." So I guess what I'm trying to say is you have to understand that there is mistrust between Jews and Muslims, but you have to set an example. I didn't say anything to them, but I did a lot of work at my center. I grew it internationally and nationally.

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

I focus on the lessons of the Holocaust. I do work on other genocides and interfaith education, and I think that's something all campuses need. We have a huge problem of antisemitism on campuses which upsets me. We don't at our college. You should ask why. I'm the Muslim student association director. My students come to me and say, "Dr. Afridi, we want to bring so-and-so." Normally, I say yes because my kids want to do cultural programs or Islamic programs, but if they say they want to bring someone who is hateful or mistrustful of any group on campus, I will say no, and that is leadership, Janice. We need better leaders on our campuses. We need better leaders who can stand and say, "No, this is not the way to have a conversation when you bring someone antagonistic into the mix of, at least, student life."

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Well, you certainly are a leader. You've touched on the campuses. The rise of antisemitism on campuses around the world and here in the United States is dramatic and very, very disturbing. When you see something, as we did at the Capitol recently with people wearing t-shirts that indicate that Auschwitz was not enough or that not enough Jews had been killed, how do you react to that? How do you share your views on that so that people understand the consequences of that kind of behavior that is growing in this country and elsewhere?

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

Well, of course, I'm a teacher educator first, so I bring all of these images actually, Janice, into the classroom. I bring them in the classroom. I go back to the Charlottesville demonstration, march. I talk about symbols. What does the Confederate flag mean?

What does Auschwitz six million never enough mean? You have to bring these things in and have conversations. First, you ask your students, "How do you react? What do you say? What does this mean to you?" And usually, it doesn't mean much and they don't even really understand what the Confederate flag stands for. So, recently, I gave a talk for Sonoma State University precisely on this. I compared the antisemitism and Islamophobia and brought in January 6 into the conversation because also, these people in the Capitol Hill are anti-immigrant, they are anti-Muslim.

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

We had to deal with the Muslim ban where my daughter was eight or nine years old where she was frightened that her mother was going to be deported, even though I'm a citizen. So these are ways that we're making our future generation feel other and not American. That, to me, is worrisome. That's why I bring it to the classroom. I bring it in my programming. I have a program coming up on white nationalism, antisemitism and racism. So these are important conversations, but they have to be head-on, but not divisive conversations because I want everyone to be able to participate in this conversation and not feel like they're not welcome. That's a very challenging thing, but we can do it.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

We certainly can. Let me ask you something else, and that is you primarily deal with college students and with the academic community and with adults. Hadassah was at the forefront of ensuring the passage of the Never Again Education Act, which provides Holocaust education to K through 12. I wondered, how do you see getting to the younger generations being accomplished? We are trying so hard for the next generation to understand what it is that hatred and bigotry and antisemitism can do. I wonder what your thoughts are with regard to that generation.

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

Yeah. Those are, again, very good questions, but I think part of some of the projects that I haven't mentioned that I'm involved with are with Muslims who are interested in Holocaust education. Recently, I've just been asked to be on another board helping actually a group of Turks, myself and some Moroccans building a curriculum in Brooklyn for high school. I think this needs to be happening, Janice, that we should be building curriculums that are not coming necessarily from Jews, but non-Jews because the way that you understand the Holocaust is very different. This is why I think it's important to look at what I do in my work. I also talk about rescue stories, Muslims who rescued Jews. Christians also rescued Jews. There's many, many stories in terms of the Holocaust. Every time I teach a Holocaust class, I find new information, new data, new stories.

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

Recently, I also built an exhibit at Manhattan College in honor of Herman and Lea Ziering who were survivors, but Herman Ziering was very special because he was a Nazi survivor and he also worked with ADL and Abe Foxman. But why did I want to tell that story? I wanted to break the stereotype of survivors. I wanted to show that these survivors were people who came out, they went and they hunted Nazis and they

indicted them. So there's different ways of teaching the Holocaust. I think kids are really interested in that. I had trained 14 of my students. They wore Nazi hunting t-shirts. They felt very empowered. They took people around the exhibit. They were knowledgeable about the exhibit. So you have to get them involved in a way that they feel like they're doing something that is active and that they themselves are the force of education, that they themselves are the kernel of truth in some ways.

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

I think we overlook that by saying, "Oh, well, let's just read Anne Frank." I love Anne Frank, but we can't just do that. We need to do more and do more around Anne Frank. Maybe introduce a story about slavery and Anne Frank. Look at these things as if they're connected rather than disconnected, so it doesn't become a racist book or it doesn't become just a Jewish text. I think those are really important ways of [inaudible 00:22:15] ... that I would love to work on more, but I'm one person. Yeah.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Mehnaz, this series is called Women of Vision. Clearly, we started the program, the series with you because you have great vision, and as I said at the very beginning, immense courage. I'd like to ask you something about being a woman. You have a wonderful family, a husband, two children. Do you feel that there are undue pressures as a woman, and as a mother, that are put upon you given the kind of work that you do? Do you feel that you're putting your family in jeopardy in any way by virtue of pursuing the issues that you are?

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

I think as a woman and somebody who is a director and associate professor, mother, sister, daughter it goes on, I really do believe we're very multifaceted, but I think we're constantly working harder still to be somehow equal in the eyes of patriarchal culture. But I also feel that being a woman gives me access to ways of thinking that I don't think men have. I'm seeing that as somebody who's read philosophy and has very different kinds of philosophy. I see that difference. I'm just reading Hannah Arendt and I'm just marveling at still her language and her depth of thinking about society. So I think being a woman is really important. I don't think, and I hope not, that my family is in jeopardy and I always pray for that, but I also think I am not an angry Muslim. I'm not there to politicize education. I'm there to build bridges, and that's really my goal and my hope. I think Muslims and Jews and Christians have heard that very clearly from me.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Hadassah is also an organization whose mission is to build bridges. We do it in our hospitals where we serve everybody and we do it through our youth villages where we provide services to students from all over the world who really need support. I wonder, in this day and age, how you see bridges being built through different cultures, different nationalities here in the United States and in other parts of the world?

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

I think the United States' nonprofit work is just amazing. I wish people would focus more on organizations that are building these kind of bridges. One of the organizations, I met

with Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom that I think is really doing amazing work. I think that Hadassah is doing amazing work. I think the Arava Institute in Israel is doing amazing work. I have been on their advisory board forever and I love them, and they are doing amazing work in the most challenging way, bringing Palestinians and Israelis together through the environment. What a cool idea. These are the kinds of things we need to start thinking about. We share water, we share air, we share our earth. Look at climate change, right? These are the things that are cutting edge and that students are really invested in.

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

Even younger people are invested in climate change. My daughter talks about global warming all the time. So I think these are ways to build bridges. We share this commonality together. There are amazing programs going on in places like Sarajevo where I go every year, and also in Venice. Pakistan where I was born, there are people. There's a young man from Islamabad applying for a Fulbright to come and work with me on the Holocaust. So these are amazing pockets of light and hope that we only have so much in our lives. If we can do a little bit of justice or help or encourage, then that's all we can do. But at least we have done something, as small as it seems, in the world to bring and build those bridges as you say, Janice.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Well, you certainly bring light and hope. So we hope that will be extended beyond this conversation, beyond what we are doing and through the wonderful work that you will continue to do on behalf of so many of us. Thank you much.

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

Thank you so much, Janice. It's always an honor to be with you and speak with you. I really applaud Hadassah's work. It's amazing.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

Thank you.

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi:

Thank you.

Dr. Janice Weinman:

The honor is very mutual. Thank you so much. You have just heard an interview with Dr. Mehnaz Afridi who is a Professor of Contemporary Islam and the Holocaust at New York City's Manhattan College and Director of its Holocaust Genocide and Interfaith Education Center, known as HGI. This series is intended to bring to you the voices and the opinions and the views of women of vision. We are really pleased that Dr. Afridi was our first guest because she brings so much in terms of vision, in terms of the help that she has provided to others, in terms of the education that she has ensured others receive with regard to bigotry, with regard to antisemitism, with regard to genocide. We can think of nobody who is a better voice of courage and a better voice of hope than Dr. Mehnaz Afridi, and we thank her again for the work she does, for the courage she exhibits and for being the person to launch our series. Thank you, everybody.

Zev Brenner:

You've been listening to a new series airing on TalkLine with Zev Brenner. *Hadassah Presents: Women of Vision* with Hadassah's CEO, Janice Weinman. The program is a production of TalkLine Network and Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America.

Voiceover:

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