Shabbat Shalom.

Before I get into the main focus of this talk which is my placement in a class made up primarily of Muslim students of Turkish descent, I want to paint you an image that’s been helpful for me in understanding my relationship to Judaism in the past couple of years away at college.

About a week into the term of my fellowship in Berlin I flew to London to participate in a retreat held by the European Academy for Jewish Liturgy. Before going to Berlin I did some searching around for Jewish life there and on a Jewish in Berlin website there was a flier for this retreat, advertised as “Reaching the Jewish Soul in Prayer.” I was so excited to participate and I received a full scholarship to go. Upon my arrival I felt quite out of place. The amount of davening was much higher than what I am accustomed to. The other attendees were primarily on the traditional side of Jewish practice. Nevertheless I participated in the background and had some enjoyable conversations with Jews from all over Europe. On the last day I still had not participated in leading part of a service as all the others had. I didn’t step forward to volunteer because I felt my way of doing things, the way I learned here in this building and in my family would not satisfy the prayer needs of this particular community. But on the last day the Cantor running the retreat invited me up to do hagbah. So I lifted the torah for all to see. And I sat with it. For the rest of the service, which was quite long. The torah, in my lap, me, in a chair, facing all the rest of these people.

After the retreat I flew back to Berlin and resumed my role as assistant teacher in the Herbert-Hoover-Schule. I was there as a recipient of a fellowship in which I along with 9 other University of Minnesota and Macalester students was placed in a Berlin school as a mentor in an English class. In my class, almost all of the students were Muslims of Turkish descent. The neighborhood where I taught, Wedding, is historically Turkish and many of my students were second or even third generation German. Nevertheless, just as it is here there is a wide achievement gap and societal injustices that non-ethnic Germans must deal with.

Right away I recognized the achievement gap I would be working with in my class and wondered how I would fulfill my mission of bringing authentic English language skills to them when their English skills were poor and their motivation to improve low.
My hosting teacher Kerstin Herger grew up in the former German Democratic Republic, or East Germany. From the start she intuited this discrepancy and we played around with the duties of my fellowship. Since it was the last month of school and these students were graduating, my teaching responsibilities were reduced. When not in front of the class leading a game of bananagrams or teaching about the American school system, I participated in many class activities. One morning all the students brought in food from their homes for a class breakfast. Another day we took a walking tour through Unter Den Linden a famous tourist area in downtown Berlin. Perhaps most notably was the day we visited Sachsenhausen concentration camp in the northern outskirts of Berlin and left flowers and a memorial speech written collaboratively by the class.

The time I spent with these students turned out not to be as you might expect between a teacher and his students. I actually became friends with these kids. Despite the age difference I was in on their conversations, their truest, most vapid, 16 and 17 year old interactions. Cell phones. Music. Relationship gossip. And they told it all to me like it was all that mattered.

My saying this isn’t to go on a spell to dissolve differences and promote peace between world religions. Not tonight. Instead it’s my goal to illuminate how the most ordinary, secular of experiences can have the most profound religious meaning.

On the second day of school a few students asked if I would like to join them after class to get something to eat. I of course agreed and at the sound of the final bell we walked out of the school building and into the busy streets of Berlin.

We walked a bit and I spotted a currywurst stand and proposed we all get in line. Currywurst is a classic Berlin street food: pork sausage smothered in a ketchup and curry sauce with fries on the side, eaten with a miniature wooden or plastic fork. I had eaten it many times before and always brushed aside kashrut.

My friends encouraged me to go order a currywurst and that after I ate we’d go to a döner kebab house. Then it dawned on me. Muslims don’t eat pork. Jews don’t eat pork. But here I am in Berlin, a Jew, with new Muslim friends, proposing we all enjoy an afternoon currywurst. The students were in the diaspora of their people having left Turkey for Christian, secular Germany. Yet they still maintained dietary customs as a symbol of belonging to one culture while living in another.

What I realized after coming home is that in no other place would I have spent so much
time around girls with hijab and boys named Mohammad. In regular daily life I don't come into contact with many Muslims unless there is a specific reason for coming together like an interfaith program. My role in Berlin as teacher and the students' role as students was foundational to our relationship--it wasn't the religion or culture that brought us together. The usual context in which I meet Muslims is in a moderated meeting where the central focus is difference as a problem needing to be fixed. That isn't how interpersonal relationships should be approached all the time.

Later in the summer I found myself in Israel. I studied for a month at Tel Aviv University's summer Hebrew program. The people I was hanging around with were all international students. When we were out in Tel Aviv or traveling in other parts of Israel, I was indeed seen as a fellow international student. But in addition to that my friends, all non-Jewish, viewed me as somewhat of a local native, at least more so than they considered themselves to be.

Because I was Jewish in Israel I somehow was explaining to them why buses stopped running at sundown on Fridays. Or the significance of the historical street names. Or what different colored berets meant on the soldiers. Piety or faith isn't what gave me the credibility to answer these questions. Merely being a Jew, regardless of not being Israeli, attaches me to the country and its history at least in other people's eyes.

In situations when I'm the least outward about being Jewish I've found myself thinking more about the Jewish connection. In Berlin or in Israel or in St. Paul, doing the things I like to do and what give my life meaning demand that I bring my Judaism out.

I've found myself in a lot of different roles as representative Jew. I've felt overwhelmed with pride at getting to live out the ancestral traditions in the modern way. At the same time I can't get rid of the discomfort of being equipped with just a modest understanding of Reform tradition and knowing that my understanding is so because for me there are so many other parts of life I want to experience.. The weight of wanting to be a good messenger with the understanding of Judaism I do have mixed with my truly limited devotion to living a Jewish life is enough to make me on the one hand feel okay eating currywurst and on the other hand seriously reckon with my future as a Jew. Shabbat Shalom.