



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

Project aims to build better relations for Muslims, Jews, The Boston Globe

By Lisa Wangsness, Globe Staff | November 6, 2010

Worshippers at Congregation Dorshei Tzedek, a synagogue in West Newton, and the Islamic Center of Boston in Wayland plan to spend this weekend getting to know one another as part of an international “twinning” project that aims to combat anti-Semitism and Islamophobia by building relationships between Jews and Muslims.

Today, a group from the Islamic Center of Boston will observe part of a Shabbat service at Dorshei Tzedek, followed by a discussion over lunch. Tomorrow, Dorshei Tzedek members will visit the Islamic Center to see the 1 p.m. prayers, meet with worshippers, and learn more about Islam.

Now in its third year, the “Weekend of Twinning” will bring together 100 pairs of synagogues, mosques, and student groups in North America, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. This year’s event comes near the end of a year fraught with tension between Muslims and Jews in Boston and across the world over such issues as the proposed Islamic center near ground zero in New York, the recent interception in Britain and Dubai of explosive-laden packages addressed to Chicago synagogues; and, locally, ongoing controversy surrounding the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center in Roxbury.

“It just feels important in this general climate of so much anti-Muslim fear and suspicion to just try to humanize this, and make some connections, and learn a little bit about each other,” said Rabbi Toba Spitzer of Dorshei Tzedek.

Dr. Sepi Gilani, a surgeon who is organizing the twinning project for the Wayland mosque, said his congregation regularly opens its doors to students and other religious groups who want to know more about Islam, and participates in a variety of interfaith events with the synagogue just across the street, Temple Shir Tikva.

The twinning project seemed like another opportunity to build bridges, she said.

“There’s a lot to be said about the word ‘twinning,’ ” said Gilani, the mother of a pair of 16-year-olds. “We are all brothers and sisters if you go back far enough.”

David Lobron, a member of Dorshei Tzedek who is helping to organize the event, said he developed an interest in interfaith work when his family belonged to Temple Beth Shalom, in Cambridge, which he said participated in a number of educational events with the Islamic Society of Boston in Cambridge. He was struck, he said, by the “interesting moments of unexpected closeness.”

He said he has noticed that Muslims tend to have a better understanding of Jewish traditions than Jews do of Muslim ones. “Probably most Jewish people have not visited a mosque before,” he said. “The Muslims I’ve talked to, a lot of them have been to bar mitzvahs and things like that.”

Rabbi Marc Schneier, founder and president of the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding in New York, which organizes the event along with the World Jewish Congress and the Islamic Society of North America, said the idea for the project grew out of a summit of rabbis and imams in New York in 2007. The event’s focus, he said, is “not leader-to-leader, it’s people-to-people, congregation-to-congregation,” he said.

The King Fahad Mosque in Culver City, Calif., is getting ready for its third twinning weekend with Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills, said Usman Madha, the mosque’s director. The exercise spawned a lecture series held at both the mosque and the synagogue, and now children from both institutions’ religious schools

participate in regular community service activities together.

“It can’t just be the kumbaya moment and the rah-rah-rah,” Madha said. “It’s lifelong work. The best thing that happened is our kids got together and are doing that work. They will be tomorrow’s adults, and they will be carrying the message.”

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