



Bridging the Muslim-Jewish divide

By - November 18, 2008

LOS ANGELES (JTA)—There was nothing unusual about some 20 devout Muslims from the King Fahad Mosque bowing and prostrating themselves as they recited the Isha, or night prayer.

Only the site was Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, and the worshipers were outnumbered by about 80 Jews watching the unfamiliar ritual.

At the same time, in another room of the Reform temple, Jewish congregants were participating in the Ma'ariv evening prayer, watched respectfully by a group of Muslims.

The separate but interwoven prayer sessions on Monday represented the beginning of a “twinning” movement that this weekend will bring together 50 synagogues and 50 mosques across the United States and Canada.

The twinning weekend, under the theme “Confronting Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism Together,” is one indicator of earnest attempts by American Jews and Muslims to reach beyond the Middle East conflict to join hands in battling prejudices within and against their communities.

There are other signs as well.

In Los Angeles, a major university, a Jewish institution and an Islamic foundation jointly established a Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement.

And at the University of California, Irvine, usually pictured as a hotbed of Muslim-Jewish antagonism, student leaders of both faiths recently returned from a two-week trip to Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Although past attempts at Jewish-Muslim dialogues generally have been short-lived in the face of Mideast flare-ups, Temple Emanuel Rabbi Laura Geller was optimistic that the twinning project would succeed because “for the first time, mosques and synagogues are giving their full backing.”

The twinning project was launched a year ago when the New York-based Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, led by Orthodox Rabbi Marc Schneier and hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons, invited 13 Jewish and 13 Muslim spiritual leaders to a meeting.

“Our goal was to enlist 25 synagogues and 25 mosques, but we ended up with double the number,” said Schneier, whose foundation has largely concentrated on Jewish-black relations.

“Both American Jews and Muslims are children of Abraham and citizens of the same country, and we share a common faith and destiny,” he said. “Of course, we cannot ignore the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it’s the elephant in the room, but I see the emergence of moderate, centrist Muslim voices, particularly in the United States, and we must do everything possible to encourage such voices.”

Urging Jews to reclaim some of the passion they invested in the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, Schneier said that a similar outreach to Muslims “can serve as a paradigm for Europe,” and perhaps even for the Middle East.

During the coming weekend, twinning sessions between mosques and synagogues, as well as between Muslim and Jewish student groups on campuses, will stretch from Seattle to Atlanta and from Mississauga, Ontario, to Carrollton, Texas.

At Temple Emanuel, the presidential election of Barack Obama was an implicit factor in the hopeful attitudes of several speakers.

After saying that "Together, Jews and Muslims can send a message to the purveyors of hate and bigotry," Usman Madha, the director of the King Fahad Mosque, led some 300 attendees in a rousing "Yes, we can; yes, we can"—the Obama campaign's mantra.

Worried that the weekend meetings, which are being publicized nationally through public service announcements on CNN and a full-page ad in The New York Times, may become overly emotional, organizers issued a set of guidelines for discussion leaders. The guidelines encourage "all participants to listen to one another in a courteous and respectful fashion, without interrupting or shouting down those with whom they disagree."

There appeared to be no such caveats needed for the Temple Emanuel audience.

At a post-meeting reception Adam Motiwala, 24, an information technology consultant whose parents emigrated from Pakistan, called the evening "awesome."

At another table, Bobbe Salkowitz commented, "I think there is a feeling in this country that we can't push problems under the rug anymore. We have to be honest, but reach out to each other at the same time."

As the concept of the twinning project evolved, Schneier turned for expert advice to the newly formed Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement. The center is the first of its kind and was established through an agreement signed by the University of Southern California's Center for Religion and Civic Culture, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the education-oriented Omar Ibn Al Khattab Foundation.

The three partners, all in the same Los Angeles neighborhood, had been working together for some time and decided to formalize their collaboration, said Reuven Firestone, a professor of medieval Jewish and Islamic studies at HUC.

"There are some anti-Jewish attitudes in the Muslim world and some anti-Muslim attitudes in the Jewish world, but there is no inherent conflict between Judaism and Islam," Firestone said. "We have much in common in our goals and aspirations."

A respected author, Firestone has written books on "Introduction to Islam for Jews" and "Children of Abraham: Introduction to Judaism for Muslims." Out this month is his latest publication, "Who Are the Chosen People? The Meaning of Chosenness in Judaism, Christianity and Islam."

Firestone and Dafer Dakhil, the director of the Al Khattab Foundation, are the co-directors of the new center, with Hebah Farrag, a recent graduate of the American University in Cairo, as associate director.

The center's first major project will be to compile a massive database on key Jewish and Muslim religious texts for the general public. For instance, someone searching for an authoritative definition of "kosher" also would be referred to the Islamic equivalent, "halal."

On a more popular level, the center is planning a film series on Jewish and Muslim topics, Farrag said.

Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation has provided a \$50,000 start-up grant to the center, but Firestone worries about future financing.

Noting that previous cooperative ventures between the two faiths have foundered on political and nationalistic differences, Firestone said, "We're aware of these hurdles, but what would kill us is not trouble in the Middle East but lack of funding. There are not a lot of Jews or Muslims who want to invest in what we are doing."