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Jews, Muslims gather to heal
Interfaith group meets in the Triangle to discuss one another's observances



Land, a Beth Meyer Synagogue member, walks among Muslim women to take a peach cobbler to a traditional Muslim iftar, or breaking of the Ramadan fast. Khalilah Sabra, an event organizer, is in the foreground. Staff Photos by Ted Richardson

By THOMASI MCDONALD, Staff Writer

Ten years ago, Khalilah Sabra could not imagine herself participating in interfaith activities with Jews. "Although I am not Palestinian, the occupation was like a sore that would not heal," said Sabra, a Muslim woman living in Raleigh.

In a classic leap of faith, Sabra organized such a gathering Sunday when about 50 Muslims and Jews participated in a discussion of the two faiths as part of this month's Ramadan and Rosh Hashana.

The program began at 6 p.m. inside a small conference room at the Muslim American Society on Western Boulevard. The Muslim society co-sponsored the event with the Triangle chapter of Tikkun, a nationwide interfaith movement comprising mostly members of the Jewish and Christian faiths.

"It was founded after Sept. 11," Triangle chapter leader Rhoda Silver of Durham said. The Triangle chapter was started in August 2003.

"Tikkun literally means 'healing' in Hebrew," Tikkun member Andrea Shapiro of Hillsborough said.

The two groups began meeting last October after Tikkun invited members of the Muslim group and other area Islamic organizations to participate in a panel discussion in Chapel Hill.

"About 25 Muslims showed up," Silver said. "From that, we began our relationship."

Some area Islamic leaders were hesitant when Tikkun first contacted them.

"The Muslim community for quite some time has been a ... target of attack," said Khodr Zaarour, political director of the Muslim American Public Affairs Council in Raleigh. "So when people reach out, we are hesitant."

Over the past year, the two groups have built trust while mingling over food, as they did at Sunday's event, or at past events where potluck dinners were served up with discussions about the story of Abraham and which of his two sons he offered for sacrifice: Ishmael or Isaac?

Jews and Christians accept the Bible testimony, which says Isaac was offered. Muslims believe the Quran points to Ishmael.

"We agreed to disagree on that one," Tikkun member Siv Shapiro of Raleigh said.

Iyad Hindi, a past president of the Muslim American Public Affairs Council, spoke Sunday about Ramadan.

The ninth month of the Islamic calendar, Ramadan commemorates Allah's revelation of the Quran, the holy book of Islam, to Muhammad.

For millions of Muslims around the world, Ramadan is a time for reflection, devotion to Allah and self-control.

Muslims refrain from eating or drinking anything, including water, during the daylight hours.

Hindi told the group that fasting during Ramadan goes far beyond depriving the body of physical needs.

"If a person fasts and continues to hurt people, then God has no use for his fast," Hindi said.

At sundown, the group observed the traditional iftar, or breaking of the Ramadan fast.

After not eating for the entire day, the Muslim worshippers welcomed the food.

In a second room, there were fragrant rice dishes and eggplant marinated in yogurt, meat and onions cooked inside of a crispy brown grain, loads of pasta, baby okra baked in a spicy tomato sauce with meat, more baked chicken and stuffed grape leaves with zucchini. Another table held plentiful offerings of cakes, pies, pastries and other desserts.

During the feast, Rabbi Eric Solomon of Beth Meyer Synagogue in Raleigh talked about "the impressive similarities" between Ramadan and the Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashana (New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement).

The New Year began at sundown Oct. 3. Yom Kippur was observed Oct. 13. The days in between are known as the Days of Awe, which are filled with soul-searching and mending relationships with God and one's fellow man.

"There are some differences, but many similarities," Solomon said. "There's reflection through fasting to make us more ethical, conscious, thoughtful and sensitive people."

Sabra said she had a change of heart after realizing the two faiths must establish a relationship "based on human compassion and ethical cooperation."

"If the Jews feel disconnected from Muslims, then it's easy to continue hurting each other and finding fault with each other and not finding a democratic solution," Sabra said.

"Hopefully, what we are doing here may affect the trials and tribulations in the Middle East."

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