



City & Region

Muslim-Jewish outreach effort contracts following allegations

Two area rabbis drop out after claims of radicalism

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A national effort to forge better ties between Jews and Muslims has run into opposition from some Jewish community members who view the interfaith partnerships as a ruse perpetrated by radical Muslims.

An undercurrent to the “twinning” events in mosques and synagogues has had a significant impact in Western New York, where two rabbis who participated in last year’s local twinning weekend have since distanced themselves from the effort.

But organizers here said the local tensions stemmed from entrenched disagreement over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and were symptomatic of the need for greater dialogue between Muslims and Jews.

Organizers put together more events for this year, including an interfaith scripture study session on Tuesday evening and a planned visit Friday to the Sufi World Foundation mosque in Orleans County.

“Good will and positive things will win out, and people will see what we’re doing and become more comfortable with it,” said Rabbi Drorah Setel of Temple Beth El in Niagara Falls, the lone local rabbi onboard with this year’s twinning effort.

Rabbi Irwin A. Tanenbaum of Temple Beth Am and Rabbi Alex Lazarus-Klein of Temple Sinai, both in Amherst, had participated with Setel in the twinning last November but withdrew their support this year.

“I’m only saddened that it’s become impossible to be involved,” Tanenbaum said, declining further comment on the matter.

While it is “in the best interests of the Muslim and Jewish communities to work together,” the twinning program was no long-

er the appropriate vehicle for it, said Lazarus-Klein, citing concerns about the national organization of the effort.

Twinning was started in 2008 by a group called the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, in cooperation with the Islamic Society of North America, a controversial national organization that, over its objections, has been linked by federal prosecutors to an international Muslim organization accused of promoting Islamic fundamentalism.

In its court case against the Holy Land Foundation, an Islamic charity accused of funneling funds to terrorist groups, federal prosecutors linked ISNA with the Muslim Brotherhood, a worldwide network considered by many Jewish groups to be stridently anti-Israel.

ISNA leaders have vehemently denied any connection to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Lazarus-Klein said he believes the local twinning organizers are well-intentioned.

But he and other Jews struggle over what extent they can discuss interfaith values with people who “are on one side promoting peace and on the other side participating in virulently anti-Israel rallies.”

“The conflict in the Middle East ends up affecting passions here. The issues are very close to people’s hearts, and it’s difficult to separate the world politics from local politics, and that’s unfortunate,” Lazarus- Klein said.

The twinning became a more contentious issue in Western New York after a national group asserted earlier this year in an online publication that Buffalo-area Jews were being deceived by radical Muslims posing as moderates.

“What we found was that the entities behind the Buffalo interfaith effort are anything but moderate,” wrote Ilya Feoktistov, research director of Americans for Peace and Tolerance, a Boston-based organization that seeks to monitor radical Islamic groups and support moderate Muslims.

Americans for Peace and Tolerance was started in 2008 by Charles Jacobs, who in the late 1980s also co-founded CAMERA, the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America.

Feoktistov said that Muslims were exploiting interfaith relationships to intimidate Jewish groups into “forfeiting their freedom to vigorously advocate for Jews everywhere, including Israel.”

Feoktistov cited in particular Dr. Othman Shibly, a local periodontist and Islamic scholar who has long been active in interfaith circles in Western New York.

Shibly is one of the chief organizers, along with Dr. Robert Stall, a geriatrician, of Building Bridges, an organization leading the local twinning effort.

Feoktistov pointed to Shibly's association with two Syrian imams who had made hostile remarks about Israel as cause for serious concern.

Shibly called Feoktistov's argument "garbage," and he said his interfaith outreach had nothing to do with getting Jewish people to give up their defense of Israel.

"A few, a minority of people, they mislead the general population," Shibly said. "They play on the fear of people. Our mission is not about what's going on in the Middle East."

"When people have a political agenda, they will paint you any way they want just to get their political view across," he added.

Shibly acknowledged that he has been critical of Israel but said he has tried to do so without being offensive to Jewish people.

"When you dare to criticize Israel, they don't want to hear this. That creates a problem," he said.

Stall said he has been able to agree to disagree with Shibly on Middle East issues — while remaining friends.

"I don't see him as an evil person trying to violently get rid of Israel," Stall said.

Setel also defended Shibly as someone who consistently exhibits kindness and peacefulness in his dealings with people of other faiths.

"In Judaism, we're supposed to judge people by their actions, not be thought police," she said.

In relations with Muslims, some members of the Jewish community were acting out of fear of the unknown because the two faith groups only now are starting to get together through programs such as the twinning, said Setel.

"It's sort of the frontier of dialogue, if you will, the same way in which the '60s and '70s were for Christian-Jewish dialogue groups," she said.

The fear found in older generations already has evaporated among younger Jews, many of whom associate daily with Muslims, Setel said.

Local organizers of the twinning concept remain committed to it, despite obstacles.

Tuesday's event was originally scheduled to be held in Congregation Beth Abraham, a small synagogue on Elmwood Avenue with a tiny membership.

But objections raised from within the congregation prompted organizers to move the meeting at the last minute to a private residence.

“Should we continue on or get frustrated? No, we will continue,” Shibly said.

Shibly keeps at the interfaith work because he wants people of other faiths to see American Muslims for what they are, while dispelling negative stereotypical images of Muslims as terrorists.

Progress has accompanied the setbacks, Stall and Shibly said.

The defection of the rabbis hasn't affected congregation members who want to participate, said Stall, who maintained that the twinning was a grass-roots effort anyway.

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