

The Suburban Trends

Jew, Christian and Muslim break unleavened bread

Sunday

April 8, 2007

Three faiths celebrate Seder

By DOROTHY O'CONNOR
Correspondent

POMPTON LAKES – They came together much as any family, enjoying the ritual of a shared meal, singing, laughing, praying, celebrating a holiday – actually three holy days of their diverse, yet surprisingly similar, faiths.

They celebrated in different languages – Hebrew, Arabic and English – this all too rare alliance of Jews, Muslims and Christians who gathered at the synagogue here Sunday afternoon to take part in a Passover Seder. There was no discord. From the outset they agreed, "No religion is an island; there is no monopoly on holiness; there is no truth without humility..." and, they declared, "Let those who revere the Lord speak one to another, leading everyone to acknowledge the splendor of God."

This is their mission – a journey on which they have embarked

The heartbreak and hope for a resolution to these problems are illustrated in the song, "Jerusalem," sung at the beginning of this Sunday afternoon Seder

"Jerusalem"

*I woke up this morning' and none of the news was good
Death machines were rumblin' 'cross the ground where Jesus stood
And the man on my TV told me that it had always been that way
And there was nothin' anyone could do or say
And I almost listened to him
Yeah I almost lost my mind
Then I regained my senses again
And looked into my heart to find
That I believe that one fine day all the children of Abraham
Will lay down their swords forever in Jerusalem
Well maybe I'm only dreamin' and maybe I'm just a fool
But I don't remember learnin' how to hate in Sunday school
But somewhere along the way I strayed and I never looked back again
But I still find comfort now and then
Then the storm comes rumblin' in
And I can't lay me down
And the drums are drummin' again
And I can't stand the sound
But I believe there'll come a day when the lion and the lamb
Will lie down in peace together forever in Jerusalem
And there'll be no barricades then
There'll be no wire or walls
And we can wash all this blood from our hands
And all this hatred from our souls
And I believe that on that day all the children of Abraham
Will lay down their swords forever in Jerusalem*

"Jerusalem," performed by the "4/5th Gospel String Band" opening the Interfaith Seder at Congregation Beth Shalom



Islamic Center of Passaic County Outreach Director Mohamed El Filali, standing, thanks members of Congregation Beth Shalom for their enthusiastic congratulations on the birth of his child just 10 days prior to his participation in the interfaith seder. He was joined at the event by Imam Dr Mohamed Qutanani seated to his left.

together and look forward to expanding in the coming months and years. This "Interfaith Celebration of the Journey to Freedom" is being led by representatives of the Jewish, Muslim and Christian religions, including Congregation Beth Shalom Rabbi David Senter, Imam Mohammad Qatanani, Ph.D. and Outreach Director Muhamed El Filali of the Islamic Center of Passaic County, Fr. John Rollins of Christ Episcopal Church, Fr. Bill Potter of St. Luke's Episcopal Church of Hope, New Jersey, and Rev. Marjorie Eriksen of the Bloomingdale United Methodist Church.

Inspired by 9/11

Fr. Potter had been doing interfaith Seders with his congregation in Hope for nearly a decade when the horrific attacks of 9/11 occurred and he served as an emergency chaplain at ground zero. In addition to the terrorist devastation he witnessed there, Fr. Potter said, "I will never forget coming out of New York and hearing about the hate crimes that were happening across our country as a result of 9/11.

"I called the CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations) office

and asked for a passage from the Quran that I could read at a community gathering," in the hope of showing that the Islamic religion does not teach hate, said Fr. Pot-



ter. But instead of receiving the piece of paper he'd requested, Fr. Potter received a call from a member of the Islamic Center of Passaic County asking when he could come to address St. Luke's congregation. Thus began his

connection to the local Muslim community, and, with that he said, "all of a sudden even our kids were talking and getting to know each other!"

one to allow an opportunity slip by. "I passed David a note saying, 'Are you game for an inter-faith Seder?'" And, as they say, the rest is history. "Over the last couple of years, we've all become close friends," said Fr. Potter.

"It's been an interesting journey. There are a group of us – about 15 including our wives – who have been getting together every few months, brainstorming about where we can go from here – what we can do together to get the various communities together to put our teeth into something that is important to everybody – something that we can all work together on," said Rabbi Senter. "We get together for dinner at a restaurant and it's interesting to see the reaction to us all being together sharing a meal – Muslims in their traditional garb, the priests in their collars, I'm wearing my yarmulke – people are stunned to see us!"

And it is because society regards a genial gathering of Jews, Muslims and Christians with such a mixture of surprise and suspicion, that these religious leaders are all the more determined to make it

ter. But instead of receiving the piece of paper he'd requested, Fr. Potter received a call from a member of the Islamic Center of Passaic County asking when he could come to address St. Luke's congregation. Thus began his

Then about three years ago Fr. Potter met Rabbi Senter when they were guests on a radio talk show together. "Here we were, a rabbi, a priest and a minister – it sounds like the beginning of a joke!," said Fr. Potter, who is not

commonplace if not for this generation, then for the next.

Sharing a “human element”

"There is a very human element that we share. We all have mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers and children, and it is the children who are the major focus because if the next generation learns that we are really not that different from each other, those that teach bigotry and hatred won't have an audience because their intended audience will have already learned that those who appear to be different are not so different at all," said Rabbi Senter.

"If we are honest, we all have some bias and prejudice if someone looks different from us, and there is a little fear factor inside us. So the question is, how do we deal with it and get past it? And that is a lot of what we want to overcome," said the rabbi.

Fr. Rollins said he has joined this interfaith journey because, "There is so much misunderstanding in the world about what things stand for and it is refreshing to find a common thread. This (Seder) service takes bits and pieces of various liturgy and weaves them together."

Passover celebrates God, people and a common struggle for freedom. It celebrates the event when God led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. This event is sacred to Jews, Muslims and Christians alike. It is recorded in the Torah, the Holy Bible and in the Holy Quran.

Muhamed El Filali said, "This festival not only tells us of history, but also reminds us that people continue to be called by God to confront all forms of human oppression and bondage," adding that "Today in America because of religious and racial prejudice freedom has yet to be fully realized."

He said, "I am a Muslim, and for me too the Exodus story is pregnant with meaning as well as irony. Palestinians today, both Christian and Muslim are seeking freedom and justice and are in violent conflict with the state of Israel. While praying to the same God, how can Palestinians and Jews, two peoples who are both committed to human freedom and justice, find themselves locked in deadly conflict? How many have died this year alone in Israel, Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq? And, how many are yet to die? How is it that we, Muslims, Jews and Christians, have allowed our fear, prejudice and hatred to de-

stroy justice, compassion and love?"

Committed to the future

Fr. Rollins responded, saying, "As we gather around the Seder table, we join ourselves with the past. We commit ourselves to the future. By celebrating this Seder together, we keep alive the great flame of freedom. We pray that this Seder will help us become builders of a just world, so that all people may enjoy freedom."

During the Seder, as Matzo is eaten, there is this prayer. "This year some people are free. Some people are suffering as though they were slaves. Next year may everyone be free – free from oppression, free from fear, free from hate, free from prejudice." And, drinking from cups of "wine" (grape juice, in deference to the children present), for the third time it is said, "This time we affirm our belief that people are destined to live in peace. In Hebrew that word is 'SHALOM.' In Arabic that word is 'SALAM.' That word is an idea, a hope. May peace come to every person on this earth."

Concluding the Seder it is noted that for those attending who are

Christians, this is Holy Week, during which the last Passover Jesus celebrated with his disciples is remembered. And the congregation reads from the Gospel of Matthew the instruction of Jesus who took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat, this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Over Matzah they say together, "Blessed are you, O Lord, King of the Universe. You bring forth bread from the earth. As grain scattered upon the earth is gathered into one loaf, so may we, Christians, Muslims and Jews, through love be united in your kingdom. Amen." Over their cups of "wine," they say together, "Blessed are you O Lord, King of the Universe. You create the fruit of the vine; and on this night you invite us to forgive one another of all hurtful thoughts and deeds. Amen."

For Christians, they say, "Jesus is Savior, for Muslims he is Prophet, for Jews he is a brother."

At a time when "there is so much animosity between people," Rev.

Eriksen says, "It is a joy to come together with people from different religious backgrounds to affirm our faith in one God. And, I do believe that we all believe in one God. We all have our roots in Abraham. If all can come to a gathering like this we realize we have more in common. I think it is important for the world to know we can live together in a spirit of harmony."

As a result of this coming together the children are already beginning to understand. Seventeen-year-old Catherine Potter, daughter of Fr. Potter, said, "Most important is for Muslims, Christians and Jews to sit together and talk about how connected we are. We realize that the problems have nothing to do with differences – the problems are all about politics and power."

The Record

Your Views

Sunday

April 8, 2007

I applaud publication of "At interfaith seder, only the herbs were bitter" (Page A-1, April 2), accompanied by the beautiful picture of the Muslim, Christian and Jewish celebrants. It is heartening to see the media reporting the good deeds and the constructive work of community leaders. Jews, Muslims and Christians do indeed share lots of values, and they all worship one God.

I was really touched by the decision of Rabbi David Senter, Congregation Beth Shalom's

leader, to decorate the Pompton Lakes synagogue's social hall in plain white out of respect for the Muslims rather than the usual blue and white color scheme of the Israeli national flag.

Reading your article gave me lots of hope. If Americans who call themselves Jewish, Christian or Muslim can work together on mutual issues and show respect to each other while acknowledging their differences, maybe one day they will be able to transfer this mentality over to the

Middle East.

My message to Senter, the Rev. John Rollins of Christ Episcopal Church in Pompton Lakes and Imam Mohammad Qatanani: "God bless you and grant your noble message and goal a success."

Hesham Mahmoud

The Record

Working toward peaceful coexistence

Sunday

April 8, 2007



THE SYMBOLS of peace are all around us at Easter. Paintings and abstract drawings of doves evoke the spirit of the season.

New life was breathed into the peace theme last Sunday not in a Christian setting, but in a synagogue in Pompton Lakes.

The decision to invite the Muslim community to be part of a Passover ceremony made for a rare and wonderful gesture, taking ideological opposites way beyond mere peaceful coexistence.

Muslims, Christians and Jews shared a seder table at Congregation Beth Shalom in Pompton Lakes. That decision should be an inspiration to any group truly interested in living in peace

alongside those with clashing political and theological beliefs.

Rabbi David Senter embraces the concept of dining together as a revolutionary act that unites people. And he found his beliefs to be in harmony with leaders of the Islamic Center of Passaic in Paterson, Christ Church Episcopal of Pompton Lakes and St. Luke's Episcopal in Warren County. This year I learned about it after the fact, but next year I'll be the first one in the door.

I attended my first (and only) seder back in the mid-1980s. I was living in Orlando, Fla., and my friend Ronnie was in Miami.

Because it was the first time in many years that we were living in the same state at the same time, we thought we'd have a good chance to get together for dinner at least once. This was after many years of just exchanging Christmas cards, birthday wishes and holiday greetings.

But it never happened. More than a year went by. Then one day I

got a message that Ronnie's sister, who lived in Winter Park near Orlando, was inviting me over for dinner.

"Suzie wants you to come to her house for seder," Ronnie said to me on the phone. I was a little bit confused, because we had talked about only having dinner together, not dinner and religion on the same plate.

I considered the invitation very special, though. Before that, I'd thought of the seder as a family ritual closed to non-Jews. Outsiders were not welcome.

But there I sat, just like the family and other guests, taking my turn reading aloud the story of the Exodus.

Breaking bread together is a time-honored gesture of peace, and a great symbol of North Jersey's interest in encouraging peaceful co-existence, even in the climate of deadly politics that play out every day in the Middle East.

Senter found common ground with men from the Islamic and Christian communities. They fashioned a seder incorporating the Exodus, the flight of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, which is what the ceremonial meal commemorates. He discovered that the escape from bondage is mentioned in the Quran.

"On a human level, we're really not that different," Senter said. "We may not be able to impact what's going on over there in this generation. But I've got a grandson living over there. I'm just a congregational rabbi. We have a golden opportunity to fix these things for the next generation."

Every year Holy Thursday signals the start of the chain of events that leads up to Easter Sunday, the day commemorating the Resurrection and Jesus' triumph over death.

The Last Supper that Jesus shared with his disciples the night before his death was probably a seder. So the traditional meal commemorating the Exo-

dus is like the bridge from Judaism to Christianity.

Christians and Jews use the seder generally as one of the common routes to get over the rough spots of competing theologies.

But there are few precedents for it to function the way it did last Sunday in North Jersey. The Pompton Lakes seder became a bridge to peace. The seder wouldn't be the first religious ritual to become secularized and transformed into a useful tool for blending the melting pot or tossing the multicultural salad. The Easter sunrise service, Chinese New Year, the blessing of the animals on the Feast of St. Francis, along with all the Christmas traditions are shared experiences that create a stronger sense of community.

When you look for the sign of the dove, look toward Pompton Lakes.

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comments about this column to letterstotheeditor@northjersey.com.

The Record

Bridging borders, sharing values

Sunday

April 8, 2007

By Rabbi David Senter

THE HOLIDAYS and religious observances of all faiths are guided by religious calendars. The Christian calendar is solar (based on the Earth's revolution around the sun); the Jewish calendar and Islamic calendar are similar as they both are lunar (based on the moon's revolution around the Earth).

One major difference exists between the Jewish and Islamic calendars. The Jewish calendar contains a leap year system that adds an extra month every few years, in order to ensure that the holidays are celebrated during the appropriate seasons.

Because of our varied calendars, our holidays don't always correspond.

This year is a year in which three of our holidays do coincide. During the past week, the Jewish communities around the world began observing Passover, a holiday that recounts the story of our people's birth as a free na-

tion, beginning with our enslavement in Egypt and ending with our journey to the promised land.

At the same time, Christians began the observance of Holy Week. They remember and recount the story of their savior, in a process that leads up to Easter. And Muslims celebrate the holiday Milad an-Nabi, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad.

As we sit down with our families and pray in our religious institutions, we should study the differences between our faiths and explore our shared values. If we are to get along, we need to respect and understand our religious differences. We must study the origins of our respective religions and extend our study to current issues.

I have been blessed to engage in



Rabbi David Senter

such dialogue over the last three years with the community at the Islamic Center of Passaic County and my colleagues of the Episcopal Church. We are clear that there are many issues that divide us, but we are also happy and surprised to discover that we share many of the same values.

The process of interfaith dialogue is not interfaithless dialogue. Such dialogue begins an understanding that we are different in some very fundamental ways. It has found me speaking in a Paterson mosque, affirming my belief in Israel's unequivocal right to defend itself, as well as my belief that death on both sides of the border is tragic.

Interfaith dialogue has brought me to the dinner table (in a kosher Buddhist Chinese restaurant!) with an imam, a priest, and 17 interested people from our respective communities who dare to dream that the only insurmountable divides are in our minds.

We have dreams that here in

America, where there are no geographical borders, our shared values can override our differences.

What we do in this country, how faith communities relate to each other here may not impact world relations today. But over time, what we do locally can have impacts far beyond the scope of our own communities.

Rabbi David Senter is the spiritual leader of Congregation Beth Shalom of Pompton Lakes.

Differing traditions but shared passions

Wednesday

April 4, 2007

HERALD NEWS EDITORIAL

Spring is a time of religious rebirth and redemption. It is an appropriate time to seek common ground and understanding.

That is why we applaud the efforts of a group of Jews, Muslims and Christians who joined together to celebrate an interfaith seder. For a time, this group of individuals affirmed a common religious ancestry and condemned escalating violence in the Middle East.

The first night of the Jewish observance of Passover was at sundown on Monday during the Christian holy week, which started with Palm Sunday and ends with Easter. In addition to religious significance, the two holidays follow the March 21 beginning of spring, a time when nature is reborn.

The name Passover comes from the night of the 10th plague when, by tradition, the angel of

death saw the blood of the slaughtered lamb on the doorposts of the homes of Jews. Those homes were passed over and the first born child was allowed to live.

Passover marks the ancient Hebrews' flight from slavery in Egypt. Jews plan a symbolic meal, called a seder, to tell the story of the prophet Moses who led the Hebrews out of bondage. Moses declared, "Let my people go" to the Egyptian pharaoh.

It is an eight-day observance that coincides this year with the Christian holy week.

In some languages, with the exception of English, German and some Slavic languages, the name Easter is derived from Pesach, the Hebrew name of Passover. Easter depends on Passover for much of its symbolic meaning. The Last Supper shared by Jesus and his 12 disciples before his Crucifixion on Good Friday is generally thought of as a Passover seder.

The week starts with Palm Sunday and the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. It ends the following Sunday with the Resurrection of the crucified Jesus.

Starting in 2005 a new and encouraging tradition started in North Jersey. On Palm Sunday of that year, area Jews, Muslims and Christians joined together for an interfaith seder.

More than a hundred people attended the event at the Congregation Beth Shalom in Pompton Lakes. Joining members of the conservative Jewish congregation were members of the Islamic Center of Passaic County in Paterson, Christ Episcopal Church in Pompton Lakes and St. Luke's Episcopal Church in the Warren County town of Hope.

The event, in its third year, is organized by Imam Mohammad Qatanani, a native of Palestine, who heads the Paterson mosque; Rabbi David Senter, Beth Shalom's leader; and the Rev. William Potter of St. Luke's. After the attacks of Sept. 11, Pot-

ter contacted a Muslim organization seeking a quote from the Quran. That led to a dialogue that evolved into the interfaith seder.

This exercise in understanding will not resolve long-standing differences in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, it can foster good will among religious leaders of different faiths in North Jersey. This is a positive step, and a hopeful sign that perhaps this sort of religious empathy can be spread beyond New Jersey to other parts of the world.

The Record

At interfaith seder, only the herbs were bitter

Monday

April 2, 2007

By JOHN CHADWICK and
M A R T H A M c K A Y
STAFF WRITERS

Jews, Muslims and Christians joined together Sunday in an interfaith Passover seder rarely attempted in North Jersey.

"Let us help one another overcome hardness of heart, opening minds to the challenges of faith," the crowd of about 120 people recited during an opening prayer at Congregation Beth Shalom in Pompton Lakes.

Joining the Conservative Jewish congregation were members of the Islamic Center of Passaic County in Paterson, Christ Episcopal Church in Pompton Lakes and St. Luke's Episcopal Church in the Warren County community of Hope.

Jews and Christians have long held interfaith events. But a Jewish-Muslim seder is almost unheard of in North Jersey, where strong feelings about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have led to frosty relations between some



Mohamed El Filali, Outreach Director of the Islamic Center of Passaic County, breaks the matzo during an interfaith Passover Seder Sunday evening at Congregation Beth Shalom in Pompton Lakes while Elissa Kaplan-Senter, left, and Imam Dr. Mohammad Qatanani, right, of the Islamic Center of Passaic County, watch on.

members of the two communities.

The jointly authored prayer service, while not papering over their differences, affirmed the congregations' common religious ancestry and condemned the spiraling violence in the Mideast.

"How is it that we, Muslims, Jews

and Christians, have all allowed our fear, prejudice and hatred to destroy justice, compassion and love?" said Mohamed El Falali, outreach director at the Islamic Center.

Passover, which begins tonight at sundown, is one of the most widely celebrated Jewish holidays, and commemorates the ancient Hebrews' flight from slav-

ery in Egypt. Jews typically hold a seder, a special meal and worship service, that symbolically retells the story of Moses, Judaism's greatest prophet, who led the Hebrews out of bondage and declared "Let my people go" to the Egyptian Pharaoh.

But the Exodus saga also resonates with Muslims and Christians, who trace their religious roots to the Hebrew Bible. The leader of the mosque, for example, said Moses is mentioned more times in the Quran than Islam's founder, Muhammad.

"We all believe in the one God and his message," Imam Mohammad Qatanani, a native Palestinian, said in an interview. "The message of Moses is the same as the message of Muhammad."

Qatanani and El Falali joined with the Jews in eating the bitter herbs -- a custom that symbolizes the harshness of slavery and oppression.

And El Falali performed the tradi-

Seder

tional breaking of the matzo -- the unleavened bread that Jews eat during Passover.

The synagogue's social hall, meanwhile, was decorated in plain white, rather than the usual blue and white color scheme of the Israeli national flag.

Rabbi David Senter, Beth Shalom's leader, said he made that change to show respect for the Muslims.

"I don't need to be in anybody's face, he said.

As the room filled up, Stewart Nadel, a Pompton Lakes resident and member of Beth Shalom, said he missed the seder last year.

"Just by being here, it's a coming together," he said.

Although an Islamic prayer was planned, the Muslim turnout was limited to the two Islamic Center leaders.

El Falali explained to the gathering that members of the mosque were celebrating the birth of the prophet Muhammad. He also added that 10 days ago his wife gave birth to a baby girl.

From across the room, someone began the traditional Jewish Siman tov and Mazel tov, a spiritual celebratory song. Quickly the room filled with

chanting as El Falali stood, a wide grin spreading across his face, receiving good luck wishes from the members of the synagogue.

The seder began with a group of banjo, mandolin and guitar-picking Christian musicians from St. Luke's performing folk songs.

Then the religious leaders were joined by members of the congregations to perform readings and eat from the seder plate.

"We take bits and pieces of our various liturgies and weave them together," explained the Rev. John

Rollins of Christ Episcopal Church.

The event marked the third time that Senter, Qatanani and the Rev. William Potter of St. Luke staged a joint seder.

The three clergymen came together by chance.

After the 9/11 attacks, Potter contacted a local Muslim organization, seeking a quote from the Quran that he could read during a community event. That phone call helped begin a relationship between the church and the Paterson mosque. A few years later, Potter met Senter and asked

him to get involved.

"I was just looking for a quote from the Quran," Potter said. "God had another plan in mind."

Still, there were doubts leading up to the first seder in 2005.

"I was honestly tentative the first year," said Senter, an Orthodox-trained rabbi who grew up in Teaneck and has relatives in Israel. "It was the first time I had any kind of meaningful interchange with the Muslim community, and I didn't know what to expect."

But the doubts faded after the first 20 minutes, and the three clergy have vowed to hold the seder every year. That doesn't mean, they said, that their differences over the Mideast have been resolved.

"We are all people, and we are going to agree and disagree," Qatanani said. "But we can still be friends."

Senter agreed.

"They know very well where I stand, and I know where they stand," he said. "But if we can get others [in America] to understand that there is a human side on either side of the equation, then maybe that understanding will someday impact other parts of the world."

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Elissa Kaplan Senter lighting candles as Mohamed El Filali looks on during Sunday's interfaith Passover Seder at Congregation Beth Shalom in Pompton