

At interfaith seder, only the herbs were bitter

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By **JOHN CHADWICK** and **MARTHA MCKAY**
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 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 slavery 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 traditional 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.



BETH BALBIERZ / THE RECORD

▲ Mohamed El Falali, 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.

"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."

E-mail: chadwick@northjersey.com and mckay@northjersey.com