

# An effort at dialogue during war

By Justin A. Rice

On a mostly sunny, 88-degree afternoon, a swiveling fan cast a breeze across the living room at the Kavod Jewish Social Justice House.

It cooled members of the Moishe/Kavod House Boston and the Boston chapter of the Muslim American Society, including two women in traditional Hijabs.

The groups discussed their commonalities over mugs of spicy cider, and the bridge over the religious divide looked smaller as they snacked on Cheetos, carrot cake and mini spinach pies.

Boston Muslim American Society associate director Bilal Kaleem said they emphasized their shared sense of social justice first so it would be easier to tackle their differences.

"In the Quran, it says to focus first on speaking about things in common," said Kaleem, 26, clad in a pink pin-striped button-down shirt and black pin striped slacks.

"This is what draws us together, a shared message, a shared vision of social justice. You can find differences with anyone; focusing on similarities is what allows you to be productive."

With that in mind, the 20- and 30-somethings paired off into seven groups.

They read Isaiah 58 and excerpts from the Quran (chapter 4, verse 135, 4:36 and 107:4-7) before discussing the tension between social service and religious ritual, a common theme in each passage.

"I know there are a lot of similarities, but I've never been exposed to the texts," MAS member Amin Maati, 35, said of the Quran and Old Testament after everyone reconvened for a larger talk. "The concepts of fasting are very similar - ritual leads to

righteousness."

Six months ago, leaders from both groups reached out to David Dolev, co-director of The Center for Jewish-Muslim Relations. Two months ago, Dolev invited the leaders to his Newton home.

"I felt like they were a really good match," Dolev said. "Both groups work for social justice through their faith."

Sunday's event was finally planned two weeks ago, well before the latest round of violence, including Hezbollah rockets raining down on the northern Israeli city Haifa. Sunday's dialogue gave Gabe Silverman a shared sense of solidarity with Haifa's Muslim and Jewish residents.

"I feel especially proud to be at an event like this where Jews and Muslims come together over whatever issues bond us together," the 29-year-old medical student said.

As they went around the room sharing their final thoughts, Kaleem translated two

excerpts from a well-worn Quran (3:64 and 29:46) before accidentally dropping the book. He kissed it, as a Jew would kiss a siddur, before polishing off the final spinach pie.

"I know I already went," Kaleem said after everyone spoke.

Then he explained that 3:64 and 29:46 command Muslims to focus on their commonalities with other religions such as a belief in one God before reading his translations: "Say: 'O people of scripture. Come to a common word between you and us ... If they turn away say: Bear witness that we submit to God' ... and do not argue with the people of Scripture (i.e. Jews/Christians) rather [speak] that which is beautiful, except with those who oppress from among them."



Hossam Aljabri, left, and Gabriel Silverman talk at Kavod House.

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