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[Home](#) > Jewish-Muslim Pairings Facing Toughest Test

Jewish-Muslim Pairings Facing Toughest Test

As Twinning Weekend nears, a sense of resolve among participants in wake of Park51; key N.Y. defection.

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In West Newton, Mass., Congregation Dorshei Tzedek will sponsor a joint program with an area mosque in November. The interfaith activity will mark the Reconstructionist synagogue's first participation in the third annual Weekend of Twinning sponsored by the New York-based Foundation for Ethnic Understanding.

The congregation's decision to take part in the program was spurred by "acrimony" over the construction of a local Islamic cultural center — a situation that has played out across the country in recent months — and a desire to improve relations between the faiths, said Dorshei Tzedek's Rabbi Toba Spitzer.

"We should be showing our solidarity with our Muslim brothers and sisters," the rabbi said.

But on Manhattan's East Side, Sutton Place Synagogue, which hosted a Twinning event last year, has pulled out of the program this year. Because of the controversy surrounding a planned Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero, the Conservative congregation is nervous about inviting a putative "moderate" Muslim leader who may later turn out to have radical connections, said Rabbi Allan Schranz. He was referring to Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, who heads the Cordoba House, or Park51, project on Park Place.



Rabbi Drorah Setel, an active supporter of Jewish-Muslim dialogue in Buffalo.





"We are more cautious. I am more cautious," he says.

In California's Silicon Valley, Congregation Shir Hadash, for the third year running, will soon sponsor an interfaith program with Muslim participants. This time around, anti-Muslim reactions around the country because of Cordoba House — notably the called-off Koran burning by a Florida pastor — played a big role in the synagogue's decision to re-up, said Rabbi Melanie Aron.

The firestorm of controversy unleashed over the so-called Ground Zero mosque, which has fueled anger about other mosque projects from Tennessee to California, is providing the stiffest test to date for the fledgling Weekend of Twinning program. And it has forced individual synagogues involved in the interfaith effort to make tough decisions, often in the face of community criticism. But interviews with rabbis and imams involved in the program, and with its organizers, reveal a sense of resolve on the part of participants.

In fact, though the Twinning program may feel like it is catering to the already tolerant, the "mosque" controversy seems to have pushed more Jewish organizations toward, rather than away from, joint events with Muslim partners.

Physical and verbal attacks on Muslims "make people see the value of these type of [stereotype-busting] programs," said Rabbi Aron, whose Reform congregation will twin with a nearby Shia mosque in November. "Jews have a visceral reaction to burning books.

"We have had some criticism from the greater Jewish community, and we have struggled with the issue of how 'pure' our Muslims partners have to be," Rabbi Aron continued. "If we set the gate too high and don't talk to anyone who has ever talked to anyone we object to, we really cut ourselves off unnecessarily from people who are open to dialogue with us. We have found in our very diverse community ... that there is more to be gained from participating in broad interfaith efforts than there is to lose."

The number of participating cities for this year's Twinning weekend, set for Nov. 5-7, which doubled from 50 in 2008 to about 110 last year, will probably increase again this year, said Walter Ruby, the Foundation's Muslim Jewish Relations program officer. That will include more than a dozen Jewish-Muslim twinings in the Greater New York area, also a slight increase from 2009. The events typically consist of visits to each other's houses of worship, pulpit exchanges and joint educational programs.

More than a month before the Twinning weekend, Ruby (who is also a freelance writer for The Jewish Week) did not have the final figure this week of participating communities in the United States and abroad, but said Jewish groups and Muslim partners in Bulgaria, Austria and Tunisia will take part for the first time, in addition to established partners in England and France.

"I have not seen any indication that people are backing away. I have not seen a negative reaction" to the Cordoba House controversy, he said.

Ruby said he has not heard calls from possible Jewish participants asking for more-extensive verification of Muslim participants' backgrounds. He said he knows of only one past participant, Sutton Place Synagogue, which has dropped out because of the controversy. And he has heard from several Jewish organizations whose interest in the Twinning program was fanned by the ongoing debate. They ask him, "What can I do, how do I do it?" he said.

The public debate over Cordoba House has forced many members of the Jewish community to take a position, said Aaron Hahn Tapper, founder and co-executive director of the California-based Abraham's Vision, a "conflict transformation organization" that sponsors a wide variety of joint Jewish-Muslim activities.

"There's a greater polarization ... a lot of people in the middle are being pushed to make a decision, for or against such ecumenical programs, he said.

The comments of American Muslim leaders like Imam Feisal and other Islamic spokesmen who have identified themselves as moderates, but who also have a history of making less-accommodating statements or have connections to questionable Muslim organizations, reportedly make many people, including American Jews, wary of taking part in events with Muslims.

But spokesmen for local Islamic organizations say they have not experienced this.

Imam Shamsi Ali, director of the Jamaica Muslim Center, said that while he is "sure" some members of the American Jewish community are reluctant to work with Muslims, he has not noticed Jewish resistance to taking part in Twinning events. Neither are American Muslims more reluctant this year to join such interfaith activities. "I don't notice any change."

As part of the Twinning Weekend, his Center will host Kehilath Sephardim from Kew Gardens Hills, Queens, on Nov. 15, and representatives of both institutions will lobby public officials about such issues as government support for private schools and increased municipal services later this year.

Habeeb Ahmed, chairman of the board of the Islamic Center of Long Island, also says he has not noticed a wariness on the part of possible Jewish Twinning partners. "I have not found this to be the case."

Representatives from major Muslim American organizations met near JFK Airport last week to discuss what they see as an increasing anti-Muslim sentiment in this country. "There's been a heightened sense of suspicion — prejudice against Muslims is increasing in the Jewish American community," Abraham's Vision's Tapper said.

The controversy has not lessened the enthusiasm of the membership of Temple Beth El of Great Neck for its Twinning program with the Islamic Center of Westbury. The two institutions have been partners in ecumenical efforts for some 20 years, said Rabbi Meir Feldman.

"I don't think people — even those opposed to the Islamic center in Manhattan — find that a reason to distance ourselves from Muslims or from the Muslim community," he said of members of his Reform congregation.

His congregants consider "finding a way to collaborate with Muslims ... an important experience."

At New York University, where a Twinning dialogue program will be part of a yearlong interaction between Jewish and Muslim students in classes and other campus settings, the debate over

Cordoba House has not increased or decreased students' interest, said Rabbi Yehuda Sarna, university chaplain.

"They are able to separate between the efforts of some to build a mosque in Manhattan, and [relations with] their peers."

But for Sutton Place's Rabbi Schranz, the difficulty in vetting Muslim leaders is a problem.

"I am suspicious" about sponsoring a speech by an Islamic representative, "a supposed moderate who turns out to be a fanatic," he said. "I am not a suspicious person by nature."

The Twinning program at his congregation last year featured Imam Feisal and his wife, Daisy Kahn.

Since their appearance, where they spoke about the value of mutual tolerance, several controversial remarks by the imam have surfaced, including his refusal to condemn Hamas as a terrorist organization and his assertion that the U.S. is partially responsible for the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The record of a future Muslim participant in the Twinning program will require a more extensive background check, Rabbi Schranz said. "It's not prejudice — you don't know who you're dealing with." His feelings, he said, "reflect on the whole the feelings of the congregation."

The planned Islamic Center, and resulting suspicion of Muslims, will not be an official theme of the upcoming programs, but the subject is certain to be on everybody's mind, Ruby said. "I can't imagine there won't be any mention of it."

In Buffalo, that city's fledgling Muslim-Jewish interfaith effort, Building Bridges, has run into stiff opposition.

It was founded by Dr. Robert Stall, a geriatric physician, and Dr. Othman Shibly, who teaches in the SUNY Buffalo School of Dental Medicine, shortly after a February 2009 plane crash that took the life of Cantor Susan Wehle, who had volunteered to teach an interfaith course for the Bureau of Jewish Education. Stall, who met Shibly at a memorial service for the cantor, took on Cantor Wehle's teaching assignment, inviting Shibly and some Muslim students to the classes.

Out of that, Building Bridges, which has sponsored a health fair (with Jewish and Muslim doctors participating) and joint educational programs, was born.

The background of Shibly, a Beirut-born periodontist and expert on Islamic law, quickly came under fire; teachers he had studied with in Syria two decades earlier had made intemperate statements about Israel and Jews.

Articles in Buffalo's weekly Jewish Review and on the PeaceAndTolerance.org website called Shibly a closet supporter of terrorism. "Guilt by association," he told The Jewish Week — "110 percent not true."

While four Buffalo-area congregations will sponsor Twinning activities in November, the organized Jewish community has taken a hands-off position. The Jewish Federation of Greater Buffalo offers no comment on the initiative besides stating that it has "not been involved." In addition, the Building Bridges course will not be offered by the Bureau of Jewish Education this year, and Temple Beth Zion, the city's biggest congregation, is running its own activities with the

Muslim community.

“There are people in the Jewish community who criticize you if you interact with Muslims,” Rabbi Drorah Setel, president of Buffalo’s Board of Rabbis and an enthusiastic booster of Jewish-Muslim activities, told The Jewish Week. “It’s a sad commentary on the level of fear in the Jewish community.”

In Dallas, Temple Shalom, which is Reform and has taken part in the Foundation’s Twinning weekend in each of its three years, will join the Islamic Association of Carrollton in a still-to-be-determined social action project in November — despite the occasional criticism from members of the Dallas Jewish community.

“They [Muslim partners in interfaith work] are pulling the wool over your eyes,” Rabbi Jeremy Schneider said some Dallas Jews tell him.

The rabbi said that improved Jewish-Muslim relations in Dallas are proof that he is on the right track.

When a controversy like the Cordoba House happens, Rabbi Schneider said, ties between Jews and Muslims in the Dallas area largely aren’t affected because leaders and members of both communities already know and trust each other. “We have those [close] relations,” Rabbi Schneider says. “We can rise above that kind of silliness.”

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