

One dinner, two traditions

Islamic and Jewish students join together to celebrate the end of Ramadan and the start of the Jewish high holidays.

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Thursday, Sept. 9, marked the end of Ramadan, the holiest month in Islam. That same evening began the High Holy Days of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashana. Muslims and Jews across the world gathered with loved ones to celebrate. At MIT, Islamic and Jewish students also celebrated — but they marked the separate holidays by joining together at a dinner to honor both religions.

Co-hosted by the Muslim Student Association (MSA) and Hillel, more than 40 students gathered at tables set with apples, honey and pomegranates as part of the Jewish holiday, and dates as the traditional food to break the fast for Ramadan. According to Rabbi Michelle Fisher, executive director of Hillel, the shared company made the food even better.

“There was a buzz and a warmth in the room,” Fisher said. “This is what a meal should be about; it’s more than the food, it’s the people.”

Two students, one from each group, spoke. Senior Easeen Zaman, a member of the Muslim Student Association, explained what Ramadan is and more about the practices and beliefs of Islam. “These are individual joyous occasions, but the coincidence of the holidays makes it even more joyous,” Zaman said.

Senior Meena Viswanath, one of the Hillel student leaders, explained Rosh Hashana and briefly described the practices and beliefs of Judaism. “I would love it if we could do stuff together all the time,” she said.

This was the first Jewish event Zaman had ever attended, but he found it surprisingly familiar. “We hold a lot more things in common than people tell us,” he said.

Dr. Les Perelman, director of Writing Across the Curriculum, proposed the idea of the joint dinner and funded the majority of the expense in honor of his mother’s memory. Chaplain to the Institute Robert Randolph covered the rest of the costs. Much like the MIT Addir Fellows program, which brings together students of different faiths for dialogue, the joint dinner gave students a chance to interact in a meaningful way outside the classroom.

According to Fisher, conversations at the equally mixed tables didn’t cover Sept. 11 or the recent threat by a Florida Christian minister to burn the Koran. Instead the students discussed “everything from Halal/Kosher and the expected opening of the Kosher servery in Maseeh Hall next year, to lunar calendars and international relations among Jews and Muslims to prayer ritual,” she said.

Fisher said she finds one of the best things about being part of a university community is the ability to arrange events such as this, so students can get to know each other as human beings. “If we can start here and lay this groundwork, then we can move forward,” Fisher said. “We might not have world peace tomorrow, but we can now move on to deeper conversations.”

After the meal ended, many students gathered outside in the hall, still talking late into the evening.

“I know I gained a lot of respect for the students there,” said Fisher, who noted that there were many requests for other such programs in the future. “It was a big win for the Muslim and Jewish communities at MIT.”



Two seniors, Easeen Saman, left, and Meena Viswanath, spoke at a holiday dinner co-hosted by the Muslim Student Association and Hillel.