



Different faiths break bread at Central Qns. Y

Christians, Jews and Muslims eat, mingle with one another in FoHi

by David Schneier, Chronicle Contributor

Another interfaith gathering, another sold-out event at the Central Queens Y in Forest Hills.

Jews, Muslims and Christians were among the 110 people at an abridged Passover seder led by Rabbi Irwin Goldenberg, a Forest Hills resident and rabbi of Temple Israel in York, Pa. for over 35 years.

On a sheet of paper explaining the Passover seder were conversation starters: Do you have a holiday or a ritual that celebrates freedom or redemption? How important is the story of Exodus in your own tradition?

The Rev. Jack Lohr of First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills offered a prayer of love and fellowship during the seder program.

Before the program, Lohr said this informal environment “makes people into friends.”

“People try to understand each other and respect the differences,” he added.

Selim Ozcicek from the Turkish Cultural Center of Queens offered a Muslim prayer expressing one’s past helplessness and eventual graciousness after Allah’s guidance.

Before the program, Ozcicek said Jews, Muslims and Christians who attended all saw the program as “great.”

“People want more of these get-togethers,” Ozcicek said.

Coming to the event for the first time was Shazia Jivraj, her husband and two children.

Jivraj said she sees a lot of similarities between Islam and Judaism, with one of them being gratitude.

“We got along very well,” Jivarj said of her tablemates. “We made friends.”

“It was good thing, getting together, with what’s going on in the world,” her husband, Ali, a Shiite Muslim from Tanzania, said. “There’s so much negativity.”

The couple’s 7-year-old daughter, Sabah, learned about Passover at the Montessori School in Forest Hills and now at the Ella Barker School she attends, with her father saying he’s thrilled city students get to learn about different religions’ holidays.

Jivraj and her son, Rayyan, sat separately from her husband and daughter to promote intermingling.

The 45-minute Passover seder given by Goldenberg was replete with matzoh (symbolizing the Jews leaving Egypt quickly), bitter herbs (remembering the bitterness of slavery), wine, grape juice, and macaroons for desert.

A kosher Middle Eastern meal was served after the seder. Ali Jivraj noted how kosher and halal are similar in how meat is prepared for consumption.

The Jivraj family said they all plan on going to the next interfaith event at the Central Queens Y, which has held a number of such gatherings over the last three years.

The next meeting planned is breaking the Ramadan fast, the Id-al-Fitr holiday, at the Turkish Cultural Center of Queens, said Peggy Kurtz, director of Arts & Jewish Heritage Programs at the Y.

The Y also offers cultural assimilation services such as teaching Afghan women and other immigrants how to speak English, write resumes and cover letters and prepare for job interviews.