On Campus

Breaking Bread, Moving Ahead

Summer 2006

Seated together at small tables and picking at a light dinner of falafel, shawarma, and hummus, about 50 Jewish and Muslim students on April 23 took turns politely posing to one another questions scribbled on folded-up pieces of paper. Why do you fast? How do you keep the spirit of your holidays alive throughout the year? What does the concept of pilgrimage mean to you? The conversation quickly turned lighthearted, as the students' reflections on their faith were peppered with humorous anecdotes about nutty family members, the challenge of balancing religious observance with homework, and keeping up your lacrosse game while fasting. What happens if you mess up a holiday ritual? "Whatever you do, do not drop the Torah, because everybody in the room will have to fast for … a year, I think," quipped Juliana Lewis '09CC. "If you're holding the Torah, you know everybody else is holding their breath."

Organized jointly by Columbia/Barnard Hillel and the Muslim Students Association (MSA) to coincide loosely with the end of Passover, the event aimed simply to "create a social venue where people could get to know each other," says Joshua Goldkind '07CC, a member of Hillel. "There are a lot of thoughtful educational events on campus, but we wanted to create a comfortable environment where we could just talk and come out of ourselves a little bit."

The gathering was supported by the Kraft Family Fund for Interfaith and Intercultural Awareness, a $1 million fund created last year through a $500,000 gift from Trustee Emeritus Robert Kraft '63CC and his wife, Myra Kraft, with a matching contribution from the University. The fund was established, in part, to sponsor student-initiated programs that facilitate understanding among people from diverse backgrounds, especially in light of tensions in 2004 and 2005 between Jewish students and some professors in the Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures department.

"I never experienced any friction with professors or with other students personally, but the general mood on campus last year certainly was tense," says Goldkind. "The

kind of tension that existed could be lessened if people from different ethnic, political, and religious groups talk to each other more. Then, when a tough political issue arises on campus, it could be an interesting thing for everybody to talk about rather than a source of divisiveness."

MSA President Omar Siddiqi '07CC agrees: "Everybody wants to understand what the other group is thinking. They're curious. I want to know what a Jew thinks about a particular topic and why, and Jews want to know what I think. We live next to each other in our dorms, but we never seem to make time to talk through our ideas."

Siddiqi kicked off the April 23 dinner by recounting the story of Muhammad's flight from Mecca and his establishing a more liberal society in Medina. The story, Siddiqi said, teaches a lesson similar to that of the Jews' exodus from Egypt and illustrates shared values of Jews and Muslims. "Muhammad left his home because he was persecuted, and when he was free, he and his followers had to decide whether to become oppressors themselves or to learn from their suffering and create a just society," he said. "We all must understand the imperative to serve the cause of goodness, whether that means opposing hateful language on campus or any other form of political or religious oppression. I hope we'll all work together to create just societies like Medina and Canaan."



Guide to school abbreviations

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