Bridging a faith divide

By Tom Carter
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Members of the Hindu Samaj Temple in Hamilton, Ontario, watched Sept. 15, 2001, as firefighters tried to control the blaze. Ron Pozzer (The Hamilton Spectator)

HAMILTON, Ontario

Ali Cheaib, a Lebanese Canadian who spent his summer vacation taking refuge from Israeli warplanes in a Lebanese bomb shelter, calls Judea Pearl, the father of Daniel Pearl, the reporter for the Wall Street Journal who was beheaded by radical Muslims, a hero and a mentor.

Mr. Pearl is a Jew and Mr. Cheaib is a Muslim. Both teach computer science -- Mr. Cheaib (pronounced "Shibe") at Hamilton's Mohawk College, Mr. Pearl at Stanford University in California, where he is renowned as a specialist on artificial intelligence.

They disagree on almost every point of Middle East politics, and both have suffered bitter losses at the hands of their enemies but are nevertheless trying to get beyond personal tragedy to build bridges with people of the other faith.

Asks Mr. Cheaib, in an interview: "Judea Pearl is a phenomenal example, like a phoenix, of coming out of the ashes of loss and tragedy and saying, 'We are going to turn this into something worthwhile.' He has done this. Why can't I?

"What I was living [in Lebanon during the war] was the alternative to dialogue. Dialogue must continue."

He said this minutes before Mr. Pearl took the platform at the Hamilton Place community center in Ontario for an unusual public airing of the differences between the Islamic world and the West.

Mr. Pearl and Muslim scholar Akbar Ahmed of American University in Washington have been traveling around North America talking to one another before audiences like this about Daniel Pearl's death in Pakistan four years ago, and about Palestinian-Israeli relations and other issues.

Nearly 1,000 Jews, Muslims and Christians crowded into Hamilton Place last month to listen to the two men talk, much like old friends, about some of the world's most provocative issues. On stage, they parry and thrust as if continuing a long-running conversation in someone's living room.

Does Israel have the right to exist? Was it created out of the Holocaust? Why shouldn't Iran have nuclear weapons? Are terrorists authentic Muslims? If the United States

champions democracy, why won't it recognize Hamas? Why do Muslims think they are under siege by the West? Why won't Muslim nations recognize Israel's right to exist? What, if anything, can be done about the state of the world today?

"Our mission is not to embrace each other with understanding, but mainly to listen to each other, to hear two narratives side by side," Mr. Pearl says in an interview before his presentation. "To acknowledge each other's narrative. I am a soldier fighting hatred, fighting ignorance.

"I have not forgiven [what they did to my son]. I am not going to forgive. I am dialoguing as a soldier. Dialogue is my weapon. ... I am fighting the hatred that took Danny's life. We don't have armies, but we have the good will of millions, the coalition of the decent."

Community journey

The narratives related by the two men hold that Jews and Muslims both follow in the tradition of Abraham, and that both have suffered from the Holocaust, the Crusades, dictatorial governments, insults and religious discrimination. That suffering, they say, must be acknowledged and appreciated by both sides.

Mr. Ahmed, who is regarded in most mosques as a scholar and devout Muslim, says his religion has been hijacked by extremists. He is working to see the vision of moderate Muslims carry the day. "It is [the 13th-century Sufi poet] Rumi's vision of Islam, versus Osama bin Laden's," Mr. Ahmed says.

To the two men the speaking tour is a way of combating the religious hatred that both see threatening the world. For the audience in Hamilton Place, it was the culmination of a five-year effort marked by tension, flared tempers and growth. It was opposed by some Jews and Muslims who say talking with the others is not only a waste of time, but a betrayal.

Sponsors of the event, including Mr. Cheaib, say they want what has happened in Hamilton to be a model for other conflicted communities where Christians, Muslims and Jews are searching for reconciliation.

They understand their experience will not be easily replicated. Any group of people can talk, but reconciliation can take place only if recognized community leaders are willing to endure hours of tense and often emotional meetings, and are committed to building long-term and respectful relationships that will become genuine friendships. They liken their conversations to a rocky marriage that works only because both sides are committed to it.

"We are getting calls from other towns, asking for help in setting up their own dialogue groups, but I don't know that we have anything yet that can be duplicated," Mr. Cheaib says. Mr. Pearl says interfaith outreach efforts generally take place among rabbis, imams and academics, rather than between families and individuals.

"We demonstrated a tone of respectful discussion that can be duplicated anywhere, on a community level," he says, if there is genuine curiosity and a willingness to listen.

'Madness by fools'

Hamilton, a run-down industrial city of steel mills, smokestacks and factories at the western tip of Lake Ontario, made international headlines when the city's largest Hindu temple was firebombed just after the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States,

perhaps by vandals who mistook it for a mosque.

"The Hindu temple was torched out of madness by fools," says Larry DiIanni, who was mayor at the time of the Pearl event. "People were fearful. You could cut the tension in the city with a knife." Hamilton, a city of half a million, includes 15,000 Muslims, about 5,000 Jews and a number of Hindus.

In an effort to dampen emotions, city officials arranged meetings of ethnic and religious leaders, which over time grew into the Strengthening Hamilton's Community Initiative (SHCI). The goals were simple -- to prevent the destruction of property and to deal with racism and religious and ethnic tensions.

By the summer of 2004, Javid Mirza, a member of the initiative who was then president of the Hamilton Muslim Association, had a strained relationship with Lorne Finkelstein, a prominent cardiologist and one of the Hamilton Jewish Federation's representatives on the initiative.

Mr. Mirza, a Pakistani-Canadian who imports sporting goods for Wal-Mart, was trying to raise money to bring a 9-year-old Afghan child to Canada for urgent heart surgery.

Dr. Finkelstein read about the boy in the Hamilton newspaper, called Mr. Mirza and volunteered his medical and media contacts from an earlier campaign on Canadian health care issues. Together, the two men worked through the bureaucratic obstacles and got the child to Canada, where the life-saving surgery was performed.

"The national headlines were about Jews and Muslims of Hamilton working together," Dr. Finkelstein recalls. "This brought a tremendous amount of appreciation to the Jewish community, and it was the first real breakthrough in Hamilton Jewish-Muslim relations. This was the beginning ... of Javid's and my relationship." .

But more obstacles lay ahead. In the summer of 2005, Hamilton's police chief and 30 other Canadian police officials went to Israel to attend a summit on terrorism and security, infuriating the city's Muslims, who said the summit was the occasion of anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian propaganda.

City leaders called a conference to air the issue, but the meeting quickly degenerated into a shouting match, with local Muslims spouting anti-Semitic invective and offended Jews responding angrily.

"Ali Cheaib, who I knew from the anti-racism committee, and I looked across the room at each other, and we just shook our heads," Dr. Finkelstein says. "It was ugly. We both knew this should never be allowed to happen again."

'All Canadians'

Dr. Finkelstein called a meeting at his office the next day, inviting Mr. Cheaib, Gerry Fisher of the Hamilton Jewish Federation, Mr. Mirza and Hussein Hamdani, a charismatic Muslim youth leader. Over the course of several months, the men formed the Hamilton Arab, Muslim and Jewish Dialogue Committee, which sponsored the Hamilton Place event last month.

They agreed that they would not try to change one another's opinions on Middle East politics, but would focus on local issues, and that no matter what the topic the discussion would be respectful and civil.

"The Middle East has nothing to do with what we are doing here," Dr. Finkelstein says. "We are all Canadians. We may have different opinions of what is going on in Israel, Gaza or Lebanon or Iraq. But we are not trying to change anyone's mind on the Middle

East. We all left somewhere else to come here, and we should not bring the old hatreds and resentments to Hamilton. We have to make sure that what happens over there does not filter back to our community here."

Particularly disturbing, at the police forum, was the sight of the loudest, most extreme participants mugging for the cameras and reporters.

"It was embarrassing," Dr. Finkelstein says. "These people, some of whom did not even come from Hamilton, did not represent our communities. The media was being used."

Afterward, they tried to identify community spokesmen they regarded as responsible, and gave the names to local reporters. Most agree that this has softened the tone and reduced the volume of the rhetoric.

"I'd say we have become more thoughtful and sophisticated in understanding how international stories will play out in our community," says Dana Robbins, editor in chief of the Hamilton Spectator, which co-sponsored the Hamilton Place debate and donated thousands of dollars in advertising to promote it.

"But let me turn this around. The respective communities have spent a huge amount of energy in putting up leadership [to serve as spokesmen]. They decided that they couldn't let our community be defined by people holding onto old habits and prejudices."

Silencing the fringe

Even so, it seems that every month produces an overseas event that threatens to percolate into a local crisis, forcing the community dialogue group to deal with resentment over the Danish cartoons ridiculing the prophet Mohammed and the subsequent attempt to silence the newspapers, or Pope Benedict XVI's reference to historical assertions that Islam was propagated by the sword.

When two Muslim students at Hamilton's McMaster University were among 17 Canadians arrested for plotting to blow up Canadian government buildings last June, the local Muslim community was stunned by the revelations of the plot and disappointed that Muslims were called on to defend their religion.

Says Mr. Mirza: "If someone commits a crime, then arrest them. But why call them Muslims, as if all Muslims are terrorists? No one calls Timothy McVeigh the Christian Oklahoma City bomber, as if Christianity is a religion of terrorism."

In August, Hamilton's Muslim community held a rally to protest Israel's border war with Lebanon. Some of the dialogue members saw that the list of speakers included extremists and asked editors and reporters to avoid the event. As a result, it went uncovered, in effect silencing the fringe at the risk of giving life to rumors.

"What happens if a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it?" asks Dr. Finkelstein. "When the event was not covered, it denied the hatemongers the attention they wanted."

Because Daniel Pearl was an accomplished violinist, the Pearl Foundation established by his father uses music to create bridges. At the Hamilton Place event, a choir of Muslim, Jewish and Christian children sang songs of peace, at times a little off-key.

Mr. Cheaib says the choir was the best thing to come from the event. Not only did the children get to know each other, but their parents -- Jews in yarmulkes and Muslim women wearing the hijab -- waited together through the practices. The parents started talking, not about Middle East politics, but their children's school grades, soccer, ice hockey and their hopes for their children.

"There were Muslims who had never spoken to a Jew before, and Jews who had never spoken to a Muslim," says Mr. Cheaib, who encouraged Muslim parents to allow their children to participate.

"The parents have been quite eager," says Laura Wolfson, the choir director. "The choir was created for this event, but many of the parents have asked me to continue. They see it as a good thing. As a social group, it is very diverse."

Breaking the fast

Not everyone has been won over, and many declined to attend the Hamilton Place event. Some Muslims stayed away because days before, Israeli artillery had missed its target and killed 17 persons, most of them women and children in the Gaza Strip. Some Jews petitioned the Hamilton Jewish Federation to end the dialogue, arguing that some local Muslim leaders support calls for the eradication of Israel.

"I believe in dialogue, but this is a monologue, a one-way street," says Lawrence Hart, a doctor who sits on the Hamilton Jewish Federation board. "It is time to rethink what we are doing and maybe find new partners."

But the dialogue is likely to continue. A few months ago, the five members of the Hamilton Dialogue each invited half a dozen executive members from their respective organizations to an informal dinner, for the purpose of establishing another dialogue group -- this time made up of the most senior community directors.

It is still in the early stages, but it was the first time several of them had met, and the first time some of the Jews and some of the Muslims had met a person of the other faith.

In early November, at the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, Jewish and Muslim students at McMaster University broke the fast together at an Eid dinner and Jewish community leaders were guests of honor at the Hamilton mosque.

"This will go on," Dr. Finkelstein says. "There is no alternative. As Yitzhak Rabin said when he shook hands with Yassar Arafat, you make peace with your enemies, not your friends. Through this, I've become friends with Ali, Javid, Hussein. ...

"We don't agree on many things. We don't try. There will be issues. But at least now we know who to call when something happens. That is better than five years ago."

"The challenges are still there," agrees Mr. DiIanni, "but now we have a vehicle with which to deal with them."

• Amy Baskerville and John Haydon contributed to this report.