

NEWS

JEWS, CHRISTIANS, MUSLIMS

'Go-to guy' on interfaith issues inspires diverse group

By Frank Lambert
Special to the Tribune

TORONTO – What did the little Jewish girl excitedly tell her father, the rabbi, when she first encountered Catholic Nuns in their traditional black habits at her first day of school? "Abba, Abba," she said. "They are all from the Sound of Music."

One of many endearing stories told by Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff, guest speaker at the 21st Annual Interfaith Dinner at Yorkminster Park Baptist Church, organized by The Neighbourhood Interfaith Group last Wednesday evening.

About 300 people crowded into the midtown church to engage in a discourse of reason. In an uncommon breaking of bread between Jews, Christians and Muslims, they were welcomed by Yorkminster's Rev. Dr. J. Peter Holmes. Pastor Brian Wilker-Frey of St. Ansgar Lutheran Church said Grace and Gary Posner of Beth Shalom Synagogue said the Motzi. Kashruth was observed at dinner and then Rabbi Baruch Frydman-Kohl and Beth Tzedec Synagogue introduced the guest speaker, who entertained the mixed faith gathering with the wit and wisdom of a seasoned storyteller.

"Rabbi Resnicoff is the 'go-to guy' when it comes to interfaith

issues," said Rabbi Frydman-Kohl. He is a consultant on interfaith values and interreligious affairs in Washington, DC, and a Viet Nam vet. He served in the US Navy, first as a line officer and then as chaplain. He is a former special assistant to the Secretary and Chief of Staff of the US Air Force and was recently commissioned by the Canadian Military to lecture on pluralism, religious freedom and interfaith values. Rabbi Resnicoff was an eyewitness and provided hands-on assistance when the American military compound was bombed in Lebanon and more than 200 Americans died and scores of others injured at the hands of a suicide bomber. His decision to become a Rabbi was heavily influenced by the good work of a Christian Chaplain in the Mekong Delta who volunteered him to aid with the Jewish troops.

Care, concern and love come from faith, Resnicoff said. The world is full of religious misunderstanding and intolerance. Through dialogue and education, we can only hope to enhance our faith and not diminish it.

"We should not worry about watering down our own faith and religion," the rabbi continued. "There is so much pain from people of faith" that only



RABBI ARNOLD RESNICOFF through talking and building relationships can we find a comfortable respect for one another without threatening or diminishing our own practices.

The rabbi related the story of his experience in Lebanon when American peacekeeping troops were attacked by a suicide bomber and caused severe casualties and heavy devastation to their compound. In a valiant attempt to aid the suffering and wounded soldiers, Rabbi Resnicoff tore off parts of his clothing to wipe away blood and dirt and without hesitation used his kippa for the same purpose. Another military clergy, a Catholic Priest, saw this gesture of humanity and offered Rabbi Resnicoff a piece of his camouflage uniform to cover his head. The story illustrates "the values

of partnership, the unity of values and the necessity to respect differences."

Different religions adhere to different texts. The Torah, The Koran, The Gospels all tell different stories and the relationships between their adherents and God is not the same. "But," the rabbi said, "that does not mean that there is no truth in these texts. God is present in the lives of others and religion is a response to God. Faith is a belief that God is reaching out." That is why dialogue is so critical. To avoid misunderstandings, at the very least, and to avoid disasters, at the very worst, we need to learn about each other.

"Learning about others brings us closer to God," Rabbi Resnicoff said. "We speak today of moderates, fanatics and extremists. Moderates teach us that we have more to learn about us and about others; their focus is on interfaith activities: Places like The Blood Bank, where we share blood instead of shedding blood and organizations like the faith-based Habitat for Humanity, where no one asks for your religious affiliation before offering help. Fanatics

believe that there is nothing new to learn. There is no humility in their belief system, and therefore, no room for discussion. Extremists are not only convinced that their beliefs are correct and sacrosanct but that there cannot be any dialogue with non-believers and the end of days is upon us and all forms of activities, including suicide bombings, are acceptable."

In discussing the rules of engagement for this interfaith dialogue, Rabbi Resnicoff warned against comparing our best to their worst and he cautioned against comparing our beliefs to their words. Sometimes it is easy to misinterpret what we do not fully understand and react irrationally. There was much evidence of this in the US after 9/11. What we need, he said, is to have diversity with shared challenges: A believe in Monotheism; a belief in a divine plan, a belief that our lives have meaning and that each of us can make a difference. The challenge we all face is to help the world keep faith in faith. Religion is not part of the problem but it certainly is part of the solution.

The rabbi spoke of the evils – wars perpetrated in the name of religion. "Faith will make a difference in the goodness of our lives," he said. "Faith will stand against those that say that war will never end, that good will never triumph," adding that we must have hope we will go on living with respect and understanding for others.

The Rev. Dr. Andrew Stirling of Timothy Eaton Memorial Church thanked Rabbi Resnicoff for his inspiration, his humility and mostly his roadmap to hope.

Twenty-four clergy from 10 different churches and synagogues attended including Abdul Hai Patel, Imam and coordinator of interfaith and external relations for the Council of Imams, as well as chaplain at the University of Toronto.

A surprise appearance by the accomplished Beth Tzedec choir, led by the prodigious singing of Canter Simon Spiro, concluded a delightful evening of interfaith spirit. The Rev. Father Gordon Kennedy of Holy Rosary Catholic Church gave the closing benediction.



Hair-raising haircut at 14,000 feet

Diving instructor Sharon Har Noy (right) is the first woman to have her hair cut while sky diving at 14,000 feet. Top hair stylist Oren Orkobi attached in tandem to Paradyve's senior instructor Ido (both on left) had cut hair below the water and he decided to go to the other extreme. Paradyve Skydiving school on Habonim beach in the north of Israel found him a candidate who was willing to brave a cut in the air. Oren managed a one-minute haircut on the way to the ground. The guys said it was quite stylish and Sharon was happy too.

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