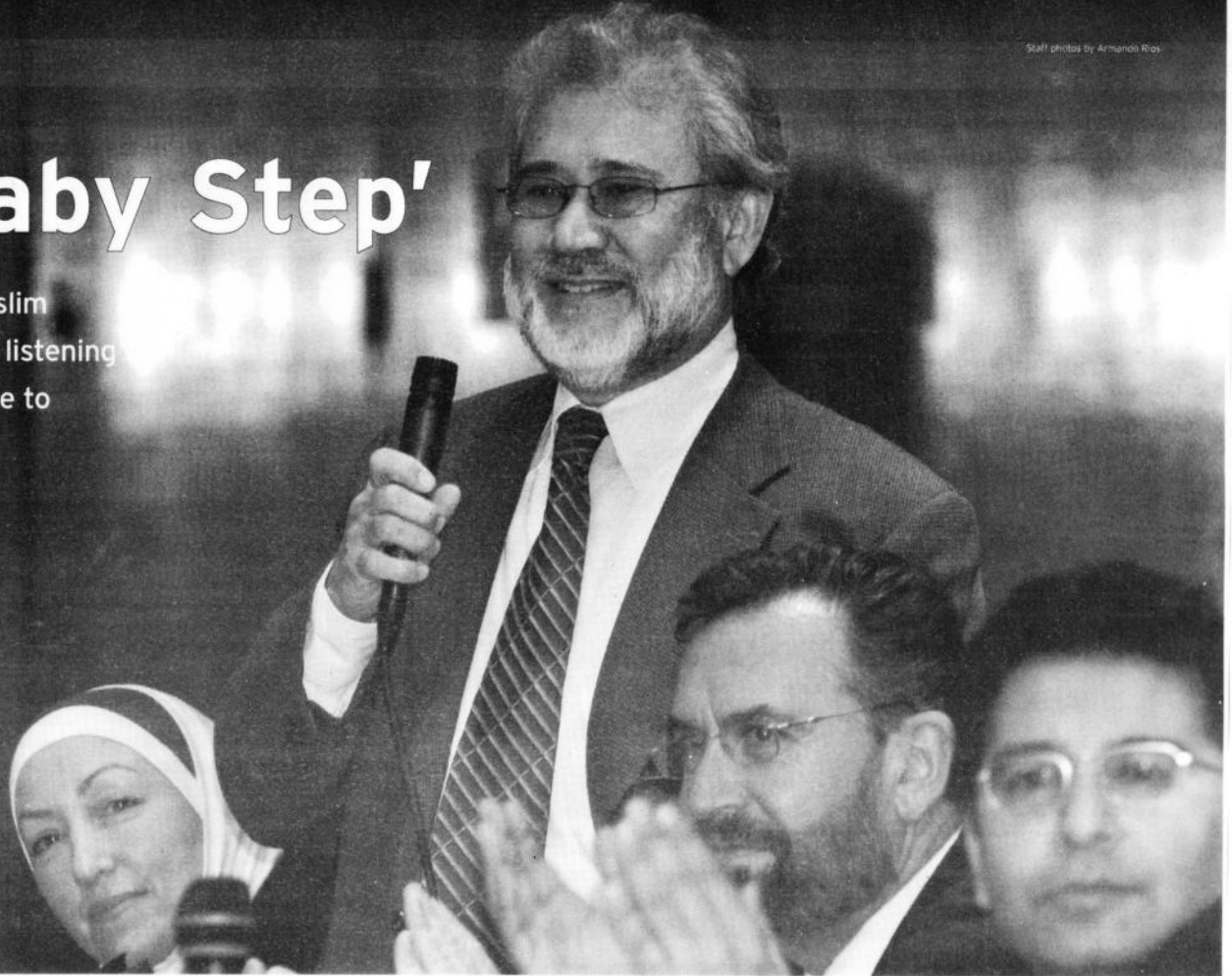


A 'Baby Step'

Program with Muslim leaders promotes listening first, then dialogue to rebuild bridges.

Najah Bazzy, Victor Begg (standing), Rabbi David Rosen and Saeed Khan



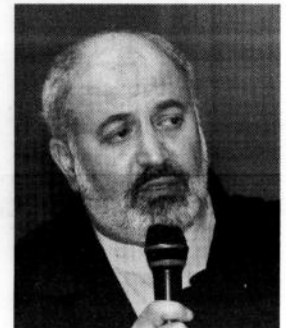
Harry Kirsbaum
Staff Writer

In Our Own Words ... Muslim Voices in Detroit: Messages to the Jewish Community was not the "dialogue" that many expected to hear on Dec. 7 at Adat Shalom Synagogue in Farmington Hills. But to the event organizers — Adat Shalom and the American Jewish Committee's Metro Detroit chapter — it was an important first step in rebuilding a bridge that had all but been destroyed last summer after the war in Lebanon. "This is a very important moment in the history of our Detroit Jewish community," Rabbi Herbert Yoskowitz told a crowd of 200, before four Detroit-area Muslim leaders answered prepared questions and tried to dispel notions the Jewish community had about their beliefs and politics. The answers, however, reinforced more differences in perspective than they resolved. "These four agreed to speak out publicly to the Jewish community because they value the relationships that have been built and nurtured," said Brenda

Rosenberg of Bloomfield Hills, co-chair of inter-religious affairs for the local AJC chapter, along with Sheldon Toll of Bloomfield Hills. "My hope for tonight is that this evening is just a beginning for us — the beginning of creating a larger network of Jews and Muslims who are willing to come together." Rabbi David Rosen, AJC's New York-based director of inter-religious affairs, moderated the two-hour event. "The tragedy of the relationship that we are looking at today is that we can look at a period in the past when we knew how to live with one another with much more respect," he said. "Especially if we look back to the era under Islam and the Golden Age of Spain, when Muslims, Christians and Jews were able to benefit from one another in the areas of science and philosophy. "We have one of two options in this world," he said. "One is to live despite one another, or live in relation with one another. It is obvious what is better." Saeed Khan, who teaches in Wayne State University's Department of History and Near

East and Asian Studies in Detroit, spoke first. "Whether or not you realize this, the four of us here, according to most loose definitions, are militant Muslims," he said, because they pray, fast and don't gamble. "The ability to define what is moderate and what is militant cannot simply be left to the caprices of what the media or what somebody else might decide. And so it's quite plausible that the scope of who qualifies as a moderate Muslim is much larger than the litmus test that seems to arbitrarily be provided. If that's the case, then, we have already overcome a significant obstacle as a partner in dialogue." The movie *Obsession: Radical Islam's War Against the West* is overgeneralized, he said. "If this were shown in my class, there would be a real disjuncture in what was being shown in the documentary and what is the historical accuracy." Khan also spoke of the situation in Darfur. "Although some will look at the issue in Darfur through the prism of race ... this is nothing more than Cain vs. Abel," he

said. "Vocations — one being a agriculturalist and one being a shepherd — it comes down to the jealousy over whose offering is accepted by the Divine. "The Arab Sudanese were the nomadic tribes-people who had a very long-lasting relationship with the Black Sudanese, a very interesting symbiotic relationship. Their migration patterns would take them to Darfur at certain times of the year, and their herds would help the agriculture by grazing the land and making it more cultivable," he said. When the civil war erupted in southern Sudan, the Arabs stayed put for survival, he said. "When two groups of people are in the midst and have overstayed their welcome, the conflict of the war erupted. "The fact that they are racially different is really incidental to the core issue. There has been a tragic lack of engagement and initiative by Arab organizations as well as the American government." **Responsibilities** Imam Mohammad Mardini, leader of the American Muslim Center in Dearborn, said the



Imam Mardini

Arab community condemns terrorist acts. "We stood tall together — that any killing of a human being is against the holy Koran," he said. According to the Koran, "If you kill one, you kill all of humanity." The imam also said there are people who sympathize with Hezbollah, but "they know it's against the law of the United States of America." He made this appeal: "We've been in the community for a long time. We've been in dialogue for a long time, but don't see any result. The bottom line is that

A 'Baby Step' on page 14

Metro

A 'Baby Step' from page 13



AJC board members (from right) Brenda Rosenberg, Sheldon Toll, Rabbi Herbert Yoskowitz and Rabbi Daniel Nevins

we would like to see a truce of this [Palestinian-Israeli] conflict."

Najah Bazy, a Dearborn Oakwood Hospital nurse who worked for many years at Sinai Hospital of Detroit with Jewish physicians and patients, is a Muslim community leader affiliated with the Islamic Center of America in Dearborn. She spoke of the Jewish community's responsibility.

Muslims beliefs, because of the prophets Moses and Jesus, have a great responsibility to stretch the hand, she said. "If you are the chosen people at the time, then you are the chosen people for all the time. You have a huge responsibility to extend your hand, too."

Victor Begg, chairman of the Council of Islamic Organizations of America and co-founder of the Unity Center, a Bloomfield Hills mosque, said the Muslim community is not a monolith, "but there is consensus on one issue: the treatment of Palestinians and their human rights."

He said Muslims are disappointed when they see blind support for all Israeli actions. "That is what our community thinks," he said.

"There is an enormous amount of pressure from the Jewish community to apologize or condemn every single act of terrorism or extremism that happens around the world. These acts have no relationship with our Islamic faith," he said.

"We agree that there are those who say they follow Islamic faith who need to change their behavior, but the collective calls by non-Muslims to reform Islam is not acceptable or practical. Promoting individuals who you think should represent Muslims is a waste of your time and is counter-productive. There should be no litmus test for dialogue."

A First Step

Rabbi Daniel Nevins of Adat Shalom thanked the crowd for coming.

"We come from different perspectives," he said. "Our hearts hurt over different issues. And we came to hear one another."

Ezra Drissman of Farmington Hills disliked the event's closed format and took offense with Khan, "who basically summed up Darfur as a tribal situation where you have two people living in close proximity, so therefore, obviously, you're going to kill each other.

"Well, maybe, but not by raping and slaughtering," he said. "That is the most negligent, the most gross comparison I've ever heard."

Phyllis Loewenstein of Farmington Hills also disliked the format.

"I haven't learned one thing," she said. "They skirted the issues."

Andrew Doctoroff, AJC chapter president, called the event a positive first step.

"A lot of people will disagree with a lot that was said tonight," said Doctoroff of Huntington Woods. "But at the same time, in order to create a real dialogue, you have to listen to people who have different perspectives."

Sharon Shapiro, AJC Michigan area director, said it was a positive "baby step," allowing the Jewish community to hear from local Muslim leaders and a proper format to help bring dialogue.

A "Jewish Voices in Detroit: Message to the Muslim Community" program is in the works, she said.

"For the very first encounter, we did not want to have a situation that we would not be able to respectfully contain through our audience participation," Shapiro said.

"Sometimes, it's important for the Jewish community to listen. It doesn't mean that we won't urge the Muslims to participate in future programs that will include open forums and allow the audience members to express their personal beliefs, to ask questions and to offer exchanges of thinking." □