



Rabbi Susan Abramson reaches out to other faiths in pursuit of understanding

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Bedford Police Chief Robert Bongiorno shaped his challah with the help of Rabbi Susan Abramson during a challah bread making lesson at the First Church of Christ in Bedford.

By Mindy Pollack-Fusi | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 06, 2017

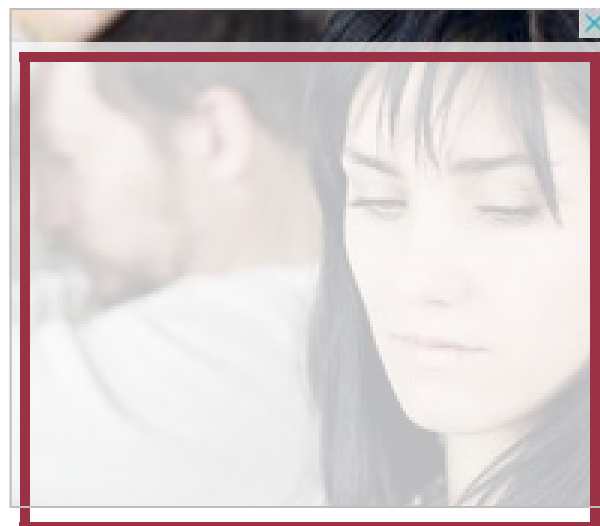
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“Shalom,” the Hebrew word for peace. The other contains a blue “B” for Bedford, slanted to resemble a heart, and inside its borders rests a second, solid-red heart. The words above and below? “Love Your Neighbor. Bedford Embraces Diversity.”

The longest-serving female rabbi in Massachusetts, Abramson has led Temple Shalom Emeth of Burlington since 1984 and is well-known for her efforts to dissolve prejudice by bringing people of different faiths and cultures together.

In the '80s and early '90s, she organized groups to help settle Soviet Jews in Massachusetts. A few years ago, following anti-Semitic incidents in Bedford and at her temple, she was instrumental in helping people heal and dispel stereotypes.

More recently, Abramson reached out to the local Muslim community, after vandals struck the Islamic Center of Burlington a year ago.



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That led to “Spiritually Speaking,” half-hour interfaith videos posted to YouTube and six area cable channels that the rabbi writes, produces, and hosts. The latest segment features Shakeel Rahman Mia, the imam of the Islamic Center of Burlington.

“There’s been so much stereotyping, misunderstanding, and myths about Islam that I wanted the community to really understand what Islam is all about and to meet people who are Muslim,” the rabbi said. “We’re all human beings made in the image of God.”

Since then, Abramson's temple hosted an Evening of Fellowship with a Jewish Shabbat service followed by Muslim Salaam prayers. The event culminated in a dinner for 120 people — half were Jewish, half Muslim. Guests learned the nuances of each other's religions, then sat down to a potluck dinner featuring favorite foods of both cultures. Now Abramson and the two interfaith clergy groups she's involved with are planning a Jan. 8 program called "Responding to Racism," hosted by the Islamic Center of Burlington.

"Rabbi Abramson has time and time again assisted in bringing people together," said Mike Kent, Burlington's chief of police, who attended the Shabbat/Salaam event. "When something happens that may involve a house of worship in town, Rabbi Abramson is often the conduit to connecting the police with the incident."

Ellen Waldron of Lincoln, a longtime Shalom Emeth member who attended the Evening of Fellowship, said she has long observed the rabbi's ability to bring groups together.

"She demonstrates her actions and values by being an advocate and a supporter, and she has devoted herself to bringing racial and social justice for all people."

The seed for the Muslim-Jewish service stemmed from a friendship between Temple Shalom Emeth's former board president, Steve DiOrio of Billerica, and Kashif A. Ahmed, a Muslim resident of Burlington. Ahmed, who came to this country 20 years ago from Pakistan, has been bringing diverse groups of people together for years "so we can understand one another," he said. Among other key events, he's been on the planning committee for the annual Anti-Defamation League Seder for eight years.

"Breaking bread is one of those things," he said. "If you can just sit together and eat, it's magical."

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DiOrio introduced Ahmed to the rabbi.

“She felt awful about the vandalism and hate and asked how she could help,” Ahmed recalled. One thing led to the next, and the event was planned, bringing together Jews from Temple Shalom Emeth and Boston-area Muslims. He’s hoping such events “inspire people to replicate these.”

“It almost seems fashionable to blame Muslims for everything,” said Ahmed. “But we must not despair; America stands for love and tolerance. There are far more good people than those filled with hate. People like Susan Abramson and others will not stand for it.”

“The best way to fight intolerance is for people to understand each other better,” Abramson said of the work she has done with the Bedford Interfaith Clergy Association.

She’s arranged a Christian-Jewish evening of dialogue, hosted 22 dignitaries — complete with Secret Service — for her congregation’s Interfaith Holocaust Memorial Service, held a community challah-baking event with Bedford Police chief Robert Bongiorno at the town’s First Church of Christ Congregational.

Meanwhile, Ambramson has over the past decade produced a series of Jewish children’s superhero books based on a flying character called Rabbi Rocketpower.

Like her character, she admits she’s “flying” (metaphorically) over the success of the Shabbat/Salaam event.

“We literally ran out of tables and chairs,” she said. “Once a few people from the Muslim community said they were coming, it opened the floodgates. The good will, excitement, and genuine desire for us to know more about each other and recognize the similarities were amazing.”

She especially enjoyed bringing a group of Muslims into the sanctuary to show them the sacred Torah scrolls.

Asked if she has encountered any opposition to her work, the rabbi said no, only positive

feedback. “I don’t see any conflict between being a supporter of Israel and wanting members of the Muslim community to feel supported and welcome.”

Dima Basha of Newton, a Muslim who came here from Syria, said everyone at the Temple Shalom Emeth event was eager to make a connection. She is grateful for any event where people learn about others.

“Not just Muslims, any minority,” Basha said. “I meet a lot of Americans, and all are nice, and I want them to meet me and others and see how we are all nice, too.”


“Responding to Intolerance: An Interfaith Dialogue” will be held at the Islamic Center of Burlington, Jan. 8 at 4 p.m. Panelists include Rabbi Susan Abramson, Temple Shalom Emeth; Imam Shakeel Rahman Miah, Islamic Center of Burlington; the Rev. Chris Wendell, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford; and Bishop Jared Koyle, of the Billerica Ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Moderated by state Representative Ken Gordon.

Following the program the Islamic Center will provide dinner. This event is free.

Please note that to observe the customs of the mosque, attendees will be asked to remove their shoes upon entering, men and women will be seated separately for the panel, and women’s heads should be covered (some coverings will be available at the door).

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