

OPINION // EDITORIALS

Amid Gaza war, Houston interfaith leaders talk

quietly (Editorial)

By **The Editorial Board** Dec 8, 2023

<https://www.houstonchronicle.com/opinion/editorials/article/israel-hamas-jews-muslims-houston-interfaith-18539343.php> 1/7



Muslim and Jewish women chat as they gather during an interfaith workshop on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at Rutgers University on Sunday, Nov. 19, 2023, in New Brunswick, N.J. The latest violence, triggered by the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel, is prompting some to question such dialogue, its role, impact -- or how to even have it-- while steeling the resolve of others to connect and wrestle together with the challenges.

Andres Kudacki/AP

On Oct. 7, when news broke of Hamas' gruesome terror attack on Israel, the first call Rabbi Steven Gross received was from an imam. He says they cried together on the phone. Cried for the people killed and taken hostage. Cried for what was to come.

"We knew this was the beginning of something really bad," Gross told us last week.

The lines were drawn quickly. Ordinary people, religious or not, felt called to pick a side — not between terrorists and innocent civilians but between victims on both

sides. If we mourned the more than 1,200 murdered Israelis, were we also somehow condoning the actions of the Israeli government, from settlements to past ground invasions? And later, if we wept for the thousands of civilians killed in Gaza, were we exempting Hamas from judgement?

Gross, the rabbi for Houston Congregation for Reform Judaism and a leader in Houston's interfaith community, resisted this division. He knew that many Jews didn't receive the call he did. Some made assumptions in the silence.

"We wanted to hear from our friends, we wanted to hear something and, often, it was silent and many took it personally," he said. But Gross didn't sit in the silence: "If I'm feeling this then I need to reach out."

The silence would only divide further. So he reached out. Tentatively, and behind closed doors, a group of leaders from the Jewish and Muslim communities began meeting to mourn, to argue, to listen and to heal as the war raged, paused, and began again.

"We don't have to be alone," he said.

Inside the windowsills of some Houston homes tonight, you'll see a small glow. Candles lit for the second night of Hanukkah. Tradition calls for Jews celebrating the holiday to display their menorahs for all to see and spread light amid the darkness of winter's shortening days. For many, though, there is an exception, in times of danger. This may be such a time for some and their menorahs are out of public view. With both anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim incidents increasing in the United States as the bloody war rages, fear is a far

too common feeling. This fear can cause us to turn inward, to isolate, even abandon friendships and relationships that once nurtured us.

We are certainly in winter now. But we urge all Houstonians not to let fear crowd out the light.

A week after the attack, Shariq Ghani had to make a decision: would the interfaith kickball tournament still happen? Ghani, head of the Texas-based nonprofit Minaret Foundation, called his friend Gross and they decided to move forward.

“You do years of relationship building not to walk away from each other when things get difficult,” he told this editorial board. “That’s when you come together.”

When the tournament began that weekend, he said, Muslims were mostly sitting with other Muslims, Jews with Jews and Christians with Christians. Partway through the event, news broke that a 6-year-old Palestinian American boy had been killed in Illinois, stabbed to death by his family’s landlord, who also attacked his mother.

Everyone stopped, bowing their heads in a moment of silence. By the end, they were all together, taking pictures and exchanging phone numbers.

Sometimes, though, Ghani wonders, had the tournament been scheduled a week later, as the death toll seemed to tick exponentially upward in Gaza, would it still have happened?

Many are familiar with the period of grief in Jewish tradition known as sitting shiva: a week of pausing in the house of mourning after a loved one has passed. Fewer know of shloshim, the monthlong period of gradually reentering the world.

It makes sense that many Muslims and Jews, cast as enemies in this political fight happening thousands of miles away, would want to grieve among their own communities. Ghani told us someone he knew lost 32 family members in the bombing in Gaza, her entire bloodline there. Even among committed interfaith leaders, Israel and Palestine has long been a muted topic. Some groups don’t participate in interfaith events at all, even in the best of times.

These are not those times. The topic can no longer be avoided.

Ghani, Gross and others who wish to keep meeting in private for now out of concern for the ongoing sensitivity in their own communities, know that their responsibilities are also here in Houston, to their longstanding friends and their neighbors.

“Coming together in this private way has allowed us to really open up and say things to each other about our history, about the Nakba, about settlements,” said Ghani. “It’s created more trust.”

They’ve learned to say “and” instead of “but,” to get beyond inflammatory statements, to disagree but still embrace.

“It’s easy to light a match,” said Ghani. “It takes a second. But creating peace and reconciliation, it can take years.”

As Hanukkah flames prick the Houston night sky tonight, ask how you can be part of the light, a lasting light and know that if you feel alone, you don’t have to stay that way.

Dec 8, 2023

By **The Editorial Board**

The Editorial Board is made up of opinion journalists with wide-ranging expertise whose consensus opinions and endorsements represent the voice of the institution – defined as the board members, their editor and the publisher. The board is separate from the newsroom and other sections of the paper. Winner of 2022 Pulitzer Prize in editorial writing.