

Quarreling only saps our strength

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By Michael Tichnor

By Robert Leikind

This column is a joint statement by Michael Tichnor, president of the American Jewish Committee Boston; Robert Leikind, director of AJC Boston; and Seith A. Klarman, chair of The David Project.

In his book “The Jewish Wars,” the first century Jewish historian Josephus chronicled how feuds among Jewish defenders of Jerusalem contributed to Rome’s conquest of the city, the subsequent destruction of the Temple and the dispersal of the people of Judea around the world. Today, the homeland of the Jewish people and the people who live there is once again confronted by profound dangers. Iran’s nuclear weapons program poses an existential threat. Hezbollah and Hamas threaten to advance their campaign of annihilation by attacking Israel’s main population centers with sophisticated missiles. And, much of the international community now embraces an Orwellian narrative that excuses attacks against Israel, while condemning Israel for actions it takes to defend itself against these very attacks.

We need to decide. Are we going to find ways to cooperate in the face of these extraordinary challenges or will we squander our communal strength fighting about a limited number of difficult issues? A dispute regarding the Jewish community’s relationship with the Boston Muslim American Society (MAS) now places this question squarely in front of us.

Dr. Charles Jacobs, president of Americans for Peace and Tolerance, contends that some Jewish leaders are acting contrary to the best interests of the Jewish community by promoting dialogue with the Boston MAS. Doing so, he says, obscures from view an extremist organization that poses an immediate threat to Jews, in Boston and beyond.

It is fair to respectfully raise questions. There is meaningful information that could lead a reasonable person to think that some MAS’s leaders, past and present, have had ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and/or to people who have expressed hostility to democratic principles, Israel or the Jewish people.

Yet, it is also true that some Jewish leaders claim that this view of MAS is not consistent with their experience of current leadership. They urge that we exercise caution before making broad judgments.

We believe that it is in the interest of the Jewish community to take time to better understand where the truth lies. Many people believe that the best way to do this is to participate in a process of engagement. This is the course pursued by Rabbi Eric Gurvis, who was recently criticized by Dr. Jacobs for participation in an interfaith event held at MAS' Boston mosque. To his credit, Rabbi Gurvis has not shied away from discussions with MAS leaders about some of the issues that have generated concern in the Jewish community.

Scores of rabbis have registered support for Rabbi Gurvis and his approach. When they did, however, it was reasonable to expect that there would be people and organizations, such as Americans for Peace and Tolerance, which would disagree and say so publicly.

We welcome such debate. We also believe, however that it is a matter of vital community interest that it be conducted respectfully, substantively and without the disparaging and mocking characterizations that stifle honest and constructive exchanges.

Doing so is not just a matter of good sense. In a time when the Jewish world faces so many acute challenges, it is a matter of survival.