

## Packed house at Muslim forum

Jewish leaders weigh responses to rift  
By Leah Burrows Special to the Advocate

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The cars lined the streets of the residential neighborhood for blocks around Temple Beth El-Atereth Israel in Newton. Inside, several hundred people packed the spacious social hall. The draw: Charles Jacobs.

They came to hear the man who set off a firestorm in the Jewish community after his June 4 column in the *Advocate* assailing a Newton rabbi for participating in an interfaith rally at the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center in Roxbury.

That storm has left in its wake not only questions about how the Jewish community should engage with Muslims, but also how members of the Jewish community should engage with one another.

For years, Jacobs has been working to expose possible Islamic extremists operating out of mosques and community centers. In 2008, he co-founded the Americans for Peace and Tolerance, a Boston-based, interfaith organization. The main goal of the organization is to explore ties between the Islamic Society of Boston (ISB) and radical Islamic organizations.

Jacobs' board members include Dennis Hale, an Episcopalian minister, and Sheikh Ahmed Mansour, an Islamic scholar. They often travel together throughout New England, holding meetings in synagogues, churches and people's homes to raise awareness of what Jacobs calls "the radicalization of the historically moderate Boston Muslim community."

So far, 3,700 people have signed up for the organization's online newsletter, according to Jacobs, and the organization's short film about the Islamic society has received more than 40,000 hits on YouTube, including 6,000 this past week.

The Islamic Society of Boston is a chapter of the Muslim American Society, which has come under fire from the Anti-Defamation League for links to anti-Semitism and Islamic extremism.

M. Bilal Kaleem, the executive director of the Muslim American Society of Boston, scoffed at Jacobs' assertions about extremist infiltration of the mosque. "If I want to subvert America, what type of America do I want to leave to my son," Kaleem said of his 5-month-old baby. Kaleem

invited members of the Jewish community to engage with the Muslim American Society and visit its Roxbury mosque.

Jacobs said the Muslim leadership has been misleading, manipulating and lying to the Jewish community for years.

“Many in Boston’s Jewish leadership do not appreciate how they are being used by the radicals,” Jacobs said at the June 24 meeting in Newton. “The radicals want legitimacy, what could be more validating than receiving a Jewish leader’s embrace, a rabbi’s embrace?”

Jacobs challenged Jewish leaders to stand up to the ISB, saying that thus far their responses have been “feckless and flaccid.”

Jacobs and others from his group spent most of the 90-minute meeting outlining their concerns about Boston’s Muslim leadership. The audience, which Jacobs estimated at 300, was supportive, occasionally interrupting with cheers.

Eric Gurvis of Temple Shalom, the rabbi singled out by Jacobs in his July 4 column, advocated engaging with Muslims.

“I am not prepared to label or write off an entire community,” Gurvis said.

“I agree with Charles in that there are many moderate Muslims out there, and I agree with Charles that there are many not so moderate Muslims out there.

“Where we divide is over who determines how do we get at who is a moderate and who’s not. It’s a puzzle to the Jewish community.”

Gurvis said that the most important issue facing the Jewish community today was not how to interact with Muslims, but how to have civil discourse among its own members. “We have to find a way we can disagree in a more agreeable fashion,” he said.

His comments were echoed by other Jewish leaders. “Unless we start listening to each other, we are our own worst enemy,” said Suzi Schuller, associate director of the Boston chapter of the American Jewish Committee.

“This is not the time to be dividing ourselves,” said Barry Shrage, president of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies.

Shrage, who wrote a column in last week’s *Advocate*, said that while investigating claims about the ISB was important, the community should not be distracted from what he called the most important issues facing Jews today: the security of Israel and Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

Some Jewish leaders are proposing an intra-faith panel to discuss this issue, bringing in all sides of the debate.

“We need to provide a forum that is a temper-controlled situation,” said Rabbi Geoffrey Haber of Congregation Mishkan Tefila in Chestnut Hill. “Let’s give people a chance to speak from reflective thought rather than passion.”

Jacobs said such willingness to speak openly about the ISB and to acknowledge differences within the Jewish community were important steps forward and a positive outcome from the overwhelmingly negative discourse of the past month.

“It’s a good thing,” Jacobs said. “Like a slap in the face and afterward you say, ‘Thanks, I needed that.’ The discussion can now proceed to the substance of the matter.”