

# Tolerance, and dessert, spread leaders' interfaith message

Barclay Crawford

Dessert is on the table at the Pakistan Club in Kowloon when a deep, spiritual voice fills the room.

Jokes stop between two women – one in a headscarf and the other uncovered with blonde highlights.

The room of about 50 may be divided between Jews and Muslims, but all close their eyes to reflect on the Arabic chanting by Imam Muhammad Arshad.

Once he finishes, Imam Arshad explains that these enchanting verses, appropriately, tell of Ibrahim celebrating the proof that God exists.

Debate and discussion follow, with Rabbi David Kopstein comparing elements of the story to Judaism. Ibrahim is known as Abraham in the Torah.

But then there is another call from one side of the room. "Come on, everyone, time to get the dessert, because the ice cream is melting."

The crowd erupts in laughter.

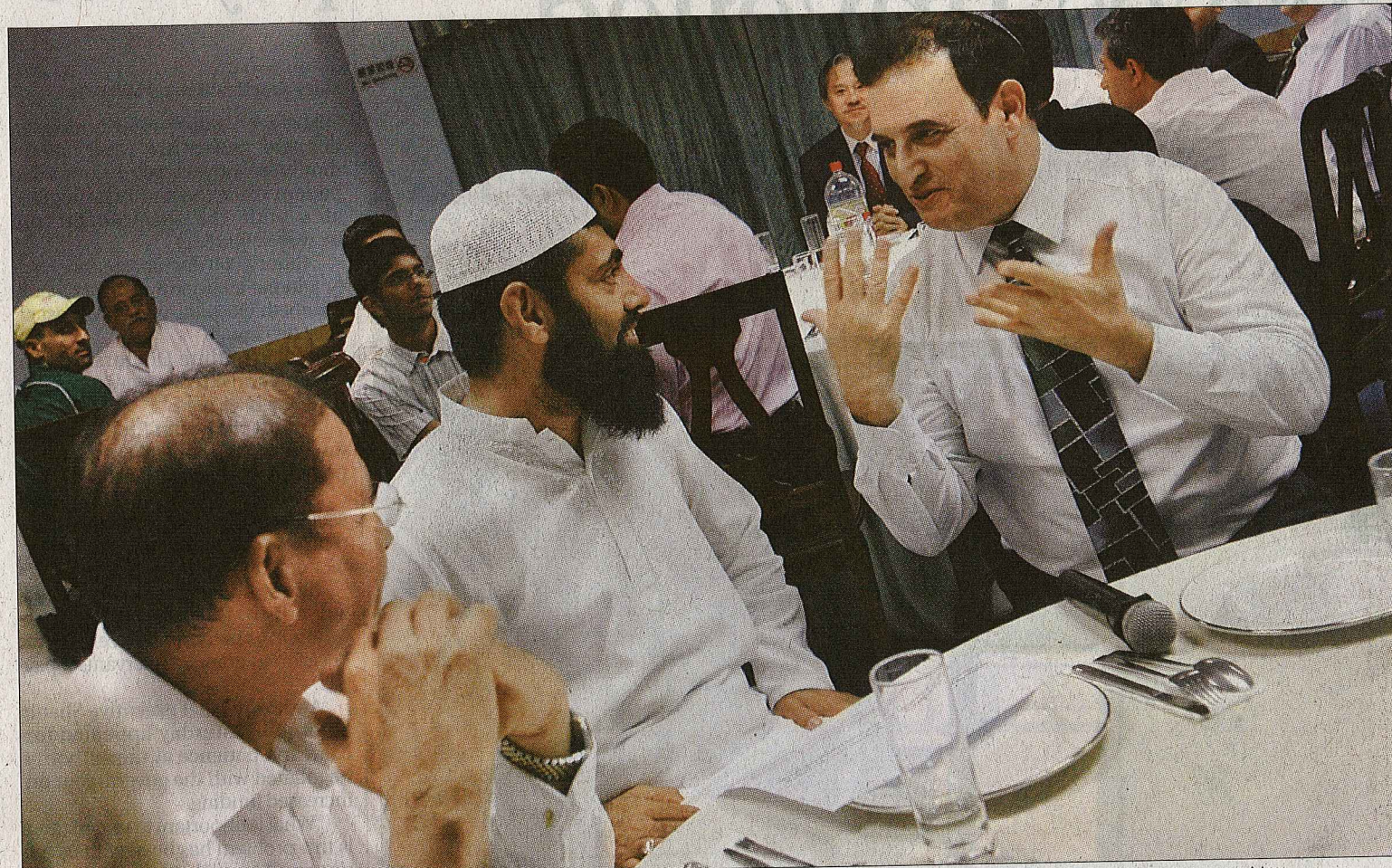
For while this is a night to celebrate the belief in God, its wider theme is showing off to the world Hong Kong's penchant for religious tolerance.

As the diners tuck into their fruit salad and ice cream, a Muslim man lectures a Jewish man on why the mangoes from Pakistan are the best on the planet.

At one table sits a group of women that alternates Jew and Muslim.

There is a question from Mr Kopstein about why the ornate Jamia Mosque in Mid-Levels has been painted green.

Mr Arshad is in the middle of explaining that green is the colour of peace when another call comes from a table: "Because it's cheaper than white!" More laughs.



Muhammad Arshad (centre), chief imam of Kowloon, with Rabbi David Kopstein (right), celebrate tolerance at the Pakistan Club. Photo: David Wong

It is now well after 11pm on Thursday, but the conversations on Princess Margaret Road show no sign of ending.

The first dinner between the United Jewish Congregation and the Incorporated Trustees of the Islamic Community Fund of Hong Kong took place last year.

Mr Kopstein said one of the first dialogues he had upon arriving in the city was with Mr Arshad, who informed him that the two communities had cordial relations.

"He was the one who reached out to me, so next time it's our turn to invite them to us," he said. "But I don't think the food can be as good!"

Mr Kopstein accepted there were problems with interfaith relations but said they were not insurmountable.

"Everything that is good to find is difficult to find," he said.

Mr Arshad wants these interfaith gatherings to become not only an annual event in Hong Kong but also an

example to other multicultural parts of the world.

"We should meet with each other, talk to each other, celebrate and embrace the similarities rather than always looking for differences," the imam said. "This is an example of how we can all live together in peace and harmony."