

Posted on Tue, Oct. 04, 2005

Two calendars, one holy season

A rare meeting in time unites Jews and Arabs at Rosh Hashanah and Ramadan.

By Michael Matza, Inquirer Staff Writer

NEVE SHALOM/WAHAT AL-SALAM, Israel - This year's cosmic convergence of the Jewish New Year called Rosh Hashanah and the first day of the Muslim holy month of fasting and introspection called Ramadan is an extremely rare coincidence that interfaith leaders here hope to exploit to promote a message of tolerance and coexistence.

Both holy days began last night - for Jews at sundown, and for Muslims with the sighting of the first sliver of the new moon in the Middle East sky.

But the extraordinary, three-times-a-century coming together of the unique Muslim and Jewish lunar calendars won't happen again for 33 years.

"When the holidays come out together, it helps integrate lessons about living together," said Bernadette Layous, a second-grade teacher at this cooperative village of Jewish and Arab Israelis set on a hilltop overlooking farm fields about midway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

"We teach about the holidays every year, but the link this year makes the lessons more memorable," said kindergarten teacher Aisha Najjar, holding piles of smudgy drawings colored with crayons by her young pupils.

The Jewish holiday is depicted by people harvesting for the new year, and the coming Sukkoth holiday. The bounty includes many ruby-red pomegranates, the signature fruit of Rosh Hashanah. The depiction of the Muslim holiday shows people scanning the night sky with a telescope, searching for the new moon.

During Ramadan, Muslims spend long periods in mosques and try to read the entire Koran during the month that ends with the feast called Eid al Fitr. Jews start their holiday with a taste of apple dipped in honey as an omen for a sweet new year.

While secular celebrations of the new year are often raucous affairs, Rosh Hashanah is observed with solemnity and soul-searching. It begins the pensive 10-day period known as the Days of Awe, which end with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

The new white stone building in which Layous' pupils and several other grades meet was completed this year through a \$1 million grant from Philadelphia philanthropist and builder Richard Goodwin, a longtime supporter of many projects to promote Arab-Jewish dialogue.

"Society must learn to accept people's different cultures and backgrounds. The key to reducing much of the violence in the world is communication and education," Goodwin said on receiving an award from the "American friends" of the village last spring.

Fayeze Mansour, codirector of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam's elementary school, said that emphasis on communication was at play in the 140-member student body, where a third of the pupils are Jewish, two-thirds are Arab, and instruction is in both Hebrew and Arabic.

About 100 miles north in a village near Haifa, Elias Jabbour, director of House of Hope-International Peace Center, a private, nonprofit agency dedicated to promoting Arab-Jewish understanding, believes this year's holiday "double dip" is "a beautiful coincidence" that should stimulate a search for more common bonds. "We have so many things in common," he said, "and unfortunately we dwell on the differences rather than what combines us, what binds us. We live in a small country, yet we don't meet. Our enemy today is not the human enemy; it is our ignorance about each other. We have only this planet. We have to share it rather than tear it."

Contact staff writer Michael Matza at 215-854-2405 or foreign@phillynews.com.