

## These friends are on a journey to destroy stereotypes (The Record - Aug 3)

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Imam  
Mohammad Qatanani and Rabbi David Senter can't cite a day or single event when their misgivings and misperceptions about each other gave way to fondness and friendship.

"This friendship evolved organically," Senter said. "It was a lot of things that made it evolve."

A series of unexpected gestures of kindness, and the discovery that they were kindred spirits, chipped away skepticism and stereotypes.

There was, for example, the time that the imam showed up at a synagogue event with a group of his young congregants.

"I was impressed by that," Senter said. "It showed he was really making an interfaith investment, bringing the new generation to the synagogue."

And there was the time Senter was in the hospital, and the imam arrived with flowers. And then there was an invitation - unconditional, and which Senter viewed as courageous - to go to the mosque and speak to the congregation, which includes a large number of Palestinians who

are deeply critical of Israel.

"I had a prepared statement," said Senter, who never had spoken at a mosque. "But on the way there I decided to scrap it and just speak from the heart. I spoke to them about how I feel about Israel, and they reacted respectfully."

Qatanani put the rabbi's speech on the mosque's Web site.

Qatanani often refers to their friendship as "a journey."

"The rabbi is a good man," he said. "We went beyond just having interfaith events, and just dialogue, to acting together to bring our communities together, and we became friends. We even have inside jokes."

They share a love for activism. The imam has repeatedly challenged the Muslim community in North Jersey to confront domestic violence and has opened his home for women and children fleeing abuse. For his part, Senter helped establish a program to assist victims of domestic violence when he was a rabbi for an Orthodox Jewish congregation in New York before moving to New Jersey.

And they have both wrestled with bias toward their communities.

"Many towns in New Jersey had it in their deeds that Jews weren't allowed to live there," Senter said. "Our children were not welcomed in youth organizations. So synagogues became islands unto themselves, out of necessity, until things changed and we could integrate into the larger community. Muslims are going through much of what Jews went through in this country. Secular communities isolate the Islamic community."

Like Senter, Qatanani believes the remedy is to disprove misperceptions.

"We believe in fighting hatred with love," Qatanani said. "Our friendship serves as a model of what is possible."

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