

## An inter-faith meeting of minds



Mohammed Amin: from halachah to holidays, a shared approach is best

# Assets of a joint venture

IT'S NOT on the syllabus for accountancy exams. *Heteriska* is the rabbinical contractual clause that allows banks to charge interest. And the recently-retired PricewaterhouseCoopers partner who explains it to me sounds as if he has several years of yeshivah study under his belt. But Mohammed Amin doesn't have any background in Talmud.

Mr Amin, a Pakistani-born Muslim Mancunian, owes his expertise in Jewish law to the Muslim Jewish Forum of Greater Manchester, which he set up five years ago and which he helps to direct today as a member of its executive. Back in 2005, he was frustrated that Muslim and Jewish Mancunians lived so close and yet had hardly any contact with one another. "I had lived in Manchester since 1952 and yet had never set foot inside a synagogue and I think that this is typical for Muslims," says Mr Amin.

He wanted to promote a belief that the "natural state of affairs" between Jews and Muslims is not one of conflict, and highlight the fact that there are "very many practical issues relating to life in the UK where Muslims and Jews are in the same camp, both communities seeking to defend their practices in the environment of a predominantly secular society."

The forum has held dozens of meetings, attracting up to 100 people and has a following of around 400 people. There have been talks on religious and cultural topics. Members have campaigned jointly on issues that matter to both communities, such as safeguarding the right to religious slaughter.

In October, the group held a presentation by Esmond Rosen and Fiyaz Mughal, experts on the subject of Muslims who helped to save Jews during the Second World War. As is often the case with the forum's events, it drew local dignitaries, among them the Lord Mayor, Mark Hackett.

In September, the forum organised a charity gala at a Cheshire country club, attended by 600 people.

The gala raised £30,000, which went towards flood-relief in Pakistan and to

Langdon, the Manchester Jewish special needs college.

One of the forum's co-founders was David Berkley, Manchester barrister and president of the Zionist Central Council of Greater Manchester. The accountant-lawyer combination in the leadership has led to a natural focus on issues relevant to their professions.

Sessions with a specialist focus have included one on how Judaism and Islam permit borrowing and lending without violating their religious codes. There were speakers from Ansar Finance Group, which provides halal financial products and Bank Hapoalim, which operates in accordance with Jewish law. It was during this session that Mr Amin developed his interest in *heteriska*. In the legal sphere, there have been discussions of medical ethics and marriage and divorce in the two faiths.

In Mr Amin's view, one of the biggest indicators of the closeness between members is their decision to share holidays. In May he went on a trip together with Jewish members to Grenada and Cordova, where they explored the local Jewish and Muslim histories. The previous year a Muslim-Jewish group went to Auschwitz. "At first we were complete strangers and we were always walking on eggshells," says Mr Amin, who since his retirement last year spends much of his time on matters related to the Forum. "Now we know each other well and can speak openly and share jokes."

Things have not always been plain sailing. During the Second Lebanon War of 2006, Muslim attendance fell away with the exception of Mr Amin and his wife — though it recovered fairly quickly. As for his views on the Middle East, he describes himself as "very critical of Israel's conduct" — but resolute on its right to exist.

Mr Amin feels that the forum has made a real contribution to Jewish-Muslim relations in Manchester. "It has an effect on the people who participate, as five years ago there was very little contact between the communities." But his biggest hope is that it will impact beyond the people who attend. "Some of it does feed out in to the wider community — but I don't want to overstate that and would like it to happen more."

## Nathan Jeffay finds free legal advice in a surprising location

# The case for pro-bono law

AN OLD criticism of law degrees is that students hardly get to meet a client. Manchester University's School of Law is pioneering a change to that culture. In the university shopping precinct there is a store that looks like any other high street lawyer's office. But there is a difference — the legal advice being dispensed is from law students, and it's free.

Now an increasingly common fixture at universities, Manchester was among the first in the UK to set up a pro-bono legal clinic. The Legal Advice Centre, celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, offers a win-win formula for students and clients. Students get to put what they are learning in the lecture theatre into action. And for the 300 to 400 clients seen each year, it provides a channel to legal advice without a big bill.

"It gives students a clinical education in a real life setting, and gives them a chance to put something back into the community with a pro-bono ethos," says Dinah Crystal, the centre's founder and director. "Some clients have nowhere else to go, or they have never been to see a solicitor and are scared to do so."

As freshers, before they are eligible to join the Legal Advice Centre in their second year, Manchester's law students help to run Streetlaw, a programme that provides free legal workshops in the community. Recent workshops have included employment law for inmates

of a young offenders institute, geared for when they join the workforce.

From the second year through to postgraduate, students can take part in the centre's training programme and volunteer in its clinics. There are currently 300 student volunteers.

Members of the public turn to the centre on a broad range of issues — recovering deposits from landlords, employment law, consumer law and more. On several occasions, bailiffs have been about to evict a client when students have negotiated with mortgage lenders, winning them extra time to find the money to catch up with their mortgage.

Back in 2005, the centre acted for a group of people who were upset that their local Church of England School was being closed down. Students took the case all the way to the High Court. They were not successful in overturning the closure decision, but they felt they had fulfilled the centre's aim of empowering the public. "The client knew they had tried and taken the case as far as they could," says Ms Crystal.

The Legal Advice Centre is helping to spread a pro-bono ethos through the Manchester legal community — not only among students. As the students are still in training, they need qualified lawyers to supervise initial interviews with clients. Around 40 Manchester lawyers volunteer for this role, some of them former student volunteers who are now qualified.

After students have conducted the initial interviews, they go off and research the case and draft their legal advice in a letter. Ms Crystal reviews and signs off all letters.

Last year the Centre expanded, opening a second office — in Openshaw, Manchester, where poverty and exclusion are rife. It has been asked for advice from as far away as Malaysia and Singapore from people interested in establishing pro-bono clinics.

To supplement its internal university budget, the centre has attracted funding from the major law firms Clifford Chance and Barlow Lyde & Gilbert, as well as from the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Northwest Regional Development Agency.

Ms Crystal, a trustee of Habonim Dror and founding member of Hale and District Hebrew Congregation, says that ethical considerations were key to her decision to set up the Centre. "When I was in private practice, one day we didn't get legal aid and the client died at the hands of the husband," she recalls, explaining her commitment to pro-bono setups.

She believes that providing legal services through the university helps the recipients in the short term and also helps society in the long term. "It gives young people an ethos of the community and stresses that they have a specialist knowledge that can help people less fortunate than themselves."



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