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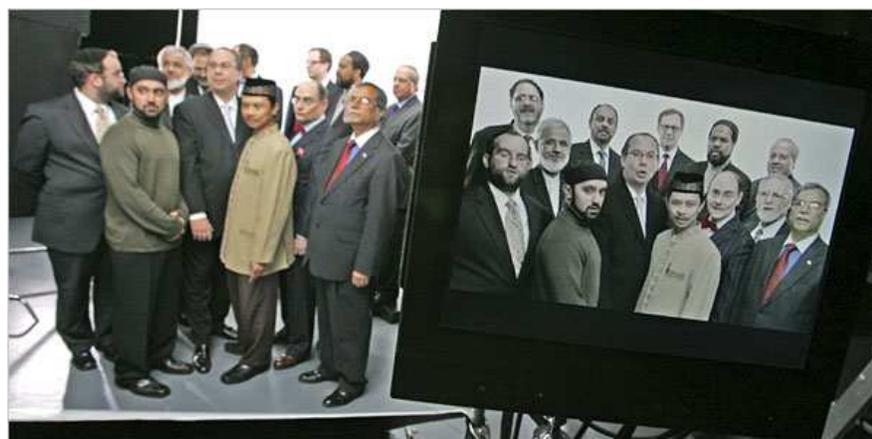
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Backstage With Six Rabbis, Six Imams and No 'Kumbaya'

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Librado Romero/The New York Times

Jewish and Muslim leaders taping a commercial in Manhattan condemning prejudice and intolerance between their religions.

By ANTHONY RAMIREZ Published: April 13, 2008

Marc Schneier, 3 years old and not yet a rabbi, had a knack for getting the attention of adults.

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Librado Romero/The New York Times

Rabbi Marc Schneier, in suit, with the commercial's director, Alan H. Zwiebel, and creative consultant, Geraldine Newman.

The story is told that he liked to wander. One night he was nowhere to be found in the synagogue during Yom Kippur services. His frantic mother searched. His stern father, who was officiating, started the service anyway.

When the congregation concluded a prayer, the ark holding the sacred Torah scrolls (about the size of a minivan) was opened.

And inside, waving at the congregants with both hands, was the toddler.

Last week, Rabbi Schneier, 49, worked on his latest attention-getting venture: a television commercial to promote tolerance between Muslims and Jews.

It is set to air in September, during Ramadan, the month in which it is said the Koran was revealed to Muhammad. It will also play in early October, during the Jewish High Holy Days.

And in November, Rabbi Schneier's group, the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, plans a national initiative matching a synagogue with a mosque in 25 cities and towns;

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together, they fight anti-Semitism and what the foundation calls Islamophobia.

In a studio in Chelsea on Thursday, Rabbi Schneier gathered five other ecumenically minded rabbis as well as six ecumenically minded imams, some of whom had traveled from other states for the occasion.

They were there to record their condemnation of prejudice against Muslims and Jews, and intolerance between Muslims and Jews.

"Six rabbis, six imams, no waiting," joked the commercial's director, Alan H. Zwiebel.

"This is serious work," said Rabbi Eric Silver, 65, of Temple Beth David in Cheshire, Conn., whose son is serving in the Army in Kirkuk, Iraq. "This goes far beyond just talking about brotherhood and joining hands and singing 'Kumbaya.'"

An imam, Muneer Fareed, secretary general of the Islamic Society of North America in Plainfield, Ind., noted that Islam, like Judaism, had no central authority like the pope of the [Roman Catholic Church](#).

"It creates a democratic chaos without Robert's Rules of Order," said Imam Fareed, 52. "No one can speak in the name of Islam. If only that fact got out to the general public, people would know that [Osama bin Laden](#) doesn't have the authority to speak out on Islam nor does any other person on the face of the earth."

In truth, the interfaith commercial they made was a little plain vanilla. Rabbis and imams, no doubt forceful in the pulpit or minbar, seemed as halting as schoolchildren before the TV camera.

If there was awareness to be had, however, it was in the green room, as the rabbis and imams waited for their close-ups over the course of three hours.

There, in an exchange resembling a graduate school seminar, they talked freely about the common and not-so-common ground between those who believe in the Koran and those who follow the Torah, both of whom call themselves the children of Abraham.

Sometimes the participants talked shop. What was the necessity of such-and-such a Muslim garment? a rabbi asked. Modesty, came the answer.

Could a woman become an imam? In some senses, yes, but not in name, came the answer.

Other times, the talk veered toward brass tacks. "Does Islam seek to convert?" asked a rabbi. "No," an imam replied. "It seeks only to convey, to convey the truth."

And so, another rabbi asked, if a non-Muslim encounters this truth, can he find salvation? No, came the answer, "if he knows the Koran and knowingly rejects it, then he cannot."

When the talk seemed to founder, the focus turned instead to the other children of Abraham, the Christians, and specifically, the Roman Catholic Church and [Benedict XVI](#), its 265th pope, who is scheduled to visit New York this week.

An imam cited the Muslim uproar after the pope's speech in September 2006, in which he quoted, without reproach, a 1391 text in which a Christian emperor says: "Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."

(The pope made the remark in an academic setting at a German university. He apologized for or clarified the use of the quotation at least four times and has said repeatedly that he respects Islam.)

Then a rabbi cited another controversy, in July 2007, when the pope authorized a wider use of the old Latin Mass, a move that dismayed many Catholics. The pope said the rite was an important tradition for some.



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A prayer in the old Latin rite that called for the conversion of “the perfidious Jews” was changed in the 1960s, the Vatican noted, to “Oremus et pro Iudaeis” or “Let us pray for the Jews.”

But a rabbi, his palms upraised, exclaimed, “It still implies conversion.”

For Rabbi Schneier, such talk is part of the hard work of cooperation. The latest of 18 generations of rabbis stretching back to the 1500s in Russia, Rabbi Schneier is the founding rabbi of the Hampton Synagogue in Westhampton Beach on Long Island, and rabbi of the New York Synagogue in Manhattan.

While Rabbi Schneier wears a traditional black hat on the Sabbath, he looks nothing like the Orthodox rabbi of the popular imagination. He wears a dapper suit, an Hermès tie and silver cufflinks. His hair is slicked back.

His friends have flair, too. In 1989, he and Joseph Papp, head of the [Public Theater](#), started the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, to improve relations between African-Americans and Jews. After Mr. Papp’s death, [Russell Simmons](#), the hip-hop record producer, joined the foundation in 2002 as its chairman.

Indeed, it was Mr. Simmons’s idea to make a commercial starring imams and rabbis. The idea was an outgrowth of a popular public service announcement in 2007 in which Mr. Simmons and the rapper [Jay-Z](#) denounced anti-Semitism as “not cool.”

Mr. Simmons, who was raised as an Episcopalian, said: “Actually I’m not very religious. I have a spiritual practice that I do religiously and that’s yoga.”

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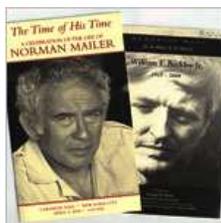
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