

Los Angeles Times



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From the Los Angeles Times

Jews, Asians are building bonds

Diplomats and community leaders dine, celebrate Hanukkah and discuss ways to broaden understanding.

By K. Connie Kang

Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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Jewish and Asian American leaders, whose communities represent nearly 20% of Los Angeles County's population, are trying to forge friendships in hopes of combating such chronic issues as racism and stereotyping.

In an initiative begun by the Anti-Defamation League, about 50 leaders from the Chinese, Filipino, Japanese and Korean communities -- the four largest Asian population groups in the county -- met Wednesday at the Japanese American National Museum in Little Tokyo for dinner, a celebration of Hanukkah, some frank discussion and talks by diplomats from Israel, Japan and South Korea.

It was the second event since the Asian Jewish Initiative was launched in June in Chinatown. During that meeting, which dealt mostly with demographics, some Jewish leaders were surprised to learn that there were three times as many Asians as Jews in the county.

Hanukkah is a "perfect time," said Faith Cookler, chairwoman of the initiative, to bring people from different traditions together because the holiday is associated with "tolerance, with freedom -- freedom from persecution."

Before lighting a candle on a menorah, she told the attendees -- some of them unfamiliar with the tradition -- that the celebration dates to the 165 B.C. military victory of the Macabees, a small group of pious Jews, over the ruling Syrian Greeks who had banned the Jewish religion and desecrated their temple.

The Jews rededicated the temple, and according to tradition, a small vial of oil, enough to last one day, burned instead for eight days -- hence the eight days of the festival.

Organizers say the Asian Jewish Initiative is the first such effort in the region. Its partners include the Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California, Japanese American National Museum, Korean American Coalition and Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics.

In diverse Los Angeles, "a lot of people don't know each other well," said Stewart Kwoh, president of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center. "So we have to be proactive to create the lines of dialogue."

Amanda Susskind, ADL's Pacific Southwest Region director, said it takes effort and "seeing the same people repeatedly" to develop friendship and trust.

"Ultimately, we want to work together to solve these broad problems -- issues of racism and stereotyping in our community," she said.

For now, partners in the initiative are moving carefully. Consul General Kazuo Kodama of Japan, Consul Song-hwan Kwon of South Korea and Yaron Gamburg, deputy consul general of Israel, praised the effort.

"I believe it is a beginning of the fascinating journey toward a stronger cooperation and friendship between the communities," Gamburg said.

The diplomat said 200,000 Israeli Jews live in L.A. -- the largest number outside Israel. "I encourage my friends in the Jewish community: Meet your [Asian] neighbors. It's only a 30-minute drive from West L.A.," he said.

Kodama said diversity and tolerance "are the strength and beauty of the United States."

During his 18 months in Los Angeles, he has done his "level best," he said, to promote better relations among Asian Americans, African Americans, Latinos and Jews.

He said he had used a variety of venues -- including golf tournaments and hosting an opera noir -- to reach out.

Participants in Wednesday's "Ancient Cultures -- Common Ties" session also spoke of repercussions felt in Los Angeles.

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