

NEWS > CONNECTICUT NEWS

## CT Jewish, Muslim women design a model Seder-Iftar as holidays overlap. 'A truly interreligious experience'



Liz Ryan / Hartford International University for Religion and Peace  
Deena Grant, acting dean, left, and Aida Mansoor, director of field education, at the Hartford International University for Religion and Peace.

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By **ED STANNARD** | [estannard@courant.com](mailto:estannard@courant.com) | Hartford Courant  
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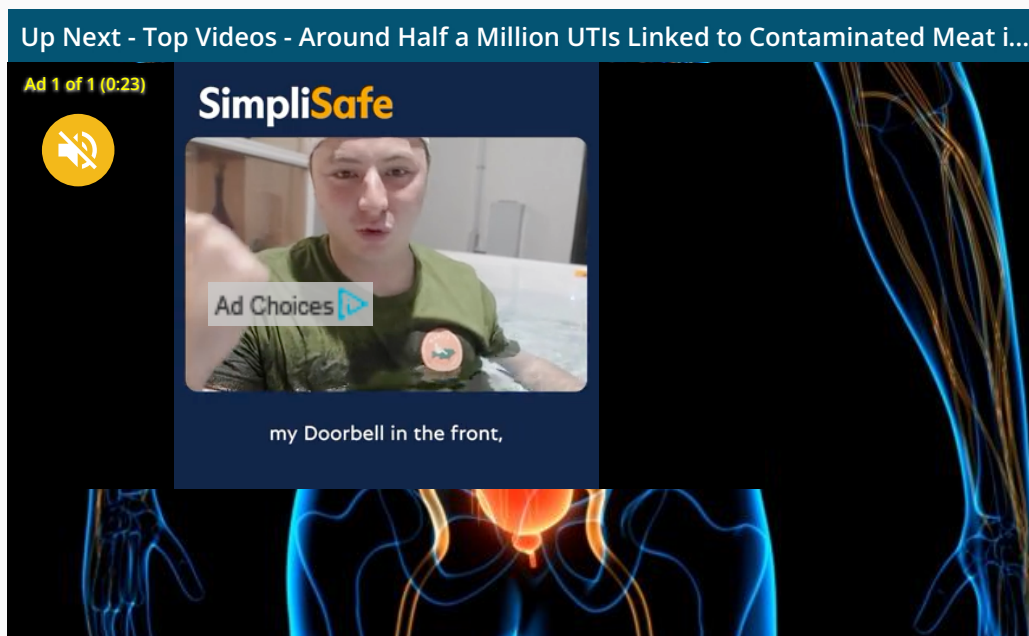
A quirk in the calendar means the three major religious holidays of [Ramadan](#), [Passover](#) and Easter will coincide this year.

It won't happen again for another 31 years.

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Jewish Passover and Christian Easter are based on the first full moon after the spring equinox, so they often overlap. But Muslim Ramadan, which lasts a month, moves back 10 days in the calendar each year, so this year is unusual.

Liz Ryan / Hartford International University for Religion and Peace.

Deena Grant, acting dean, left, and Aida Mansoor, director of field education, at the Hartford International University for Religion and Peace.

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Ramadan began at sundown on Wednesday, ending on April 21 with Eid-al-Fitr. Passover lasts from April 5-13, and Easter falls on April 9.

Since both Ramadan and Passover feature ritual meals as part of observing the holidays, the [Hartford International University for Religion and Peace](#) (formerly Hartford Seminary) decided to feature both in a combined Iftar and “model” Seder. It will be held Sunday, March 26.

“It’s an opportunity for us to engage in a truly interreligious experience, because oftentimes we talk about interreligious dialogue, but here’s an opportunity to do ... interreligious practice, interreligious life,” said [Deena Grant](#), acting dean.

“What we didn’t want to do, we didn’t want to dilute either of the holidays,” she said. “And that was really important to us.”

Hartford International University for Religion and Peace.  
A Haggadah that will be used for a combined Iftar and model Seder at the  
Hartford International University for Religion and Peace.

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The Passover Seder is held on the first and, often, second night of Passover, after sundown, Grant said. Iftar, which is the meal breaking the daily fast, is eaten as soon as the sun sets.

“It wouldn’t be possible for us to do an actual Seder on the night of Passover here, because people wouldn’t be able to come onto campus,” Grant said, because driving is not allowed for Orthodox Jews once Passover begins. So Sunday’s meal is a real Iftar but a model Seder, held before Passover.

“We thought this could be a teaching experience,” Grant said. “For those who celebrate Passover it’s preparing us for the holiday, and a lot of people do model Seders in preparation for the actual Passover Seder. And for the Muslim, or Islamic community, it’s an actual Iftar, which is the celebratory meal that you have at the end of the day.”

“It just started off with, let’s invite a few people, nothing major,” said [Aida Mansoor](#), director of field education. “But then as we got into it, in terms of preparation and how much we had to know about it in order to do it, it kind of grew and so became like an event now.”

Mansoor said the goal was to create a way for people to learn about each other’s faith. “And of course, that’s one of the focuses is to get people together to understand one another and to deepen understanding and respect of one another,” she said.

Among the preparations was creating a Haggadah, the Seder booklet that tells the story of the Israelite Exodus, which incorporates Islamic traditions as well.

Their Haggadah describes “how the Jewish ritual is done, as well as what happens when people break fast,” Mansoor said. “So we’re having quotations from the Quran and the Torah.”

The Haggadah also will describe what Ramadan means. Fasting is one of the five pillars of Islam, and Muslims believe that Mohammed received the Quran starting in the month of Ramadan.

“For people who are Jewish who are going to be attending, this may be the first time that they’ve ever broken fast in Ramadan,” Mansoor said. “And it may be the first time a Muslim has ever gone to a Seder. And so we wanted people to have this book, this keepsake, as a reference to both rituals.”

Among the rituals in the Haggadah are the traditional washing before and during the meal, which is different in the two traditions. Also, while kosher food is considered halal in Islam, it’s not always true in reverse.

“It was really interesting in terms of the enormous similarities that there are between the two faiths,” Mansoor said. “I mean, there are definitely differences, but those little things, those little details are quite interesting when you compare notes.”

Grant said, “What we did is add in moments in the Haggadah when, let’s say we’re talking about fasting, and stop and say, Hey, there’s fasting this month in Ramadan. Why is that? Why do we fast before Passover? Why do we refrain from certain foods on Passover? Why do we eat certain foods on Passover?”

“And then we can see, well, these are two very different holidays,” she said. “They both use food, taste and hunger, satiation as a means to ... bring you into a spiritual place of appreciating God and specifically appreciating God’s redemption of the people of Israel.”

Among the compromises was in the food they chose for the meal. Meat must be prepared in a kosher manner for Jews, which is acceptable to Muslims. Jews would not be able to eat non-kosher halal food, “but they would eat fish and Muslims eat fish as well,” Mansoor said. “So then we thought, OK, how about if we just have salmon or something that we both can have?”

Food is symbolic in both traditions and can be used to think about current issues, Grant said.

“These are very old traditions,” she said. “And we also want to recognize that it’s important to bring them, into some kind of usefulness for modern day,” she said.

“So some of the themes, for instance, of hunger and slavery in the Passover Seder and fasting on Ramadan that can evoke thoughts of social injustices of food distribution,” Grant said. “And while it’s not the same to fast as it is to be hungry regularly, it may be a reminder that we need to do something about hunger, and that part of our religious practices should be involved in trying to engage in social justice.”

There will be a rabbi doing blessings, as well as a muezzin who calls Muslims to prayer. There will be readings from the Bible and Quran.

Another compromise was in the timing of the meal. The Seder begins with a ceremony that involves ritual foods but the main meal is usually served later. To accommodate the breaking of the Ramadan fast, part of the Seder will take place early and the rest, such as the 10 plagues, during the actual meal, Grant said.

“The reason why we fast, according to the Scriptures, it’s to get closer to God, to be aware of our Creator,” said Mansoor. “I’m fasting at the moment and I feel a deeper clarity in my prayer and a deeper connection to God.”

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