

“A Very Light Sleeper”: The Scourge of Anti-Semitism

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1. Introduction

Anti-Semitism is like a dense, poisonous fog which rarely disappears altogether. At times it is thick and at times it begins to lift, but we know it is lurking out there. It can be easily seen in the highways and byways of history and today in different parts of the world. Only recently we have seen the stabbings in New York this past Hanukkah, the shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018, Jews fleeing the Ukraine due to the eruption of Anti-Semitism since the Russian annexation of Crimea and the countless examples of Anti-Semitism on campuses and in public places.

2. Challenging Anti-Semitism

I have been involved over the last three to four decades engaged in studying, battling and attempting to check bigotry ---whether against Muslims, Christians or the Jewish community. Here are some examples of my interactions challenging Anti-Semitism:

- a. I was privileged to be the Muslim Commissioner in a Runnymede Trust study called *A Very Light Sleeper: The Persistence and Dangers of Anti-Semitism*. Although I had some idea of Jewish history, working on this project opened my eyes to the extraordinary story of the Jewish people. It is a stirring story.**

Through the terrible persecution, exile, genocide and suffering the community remained steadfast to its faith. I had so much to learn. Not only was I understanding Jewish history and culture but noting that so much of the abuse and attacks on the Jewish community had a familiar ring as I saw them happening to my own community. My Jewish friends were amazed to note that Muslims too were feeling under siege and said to me your global population is over a billion and yet you feel under pressure, think of us with our tiny population. It helped me understand others better. I believe anyone interested in the topic of Anti-Semitism ought to read *A Very Light Sleeper: The Persistence and Dangers of Anti-Semitism*. I have given some references below and suggest they be consulted for the same purpose. The exercise has helped me to understand better another phenomenon based in hatred that concerns and threatens my own community, commonly referred to as Islamophobia. A landmark study on prejudice against Muslims emerged from this earlier study on Anti-Semitism (1997).

- b. In 1999, I was invited to deliver the Rabbi Goldstein Memorial Annual Lecture by the Liberal and Progressive Synagogues of the UK at the famous St John's Wood synagogue. On arrival I noted the heavy police presence around the synagogue and the packed capacity audience inside. We were informed that some individuals on both sides were not happy with the event and had even threatened to disrupt it. The event however proved historic in breaking the ice between the communities with several prominent

figures in attendance including the first Muslim Lord who had just been appointed. It was widely covered in the main stream media including the *Guardian* and BBC.

- c. After 9/11. I was privileged to be part of the First Abraham Summit initiated by Senior Rabbi Bruce Lustig of the Washington Hebrew Congregation and the Episcopal Bishop of Washington, John Chane over a meal at the Rabbi's home with our wives there to participate and give excellent suggestions. In our first session in the Sanctuary of the Washington Hebrew Congregation when Rabbi Lustig walked across the stage to kiss me on both cheeks he sent out a powerful message to the interfaith audience that needed no words of explanation. Subsequently, the Rabbi, the Bishop and myself visited houses of worship, Universities, think tanks and appeared in mainstream media including the BBC.**

- d. I had the honor of speaking at the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC and found the experience deeply moving.**

- e. I became charter member of ADL's Interfaith Coalition on Mosques (ICOM) which has challenged attacks and assaults on mosques after 9/11. I have worked with the Greater Washington Muslim Jewish Forum, the predecessor to JAMAAT, and the Muslim Jewish Council. This work creates goodwill among Muslims for the Jewish community.**

- f. **My friend Professor Judea Pearl, whose son Daniel Pearl was so tragically killed in Karachi in an act of blatant and cruel Anti-Semitism, and I travelled the world promoting Jewish-Muslim dialogue to improve understanding. We were often invited where there was tension between the communities. Our visits talking to the leaders and students invariably had a calming effect and new friends were made. The high point came when we spoke in the Moses Room in the House of Lords in London, in an event hosted by a Jewish, Christian and Muslim Lord.**
- g. **A powerful and successful development in Jewish-Muslim relations came when the renowned scholar Professor Edward Kessler appointed Dr. Amineh Hoti as the founder-director for the Center for the Study of Muslim-Jewish Relations at Cambridge. The Chief Rabbi of the UK, Lord Jonathan Sacks, was the patron of the Center. Dr. Hoti, with a Ph.D. from Cambridge University, played a significant role in building bridges and therefore checking Anti-Semitism by involving women and their families. She organized trips to each other's homes and houses of worship. She also wrote several books describing the purpose and process of her initiatives.**

3.Lessons

After decades of dealing with the subject these are some lessons I learned:

- h. It is vital to understand each other through scholarship, visiting houses of worship and talking to learned scholars (for example very early on in my dialogues I was deeply impressed by the wisdom and learning of the Rabbis.)**
- i. In my dialogue I noted that once we broke bread strangers often became friends and very soon relationships formed. Amineh's initiatives, for example, resulted in friendships forming across religious lines.**
- j. Over the years I found that the most powerful and effective form of dialogue is the one that is visible and frank and honest in its purpose and content. My dialogue with Judea Pearl always had great impact and drew in the greatest number of people of different faiths eager to reach out to the other and promote understanding.**
- k. Extra guards and increased patrols around Jewish institutions may discourage further violence but unless the hatred in peoples' hearts is checked the acts of violence will not disappear. In London one morning at breakfast Judea Pearl showed me the *Guardian* and pointed to a news item in which a mosque had been attacked. I pointed out that he should look out in the paper the next day for an attack on a Jewish cemetery or synagogue. There was unfortunately a mathematical precision and a sociological relationship in the way attacks on minorities take place.**

- l. The media are blamed for many things but they can also be an ally in promoting a better understanding of each other. They must entertain and consider ratings to survive in a cut-throat environment but they can also teach and give a platform to the champions of interfaith dialogue to share their views.**

- m. Many of the rabbis I have met are scholarly men and women and most effective communicators. They could be requested to visit schools and colleges and inform people of the history of their communities. That exercise would create better understanding. Presently there is a vacuum in religious and cultural studies in our schools. Similarly, rabbis could be great ambassadors to other communities and build bridges for their own.**

- n. I heard the powerful phrase “Never Again” after each violent act against the Jewish community and yet we see the violence happening again and again—most recently late last year in the US. Alas I also see this pattern accelerating and hope the authorities will learn something from this kind of situation so that never again means never again.**

4. Conclusion

The way forward is to develop these conferences and hearings. But no one could have missed the fact that there were antisemitic attacks every single day during this last Hanukkah. In the highly complex and interconnected world that we live we must work together to bring down

the temperature. Anti-Semitism must be challenged round the clock. The violence and hatred must not congeal into the new normal. It is the moral obligation of American leaders regardless of party and other affiliations to preserve the grand and noble vision of the founding fathers of this great nation. At the heart of that vision lies Jeffersonian religious pluralism. Hatred, bigotry and violence against minorities are unacceptable, because they are immoral and un-American.

After attending numerous conferences, visiting many houses of worship and talking to many truly spiritual leaders over the years I have been most impressed by and therefore borrowed a Judaic phrase *Tikkun Ulam*, to heal a fractured world to help me in my task of building bridges. The task before us then is to go out and heal our fractured world. That profound admonishment comes from no less an authority than one of the great sages of our time, the former Chief Rabbi of the UK, Lord Jonathan Sacks. It echoes my own South Asian tradition in which scholars and Sufis preached and practiced what they called *Sulh-I-kul* or “peace with all.” I plan to pursue a study, *The Mingling of the Oceans: How Civilizations Can live Together*, being published by Brookings, 2021, in the hope of finding answers to the question of how civilizations can live together in peace.

5. Recommended Reading/References (with the request that the following be placed on record)

***A Very Light Sleeper: The Persistence and Dangers of Anti-Semitism*,
Runnymede Commission on Anti-Semitism, London ,1994.**

***Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, Runnymede Trust, 1997.**

***Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam*, Akbar Ahmed (See Chapter “Jews and Muslim: Bridging a Great Divide,”). Brookings Press, 2010.**

“Empathy as Policy in the Age of Hatred” by Amineh Ahmed Hoti in *Confronting Religious Violence: A Counternarrative*, edited by Richard A. Burrige and Johnathan Sacks ,2017.

***Journey into Europe: Islam, Immigration, and Identity*, Akbar Ahmed (See Chapter “Judaism, Islam, and European Primordial Identity,”). Brookings Press, 2018.**

Sacha Baron Cohen’s address to ADL 2019.

***The Mingling of the Oceans: How Civilizations Can live Together*, Akbar Ahmed, Brookings Press, 2021.**