



Holocaust Memorial Day 2007

Holocaust Memorial Day 2007

This is the text of a speech given to the Holocaust Memorial Day commemoration event in Camden in January 2007.

In thinking about what to say this evening, I was inspired by the flyer advertising tonight's meeting. The flyer depicts a plaque presented to Camden Council by Rabbi Hugo Gryn who died 10 years ago.

Hugo was both a dear friend and an inspirational mentor who among his many, many activities was a great supporter of the Jewish Council for Racial Equality. A few months before he died he delivered a most moving speech about his concerns over the way asylum seekers were treated. JCORE together with the Refugee Council published this speech as a memorial to Hugo and as an inspiration to others. His remarks, delivered over a decade ago have the same force today as they did then. His concern then for asylum seekers is of course relevant used to describe any group who is marginalized and demonised such as Muslims today. These concerns were very much influenced by his experience of being a Holocaust survivor. Let me read you some excerpts from this speech....

"It seems to me that true religion begins with the law about protecting and shielding the alien and the stranger. It's there in practically every religious tradition and it is there that men and women discover the idea of humanity. As I was coming here today I was thinking of an episode, which was a movie under the heading of the Voyage of the Damned.

This was about a ship, the SS St Louis. It was a German passenger ship which set out from Germany in 1939 and had on board 1,128 German Jewish asylum seekers, each of whom, by the way, had a Cuban visa. When the ship gets to Cuba, the Cuban authorities look at the visas and say only 22 of the visas are authentic – the rest must go back.

The only decent person in the whole story is the German captain of ship. He tries whatever he can. He negotiates with the United States, with Colombia, with Chile, with Paraguay, with Argentina – but nothing comes of it. So the ship recrosses the Atlantic and comes back to Europe. Here 288 of them are allowed to disembark in Britain. 619 of them were admitted to what they thought was the safety of Holland, Belgium and France. Other than the 288 that came to Britain and the 22 who were allowed to land in Cuba, none of the others survived. None of them. It is a very painful and I have to say this, it is an unacceptable fact, that half a century later, we, and by we I include our political leaders as well, we act as if nothing happened. It's unacceptable.

Voltaire said that if we believe in absurdities we shall commit atrocities. And if we believe in the absurdity that people who are fleeing their country, their home, their families, their job are doing it for a whim, we will be on the way to committing the atrocities. Nobody does that unless they have to.

Now there is a great deal of force that is exercised without justice and I believe that it opens a door, a tyrannical kind of door. What concerns me is how a society which



Holocaust Memorial Day 2007

justifiably prides itself on the traditions of tolerance, and fair play, can slide towards lawlessness in its most literal form.

I have a definition of lawlessness that when the force and power over life and death issues – and asylum seeking is a life and death issue – can be at the disposal of whoever is at the controls. That is a very dangerous situation to be in.

I am also desperately concerned over the fact that the issues of asylum seeking and the authorities' mean spirited response to it are part of the process which is the hardening of the caring arteries. There is such a process going on. I see towards the end of the twentieth century here in civilised Europe that it is an abomination, but it is happening.

A civilised society has a responsibility for shielding and protecting life. In biblical times such places of refuge were a guard against the miscarriage of justice and the arbitrary use of power. I think that any society that wants to call itself a civilised society must have in it these areas of refuge.

I believe that future historians will call the twentieth century not only the century of the great wars, but also the century of the refugee. Almost nobody at the end of the century is where they were at the beginning of it. It has been an extraordinary period of movement and upheavals. There are so many scars that need mending and healing it seems to me that it is imperative that we proclaim that asylum issues are an index of our spiritual and moral civilisation.

How you are with the one to whom you owe nothing, that is a grave test and not only as an index of our tragic past. I always think that the real offenders at the half way mark of the century were the bystanders, all those people who let things happen because it didn't affect them directly.

I believe that the line our society will take in this matter on how you are to people to whom you owe nothing is a signal. It is the critical signal that we give to our young, and I hope and pray that is a test we shall not fail."

So where are today, over 7 years since this speech was given, seven years into the new millennium, at our fifth Holocaust Memorial Day. Well, like so many things, we can see that the cup is both half full and half empty.

On the positive side, we have in Britain the most extensive anti-discrimination legislation in Europe and, in London, for all its fault lines, a thriving multicultural community. We also have a plethora of inter-faith groups including a number of Muslim/Jewish initiatives. As far as my own community is concerned, we have a mushrooming of Jewish culture across a range of different disciplines including book weeks, film and music festivals and the development of community and cultural centres.

But there are dark clouds as well: the existence and persistence of institutional racism, tension between and within communities and the ongoing electoral successes of the BNP as they hide behind their superficial veneer of respectability in order to win friends and influence people.



Holocaust Memorial Day 2007

On this note, could you believe that the BNP actually had a letter published in the Jewish Chronicle in which they said, and I paraphrase, “The Jews are alright, it’s the Muslims and the asylum seekers who are the problems”.

Then there are fears about the prevalence of anti-semitism today, not only in attacks against Jews, but also in the insidious and exaggerated views of Jewish power and influence.

And also prevalent today in Britain is the continuous demonising of asylum-seekers and Muslims.

The Institute for Public Policy Research published a major review in 2005 of people’s attitudes towards asylum-seekers. Their findings about the degree of animosity about asylum-seekers make for very troubling reading.

These images of ‘disreputable undeserving foreigners’, like similar reactions to Muslims, echo views expressed about Jews, not only during the Nazi period, but for hundreds of years before that.

Maleiha Malik, an academic at King’s College, in an address she recently gave at a conference organised by the GLA, talked about a number of the similarities in the way both Muslims and Jews have been demonised for their religious and cultural practice. For example, because of the way they dress, their treatment of women, the way they slaughter animals, and adherence to certain religious texts, that they are held as being culturally disfunctional and cannot be incorporated into liberal democracies.

She mentions the early 20th century writer S. H. Jeyes who felt that nearly all Jews were “politically unfit to be suddenly transplanted into those democratic institutions for which we have adapted ourselves by a long course of self-governing liberty.”

How many times have we heard such views expressed about Muslims today?

Maleiha Malik also points out how some commentators claimed that the involvement of a few Jewish activists in the late nineteenth century anarchist movement and later in the Bolshevik movement was evidence of the fact that Jews were more inclined towards terrorism and violence, again sentiments so often expressed against all Muslims.

We know that both in terms of anti Jewish and anti Muslim sentiments (and of course anti asylum-seeker), and anti-multiculturalism that the press have played and continue to play a crucial role in demonising all these groups. The following quote, (and there are many to choose from) is from the Manchester City News in 1888, whilst directed at Jews, could equally be directed at Muslim and asylum-seekers.

“...Their unclean habits, their wretched clothing and miserable food enable them to perpetuate existence upon a pittance... these immigrants have flooded the labour market with cheap labour to such an extent as to reduce thousands of native workers to the verge of destitution... Surely our own people have the first claim upon us”.

Jewish Council for Racial Equality.
www.jcore.org.uk



Holocaust Memorial Day 2007

Comparisons between Muslims and Jews were commented on by The Guardian journalist, Jonathan Freedland, who wrote “I’ve been trying to imagine what it must be like to be a Muslim in Britain. I guess there’s a sense of dread about switching on the radio or television, even about walking into a newsagents. What will they be saying about us today? Will we be under assault for the way we dress? Or the schools we go to, or the mosques we build?”

In this article he concluded with these words: “I try to imagine how I would feel if this rainstorm of headlines substituted the word ‘Jew’ for ‘Muslim’. Jews creating apartheid, Jews whose strange customs and costume should be banned. I wouldn’t just feel frightened; I would be looking for my passport.”

He articulates what many in the Jewish community have an understanding of;

Of how myths misunderstandings and stereotypes are used to victimise and demonise whole groups of people.

How certain groups are defined as one monolithic community without being allowed the same diversity that some of the more established communities are allowed.

How we are told in an endless variety of ways that we haven’t passed the ‘cricket’ test and thus our allegiances are being constantly challenged.

To counter these trends we need, all of us to work together to...

participate not only in these large campaigns, but also to look at the grass roots; the workplace, the classroom and around the dinner table, and reassess ways of positively challenging the stereotypes and misinformation which can thrive in these settings

Constantly examine our individual institutions (faith schools, religious teaching) and make sure we do not demonise “the other”, nor contribute to stereotyping and make sure that race equality, human rights, social inclusion are part and parcel of what we do and what we teach.

Stop seeing antisemitism, Islamophobia and other forms of racism within our little boxes and recognise that we as victims can also be perpetrators and that we all need to work within civic society to diminish all forms of racism, not just the one form that directly affects our particular group. Have to in a sense become less territorial about our victimhood.

Strike a balance between combating antisemitism, Islamophobia and other forms of racism with a more vigorous and creative engagement with the wider society.

Work together to end the demonisation of asylum seekers and refugees (which too many minority and faith communities are now buying in to).

Refocus our concentrate on local and domestic issues

Jewish Council for Racial Equality.
www.jcore.org.uk



Holocaust Memorial Day 2007

Think critically about how we may be reinforcing the secular/religious divide which can become a breeding ground of misunderstandings and instead rally behind a human rights agenda which is honest about violations within our own community as well as the general society.

Finally - this year marks the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery. As with those commemorations, I think it is important that we also see Holocaust Memorial Day as a symbolic space – one in which we can tell our own, unique stories, while at the same time properly hearing the unique stories of others. I know this can be a difficult balancing act, but I believe it is vital as we work towards the kind of society to which we can feel a real sense of belonging.

Dr Edie Friedman,
Director
Jewish Council for Racial Equality
January 2007