

Interfaith Harmony and Holocaust Memorial

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The Introduction to this evening's meeting would, I thought, be the obvious place upon which to base my own contribution to our thoughts and discussions. Calling all Peoples to praise The Lord, with trumpet, lute and harp, may not, I suggest, necessarily equate to harmonious relationships between one Faith and Another. All too often history has been witness to religious conflict, with each protagonist apparently convinced they were fighting 'in the name of G-d'. And that first paragraph actually refers not simply to 'differences' but 'religious differences'. These actual (or sometimes perceived) differences have indeed led to much suffering, but not, I suggest, either to genocidal brutality or indeed, the Holocaust. 'Harmony' comes in many forms. It is pleasant. It is restful. It is comfortable. It is Peaceful. Musically, vocally, architecturally, artistically, in play, and even in the kitchen, and yes, in acts of worship, it is more than acceptable and much to be commended. Disharmony is depressing, distressing, disturbing, unpleasant, uncomfortable and a recipe for unrest. I will not shy from addressing the real causes that have led and continue, alas, to this day, to much suffering, of which the horrors of Genocide and the reality of the Holocaust itself, are especially in our minds right now.

Interfaith Harmony and in broader terms, Harmony amongst all Peoples (The Quotation from the Psalmist specifically calls on 'all' Peoples, and not just those of specific or unspecified Faith), does have a prominent role to play but it is a role and not, in itself, a solution, to the cause of Peace, Universal Peace and we in this place this evening and all those associated with UPF are pretty good at it. I want briefly to examine the three aspects referred to in the Preamble stated to be 'the essential step towards Interfaith Harmony'.

First, 'APOLOGY'. Who is apologising to whom? On a one to one basis it may sometimes be somewhat difficult, but if we know we have upset another person or perhaps damaged his/her property, or even failed to come to their rescue, we can apologise. The apology is not always received graciously, but

to so does tend to make us feel less guilty. Some will find it appropriate to apologise to G-d, as well as, or even, instead of. There will be occasions when more than an apology is required and ways have to be found to make recompense. There are occasions when we do not feel able to forgive a past generation for what we term the 'sins of their forefathers'. Now this takes the notion of apologising to a level beyond the person to Society. We seek an apology even though we have not been personally involved and nor has the person or group from whom we want it.

And that conveniently brings me to the second step, Forgiveness. There is a 'Jewish' angle to this and I am fortunate enough to share it, I like to think, notwithstanding it is a taught precept rather than a thought one. The Jew, on the holiest of holy days, Yom Kippur. The day of At One Ment (Atonement) asks G-d to forgive. When I have done something perhaps just a little bit naughty, I have been known to excuse myself and saying that 'Yom Kippur is just around the corner and I have been so good, I simply felt I had to do some mischief so that I had something to confess, some deed for which to apologise. But when we come together on this most Holy of days, we do not simply ask to be forgiven fro our own individual sins but for those of our Community too, and often, for the wrong-doings of man. And it is not only for what we have done, that we should say 'Sorry', but equally for what we have not done, the so called 'Sins of Omission'. But what does Judaism teach about the re-action we might anticipate? Primarily, that our supplications must be genuine. There must be real sorrow about what we have (or have not) done. And there must be a genuine resolve to resist from further transgression. So that is about our relationship with G-d . As to the apology and the forgiving Man to Man, that too has to be meaningful. We are not able to forgive others, individuals or groups, or Nations, for their wrongdoing. That is G-d's business. But equally, it is not for us, either individually or collectively, to confront absent oppressors, murderers, or those whose ancestors have committed heinous crimes against certain parts of Society. Yet I am convinced that the obstacle called 'Grudge' has to be removed if we are to make progress along the path of and to Peace.

So what about that third step, 'Reconciliation' ? This, I suggest is not an issue so much for discussion as a choice that we have to make. And like so many choices, it is less easy to achieve than one might think. Place the flowering plant in the earth without proper preparation of the soil and what at first is a thing of beauty, will soon perish. Reconciliation has to be planted in fertile soil if it is to flourish. Like the plant, it must be able to grow beneath the soil that we can see, and find nourishment for its roots. Conference smiles, friendly handshakes, words artistically embroidered, they are the petals. I want to end by addressing the final two sentences in the blurb for today's event.how in some places religions, acting together, are contributing to peace and reconciliation and to consider the lessons to be learned and how these can be applied in other troubled areas.

Israel is seen by many as a possible time bomb waiting to explode. This is not the appropriate occasion to examine the Middle East situation and the dangers we all face if it does not come to a peaceful solution. But let me just relate one programme that emanates from a school that I know in Haifa. It is names after the revered Rabbi Dr. Leo Baeck.

Speak here about the Israeli Arab and Israeli Jeish Youth dance project.

So there we have an example of young people coming together, learning together, playing together, understanding each other and above all, I believe, understanding themselves. Such initiatives all over the world, yes, here in London too, are, I suggest, the key to translating our words into positive action for Peace. Many of us will be able to recount stories that reflect this one. But not enough.

We come together to enjoy our quest for Universal Peace. Peace within and Peace without. Let us be wary that we do not neglect the positive attributes within the quest for Peace. Yes, there is much to be said for the silent meditation, the view from the mountain top, the sunset, yes, even the stretch of pure white snow

I could see this morning from my bedroom window. But if we are really serious about this often elusive Peace, we have sometimes to be rather less quiet, less reserved, less shy, less, dare I say it, ostrich like, as we look about us. The sound from the instruments that we play, in our harmonious orchestra must be those which call attention to the injustices that are all around us, close to home and far away.

May we be ever conscious of suffering, indignity, prejudice, and self-satisfaction. May we earn the right to Peace within ourselves and for all mankind.

The Introduction To The Evening:

'Praise the Lord, all people' says the Psalmist and calls for praise from trumpet, lute and harp. 'Interfaith Harmony Week' suggests a picture of different faith traditions joining together in harmony, like the many instruments of an orchestra, in praise of the Holy One.

Sadly, too often religious differences have caused disharmony and, worse, they have contributed to much suffering, to genocidal brutality and to the Holocaust. Apology, Forgiveness and Reconciliation between faith communities is, therefore, an essential step towards Interfaith Harmony. At this meeting, we shall hear how much has been achieved in recent years - for example in the new relationship between Jews and Christians. We shall also consider how much still needs to be done.

If faith communities are learning to overcome past hostility, they have a vital contribution to make to healing the wounds of conflict and enabling former enemies to live together. At this meeting we shall also hear how in some places religions, acting together, are contributing to peace and reconciliation. We shall also be considering the lessons to be learned and how these can be applied in other troubled areas.

'Interfaith Harmony and Holocaust Memorial' - House of Lords, 6th February 2012 (photo from another occasion)