

[[The Kindertransport was a rescue effort initiated by the British Jewish Community in late 1938. It brought almost 10,000 unaccompanied children out of Germany, occupied Austria and Czechoslovakia to England. My (the authors') mother was one of these children. Very few of them ever saw their parents again. The Kindertransport Association is made up of the these "children" (now elderly), their spouses and descendants.]]

Anti-Semitism Talk at Kindertransport Association Conference

October 2004

By Terry Fletcher

As Holocaust survivors and children of survivors, we have both strengths and challenges when responding to anti-Semitism. One strength is that we take anti-Semitism very seriously, and that's a good thing. On the other hand, we still have a lot of raw emotion about the Holocaust. We desperately wish that the Holocaust had never happened, and we feel a special, intense responsibility to prevent a Holocaust or something similar from ever happening again to our beloved Jewish people. We are therefore vulnerable to losing our capacity to discern, sometimes acting as if any incident of anti-Semitism were as serious as the Holocaust, or that it soon could lead to one. And we're not the only Jews who do this.

While it's true that even the most minor anti-Semitic remark could eventually lead to something more serious, that does not mean we should respond to a supermarket clerk who unthinkingly wishes us Merry Christmas as if she were Hitler.

Because nearly all of us live in the United States, I'm going to focus my talk on anti-Semitism in the US. Of course we care about and are deeply troubled by the anti-Semitism occurring in other parts of the world. But what we face on a regular basis and what we can do the most to confront is anti-Semitism here at home. Very little of the anti-Semitism we face here in the US is immediately life-threatening, although it might feel that way. What we are confronted with on a regular basis are thoughtless or offensive comments that we hear in person or in the media, anti-Semitic political cartoons, letters to the editor and op-ed pieces, and signs and speeches at demonstrations. Oh yeah, and that movie! How we respond to anti-Semitism should depend on a careful analysis of the situation, not on our emotional reaction to it.

We usually have many options: we can ignore the anti-Semitism, contact the offender personally, use education, engage in dialogue, politically organize against it, issue press releases, write our own op-eds and letters to the editor, protest it, etc. Wherever possible

(and I know it's sometimes not), I,d like to see us engage in education and dialogue. That way we have a chance at changing the beliefs underlying the actions, not just stopping the actions. So first, I,d say we need appropriate responses to different situations, not a single cookie-cutter response based on our worst fears.

Second, when we do respond to anti-Semitism, we need to have clear in our own minds and be able to communicate what anti-Semitism really is and what it really does. The main characteristic of anti-Semitism is that it scapegoats Jews, so that those who hold the real power in society get off the hook. Historically, when poor and working people started getting angry at the real injustices that were happening to them, time after time, those in power would manage to convince them that the real problem was not their political or economic policies, but the Jews. The people would be duped into turning their anger towards the Jews, and the rulers would get off scott free, leaving many Jews dead and the real problems still in place. This mechanism is still very much alive today.

So the real function of anti-Semitism is not specifically to hurt Jews, but to confuse everyone about the real relationships of power in a society. We Jews do get hurt, but in a big sense, the damage done is to the whole society. When I confront anti-Semitism, it helps me to remember that anti-Semitism hurts everyone, not just Jews, and that everyone stands to benefit from its elimination.

Another very important thing that we can do to respond to anti-Semitism is to get help from our non-Jewish allies. Building strong relationships and alliances with non-Jews is a very good way to enhance our security.

When we do this it is important to remember that we are not the only oppressed people in the world. I'm not going to enter into a discussion about us being "more oppressed" or "less oppressed" than other groups; I think that's futile. Unfortunately, there's more than enough oppression to go around in this world. I'm addressing this issue for two reasons: in recent years much of the anti-Semitism we hear about comes from other oppressed groups, such as African Americans, Arabs and Muslims. Second, as kindred oppressed groups, we should be working together to end our own and each other's oppressions. Sadly this has often not been the case.

I think that much of the anti-Semitism that ends up getting expressed as criticism of Israel and its government's policies come from a lack of understanding that Jews are an historically oppressed people, that the existence of the state of Israel and many of its policies are a response to anti-Semitism, and that many of the attacks on Israel are clouded by anti-Semitic attitudes. When I'm confronted with these kinds of attitudes, I insist that the person in question acknowledge that Jews are an oppressed group and that they see the policies they are complaining about in the context of Jewish oppression. I ask them to learn about Jewish history so that they can understand the actions they are complaining about. I also ask that they examine their own potentially anti-Semitic beliefs.

Many people would stop there, but I wouldn't. I,d say that we can take anti-Semitism

into consideration and still decide that the Israeli government's actions were inhumane or disproportionate. Just because an action is a response to an oppression doesn't always mean that it is a correct or justifiable response. And just because you are part of an oppressed group, that does not make you immune from having your own prejudices and oppressive attitudes.

So, let's take these same perspectives and apply them to a group who is doing things we don't like, say the Muslims in the US, who we all know have been the victims of hate crimes, discrimination and government round-ups and deportations. What would happen if we tried to understand their actions as a response to their oppression? What would happen if we learned about their history as a way to better understand their viewpoints? And what if we examined our own prejudices and how they affect our attitudes and interactions with this group? This doesn't mean that we excuse anti-Semitism. But we can address it from a smarter, and more informed point of view. If we want our potential allies to support us in our battle against our oppression, we also need to support them, which still does not mean we have to agree with everything they say or ignore their own oppressive attitudes.

There may be those of you who don't think this is possible. But you can start small, just by making friends with one person from a group you don't usually associate with. I'd like to end with a story of how I put this into practice: I had the very good fortune of meeting and becoming friends with a wonderful Arab Moslem named Mohammed. He came to a meeting of a Jewish peace group I belong to and seemed to have lots of questions about Jews. I emailed him after the meeting: "It seems like you had a lot of questions about Jews," I said. "If you have any more, I'd be happy to try and answer them for you."

Well, he did have more questions, and soon I started asking him questions about Arabs and Muslims as well. As it turned out he had been raised in Iraq under the rule of Saddam Hussein, where anti-Semitism was omnipresent. I had been raised with negative stereotypes of Arabs and virtually no information about Muslims, so we were well-matched. Eventually we agreed to an informal deal: if he would come to synagogue with me, I would go to mosque with him. As it turned out, I didn't end up going to mosque with him, because women and men have to pray in different sections of the mosque, and I was just too scared to go and be among only strangers.

Fortunately, I ran into a former student of mine and her mother, both Malaysian Moslems, and they agreed to take me to their mosque in Oakland. They lent me a hijab or headscarf to cover my hair and even a long robe to put over my clothes. At the mosque my former student Jassmine taught me how to do the ritual washing that Moslems do before they pray, and Ana, her mother taught me how to do the Moslem prayers. I was nervous to be a Jew at a mosque, so I kept my star of David necklace hidden and didn't tell anyone I was a Jew. But Ana introduced me to everyone we ran into as her daughter's Jewish teacher. The responses were all very warm and welcoming.

During a break in the prayers, I agreed to take Jassmine to a store down the street to buy some sweets. The errand seemed innocuous enough at first, but as we stepped out onto the dark street, I realized with a fright that I was walking around in public in full Muslim attire just two months after 9/11, when hate crimes against Muslims were rampant. Thankfully, nothing untoward happened, but walking that block to the store and back turned out to be far more terrifying than anything I'd experienced as a Jew. And when we got back to the mosque, suddenly it felt safe, rather than scary to be there.

My Muslim friend Mohammed came to synagogue with me twice, once for Saturday morning Shabbat services and once on Rosh Hoshanah. He wore a kippah and participated in the prayers. After the morning Rosh Hoshanah services, I asked for his reactions. "The way you Jews pray is really different," he said. "It's day and night different from how Muslims pray. But the content of the prayers ^ what we pray for: it's exactly the same."

What made my friendship with Mohammed work? We both reached across a divide, were willing to question our own assumptions, and were willing to get out of our comfort zones to learn about each other's cultures, politics and traditions. And if someone as scared as I am can do it, why not you?

To recap, when we survivors and children of survivors experience anti-Semitism, we need to take stock of the actual situation, and not have a cookie-cutter response as if everything were the Holocaust. We need to remember that anti-Semitism hurts everyone. And we need to get help from our allies, which may involve further educating ourselves and questioning our own assumptions.

Thank you.