

Small Miracles in Our Region

On the first night of Chanukah 5765, Jews around the world lit a candle to celebrate the miracle of our survival. In Yogyakarta, Indonesia, Rabbi Michael Weisser of New Zealand and I did the same. In the presence of about 100 of the 140 delegates to the regional Dialogue on Interfaith Cooperation, Rabbi Weisser sang out the Hebrew blessings, praising G-d for His miracles and marvelling at the fact that we have survived to experience the joy of arriving at this moment in time.

Indeed, the very presence of a Jewish representative on each of the Australian and New Zealand delegations to the Conference represented an enormous achievement in the history of Jewish life in the South-East Asian – Oceania Region. Considering that we are only half of one percent of the population, to be included in a delegation of just ten is highly flattering to the status of the Jewish community in our countries.

Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer convened the conference along with his Indonesian counterpart, Dr Hassan Wirajuda. The stated objective was “to foster greater understanding and cooperation between the various faith communities in our region” and the underlying aim was to empower religious moderates.

The Australian delegation comprised six Christians (an Anglican, two Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Lutheran and Uniting Church), one Muslim, one Hindu, one Buddhist and one Jew. Delegates were selected by the Minister himself from among those “who have practical experience in fostering inter-communal relations.”

The selection was not without controversy. Catholic Archbishop Pell was included but not the ecclesiastical equivalent of the Anglicans. The Uniting Church delegate, (one of three women), was selected over the current head of her Church. The most vocal person objecting to his non-inclusion was Sheikh Haj-Amin El-Hilaly, a radical Muslim cleric who is self appointed as spiritual leader of the Islamic faith in Australia.

In each case, the Minister was adamant that the individuals he had selected best embodied the ideals, the experience and skills in interfaith dialogue that he sought. In my own case, the unavailability of the President of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, Jeremy Jones, who had been instrumental in advising the Minister regarding the plans for an international interfaith conference, certainly made my selection possible.

As a founding member of the Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims and Jews, and representing the ECAJ in other interfaith delegations as well, my very practical experience in interfaith dialogue sufficiently impressed the Minister that he was prepared to include me on the basis of my nomination by the ECAJ.

When the invitation to participate arrived, I was both flattered and concerned. I immediately made contact with the responsible person at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to forewarn him of the difficulties of including an observant, Orthodox Jew in such a delegation. The issue of travel was simple – I would miss the Sunday activities but arrive in time for the formal proceedings of the conference. The issue of food was of greater concern. In normal circumstances I would not organize a “travel kit” of food. However, I was sensitive to the diplomatic scandal that could ensue if I brought my own “doggie bag” to the Sultan’s palace for the closing dinner.

After providing the Department with information about the laws of kashrut and explaining that I had a high level of adherence to these laws, I was pleasantly surprised to be contacted directly by the Australian embassy in Jakarta. He was phoning to assure me that the arrangements for my separate cooking and eating utensils and my vegan diet were in place. As it transpired, I had my own cook and waiter, allocated exclusively to ensure that my religious dietary needs were met.

There is no doubt that my gender helped secure my place. The protocols for the dialogue specifically mentioned the need for the inclusion of women in the delegations. As it was, Australia managed to include three, bettered only by the Philippines and Singapore, who managed four apiece. Women led the delegations of Papua-New Guinea (Lady Carol Kidu, Minister for Social Welfare and Development) and the Philippines, and women were prominent in the discussions, with the young Confucian representative from Indonesia impressing everyone with her intelligent contributions. The three Australian women participated actively in plenary and workshop sessions. Although no plenary session was chaired by a woman, they featured prominently as workshop leaders for the session examining case studies in interfaith cooperation.

The first day of the Dialogue was Sunday 5th December. As I did not join my Australian colleagues, who travelled to Indonesia on Saturday (Shabbat), I missed the excursion to the Temple at Borobudur. (This was rectified on the Wednesday.) I arrived to catch the tail-end of the dinner with Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, where he urged the Australian delegation to network and to speak out. These instructions contrasted sharply with the instructions given to some of the other delegations.

The Minister was gracious in welcoming me and his warmth extended to the following morning, when he made a point of greeting me personally at the Prambanan Temple where we met. Two members of each delegation were invited to travel to the Temple prior to the opening session on the Monday, for what was essentially a photo opportunity. Catholic Archbishop Pell and I represented Australia. We then returned to the conference venue for the formal opening.

Delegates were required to be in their allocated places by 8:30 am. The layout of the room, a u-shape of three-rows' depth, did not seem conducive to genuine dialogue but this was to be proven an unnecessary concern.

Ten delegates made their way to the front of the hall; I was among them. Each of us had been asked to represent our faith community in the Interfaith Prayer ceremony which was to proceed the official welcome by the President of Indonesia, HE Dr Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

Catholicism was represented by a Bruneian delegate; Confucianism by Indonesia; the Baha'i faith was represented by Paul Lupai from Papua- New Guinea; Buddhism had a spokesperson from Myamar; Hinduism was represented by Thailand; Australia provided both the Muslim and Jewish representatives; the Protestant faith ("Christian" as opposed to "Catholic" for most in our region) was represented by as Cambodian; Singapore delegates spoke for Sikhism and for Taoism.

I was honoured to select the following for the prayer on behalf of "Judaism":

*Ashira Lashem b'chayai, azamra lelokai b'hodi
Yerav elav sichi, anochi esmach bashem
Yitamu chataim min ha'aretz urishaim od einam
Barchi nafshi et Hashem
Halleluyah*

I will sing to the Lord with all my life
I will make music to my G-d with all my might
My speech will be dedicated to glorifying the Creator
And thus I will find joy.
Let us banish evil from the earth and that which is wicked shall be no more.
My whole soul will be dedicated to G-d's praise.

Od yavo shalom aleinu.

Together we can achieve peace.

Halleluyah.

From that moment onwards, I was identified as "the Jewish delegate", along with Rabbi Weisser, who chose to wear a kippah for the duration of the conference, proclaiming proudly, as I did, our Jewish identity.

Significantly, there was no outward hostility towards Jews or Judaism. The Head of the Bishops' Conference of Indonesia addressed me as his "Daughter of Zion". The Anglican Bishop from Papua-New Guinea sought me out to express his keen interest in Judaism, and his Muslim compatriot presented me with a list of questions that had been perplexing him. Many delegates

were confused: was I really a Jewish person? It was clear that, for many, Jews were mythical figures from an ancient tribe. Their live presence at such a gathering was a shock. For Cambodians, Laotians, Vietnamese and others, issues of the Middle-East have not dominated the flow of information in their less-than-free media and so biases against Jews or Israel have not penetrated their psyches. Indeed, the word "Jew" carries overtones of a mysterious past in distant lands.

The official welcomes by HE Dr N Hassan Wirajuda and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer contained the appropriate words of encouragement and indicated the personal interest of both Ministers in the success of the Dialogue.

Dr Wirajuda said "In a very real sense, we came here to pool our spiritual resources together and to invest them in the solution for some of the most intractable problems of the societies in which we live...Religion and culture are among the core components of civilization. Hence, promoting interfaith dialogue among nations is an important global agenda."

Minister Downer amplified, "It is a profoundly important discourse, a most timely conversation. ... One of the reasons why this Dialogue is so timely is because, as we all know, the peace and harmony of the world, and of our region, is under threat...Ultimately it is people of moderation who are going to be able to effectively curb the terrorists and others who commit violent acts in the name of religion, to thwart them in their attempts at recruiting and to vanquish them in the battle of ideas."

The Chairman of the Muhammadiyah, ("Followers of Muhammad"), movement introduced the President of Indonesia by saying "We will explore ways to forge a closer inter-faith cooperation to create a better society we serve, a better world we all share." The President himself then addressed the gathering in a similar vein. His very presence demonstrated the priority Indonesia is giving to coopting religion, particularly moderate Islam, for peaceful purposes. Despite modern secular nationalism as the basis for the independent Indonesian state, 86% Muslim Indonesia is struggling with the rise of extremist movements within. Modernist, or reformist, Islam in Indonesia is best exemplified by the Muhammadiyah, the predominant movement in the region of Yogyakarta, the selected site for the conference. The President is relying on strengthening the modernists to undermine the reactionaries. The Dialogue was a key component in promoting this agenda.

The opening ceremony concluded with the sounding of the traditional Buddhist chimes by the President and the Sultan of Yogyakarta.

Our first plenary session, "Key Challenges facing Communities in the Region" consisted of two brief academic papers followed by open discussion. Australians, New Zealanders and representatives of the Philippines, Indonesia and Papua New-Guinea immediately distinguished themselves as

forthright, critical thinkers. Not that there were not highly intelligent, significant personalities from other nations but, for the mostpart, they were restricted to “official lines” or prepared statements, whereas we were free to respond, to interact, to offer divergent views and even to imply criticism of our own governments.

From Myanmar, only the government “minder” spoke in the plenary sessions and the same was true for Brunei. The Vietnamese read out a prepared, sanctioned statement and distributed the text of an Act of Parliament to “prove” their country’s commitment to freedom of religion. The Singaporean delegation asserted that Singapore had the solution to extremism – any expression of it was outlawed and the government determined the appropriate lines religious communities should take. This was lauded by the delegation as a suitable solution to the disturbances evident in other places.

My most uncomfortable moment had nothing to do with my status as a Jew and little to do with religion at all. The Australians had been encouraged to meet others. Taking this responsibility seriously, most of us attempted to use the five meal breaks each day to sit with representatives from other delegations. When we arrived at the Monday night formal dinner, I noticed seven of the Cambodian delegation sitting in a group. (The other three were Buddhist monks, who did not eat after midday.) I asked if I could join them and was welcomed by someone who introduced himself as the Muslim. He was one of those who checked several times if I were really a Jew – clearly needing convincing! In a short time it became clear that most of the Cambodians did not speak English sufficiently fluently to engage in dinner conversation. They clearly could not have benefited from and certainly not participated in the proceedings of the Dialogue. They were there as employees of the Ministry of Cults and Religions: public servants enjoying a perk at the Australian government’s expense. One of their group, however, did have excellent English and my new Muslim friend signalled him to move next to me.

Rev Vek Huong Taing handed me his card. When I asked him how he had acquired such excellent English, he explain that when the Khmer Rouge had been overthrown, he had been forced to flee to Thailand and from there found his way to the United States. He had recently been rehabilitated in Cambodia and had returned to continue his Christian missionary work. My mind went into over-drive – this man had been with the Khmer Rouge; that makes him a murderer or at least an accomplice to murder. I couldn’t say anything, nor could I get up and leave. Fortunately, the formalities at the dinner saved me from the need for further conversation and I was relieved when the whole Cambodian delegation left the hall early.

However, my feelings of discomfort were sorely misplaced. It was not until I returned to my office and decided to see what was written about this likely war criminal that I discovered the following. In 1979, Vek Huong, his wife Samoeun Taing, and their son Wepousana were condemned to death

because of their association with the United States-based Campus Crusade for Christ, International. Huong and his family had been in Phnom Penh distributing Christian literature when the city fell to the Khmer Rouge. They were forced to leave the city, along with everyone else. Eventually, they were sent to Battambang, in western Cambodia about 300 miles east, near the border with Thailand. From there they escaped from the Khmer Rouge to Thailand in the confusion that resulted when Vietnamese tanks attacked the Khmer Rouge near Battambang. After a long ordeal they made their way to the United States. Huong's story is told in *Ordeal in Cambodia*, published by His Life Publishers, 1980.

Rather than feeling uncomfortable, I could have taken the opportunity to admire this heroic resistor against Khmer Rouge godlessness. Rev Vek Huong Taing was not the only hero I encountered. A Catholic Priest from Brunei struck me as particularly brave. Although banned from speaking out and saying anything that might vaguely resemble government criticism, this English educated, passionate advocate for justice and human rights took every opportunity – at meals and on buses – to explain that Brunei was an oppressive state. To demonstrate this, he explained that his inclusion in the group, as the second Catholic, only came about because the leader of the Anglican Church had declined his invitation to be a member of the delegation. He had been worried that this was a trick to have him leave the country, where he would be certain to say something the government construed as seditious and which would be used as a pretext to deny him re-entry. Hence, the Bruneian delegation included two Catholics and no Protestants.

It was at that Monday night dinner that another cultural-linguistic gap was made apparent to me. The Muslim speaker concluded his remarks with the phrase "G-d bless you." In broken English, one of the Buddhists asked me, "What did he mean by 'G-d bless you'?" Initially I was not sure if he was asking about the phrase specifically in the context of the speech just given but it soon became clear that it was a general question. How does one explain to a non-monotheist the concept of 'G-d bless you'? I did my best, saying something about the one G-d Who has the power to bestow blessings on individuals or on all humanity. The polite nods indicated some progress in understanding but this was clearly a concept too new and too foreign to be completely absorbed.

There was enormous interest in the Australian case study entitled, "More than Food and Music – Interfaith Relations in Australia". The title was explained by Wendie Wilkie, who had done much of the preparation for the presentation. At one of the interfaith gatherings she had attended some years ago, participants had expressed frustration that interfaith relations had remained on the level of sharing food and music – exotic delicacies – but had not progressed to grappling with real issues. This has certainly been rectified in the last decade, particularly with the advent of the Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims and Jews.

The section of the presentation that attracted the greatest interest was the 'Journey of Promise'. We had anticipated this and the Department of Foreign Affairs had generously prepared a DVD about this project for each delegate to the conference. Realising that many of the delegates would not have access to DVD technology, I also carried 30 booklets of the experience to distribute. These were quickly taken up and a further small quantity was photocopied at the Conference.

As the Jewish mentor to 'Journey of Promise', I was able to attest to its significance, particularly regarding the empowering of small minorities to speak about their issues in an open and safe environment. In Australia, we took ten young Christians, ten Muslims and ten Jews between the ages of 18 and 25 for an intensive week together. Other countries would probably include different faith communities. The key was the age of participants, which signifies looking towards the future. Not only were personal friendships forged but a broad appreciation of the issues facing the different faith groups, their principles and priorities.

We were also proud to report that the young people themselves had moved the project forward through their initiative, 'Youth Encounters'. Two of the Jewish delegates had successfully brought together Year 11 students from a Catholic school, a Muslim school and a Jewish school into dialogue. After a professionally crafted and executed educational program preparing the students in their respective schools for dialogue, the meetings between them broached significant issues and increased understanding and mutual respect.

While Australia was presenting its case study, other workshops grappled with the issue of AIDS in Papua-New Guinea and studies in interfaith harmony from Singapore, Myamar and the Philippines. While there was some cynicism expressed regarding Singapore and Myamar and genuine amazement at the small daily achievements in the tension ridden regions in the Philippines, it was the workshop on AIDS that sparked the greatest controversy. When the Nigerian-born Muslim representative of Papua-New Guinea expressed the view that AIDS was Divine retribution for immorality, he verbalised what some were quietly thinking. Nevertheless, his position frustrated his colleagues, who were describing the joint effort to counter the AIDS epidemic in a humane, non-discriminatory way. Eventually the focus was returned to the way in which interfaith cooperation was and could be garnered to achieve positive practical outcomes.

One of the most memorable lines from the Dialogue came from Bishop Peter Fox, an Anglican from PNG, who described people's attitude to their religion as taking one of two forms: the time-line or the time-capsule. Those who took the former view expected their sacred texts to be constantly interpreted and in dynamic relationship with the present. Those who took the latter were holding on to a "perfect past" and their text was static. Of course, he urged us all to subscribe to the former perspective.

Altogether, I identified nine contentious issues that were raised during our discussions that require further investigation and dialogue. They were:

- Conversion;
- The sanctity of the text;
- Joint projects – “active” dialogue;
- Poverty;
- The status of women;
- The relationship between “tribe”, “ethnic group” and “religion”;
- Language: appropriate language and language barriers;
- Salvation;
- Human rights and religious obligation.

When Professor Dr Syafii Ma’arif, Chairman of the Central Board of Muhammadiyah, summarised the workshop outcomes he spoke of the need to “promote and foster cultural acceptance and tolerance.” After lauding the “spiritual dimension” as a “transcendental anchor”, he commented on the need for believers to attract non-believers to face the challenges “everywhere in this planet”. My cynicism regarding his remarks were not connected to their content. Having seen him on ABC television the night before, suggesting that the solution to the various conflicts in the Middle-East, and in other places as well, lay squarely with the United States, I was bemused by his suggestion that Dialogues such as ours were important. I wanted to challenge him but diplomacy got the better of me.

Indeed, while I am convinced that most delegates to the Dialogue sincerely believe in our power to influence the destinies of our communities and, through them, the region and the world, one of the characteristics of political leaders in the region is their tendency to blame others – usually the United States – for conflict and for terrorism. This Dialogue contradicted the assertion that only political or military power could solve problems and suggested that local solutions could be found for many of the ills of the region, especially when people of faith act forcefully together.

I came away from the conference with a changed attitude towards Buddhism or, more correctly, Buddhist leaders, who have been, in my opinion, negligent of their responsibilities to influence political decision-making. In a separate piece, I have written a critique of the Buddhist laissez-faire attitude which has allowed dictatorships and oppressive regimes to dominate our region.

Our final task at the Dialogue was to communicate some outcomes and this proved a most difficult challenge. After meeting in national groups to suggest practical projects for the region as well as for our own countries, we gathered to exchange ideas that had been generated. It was at this session that the gulf between countries was most evident; there were delegations that had not been able to have free discussion and those, like Australia’s, that were vibrant and creative.

When the Chair, Right Reverend Richard Randerson of New Zealand, then suggested that we try to issue a joint statement, there was significant dissent. Professor Paul Morris of New Zealand (in fact, another Jew, but at the Dialogue in his capacity as Professor of Religious Studies) suggested a 4 point general statement that received approval from most delegates but the Indonesian government had a 19 point platform for which they sought approval.

Debate ensued, highlighting language difficulties as well as the range of views amongst delegates. The label "moderate" is one which many Muslims find difficult. While its intended meaning is moderation in terms of attitude towards those of other faiths and the rejection of extreme modes of action, especially terrorism, Muslims feel it might also indicate moderation with regards to belief. This, of course, is unacceptable. My contention that one could be passionate with regards to commitment to one's own faith but at the same time respectful towards others of different beliefs, was appreciated but the word "moderate" was eventually eliminated from the text.

One of the aims of the Dialogue highlighted in the opening was to undermine terrorism and empower those who rejected it. Unfortunately, a decision was made that there could be no reference to terrorism in our final statement. The Australian Muslim delegate, Ameer Ali, insisted that he would not oppose terrorism unless we also had a statement opposing counter-terrorism. While his objection left some bemused, we adhered to the principle of not including in the statement anything to which there was dissent. (Ironically, the distributed version of the statement does include a reference to terrorism in the opening clause.) On the other hand, Sister Patricia Madigan succeeded in having the word "justice" included in the statement.

The Statement, issued by our Indonesian hosts, is included as an appendix to this report. More important than its contents was the process to achieve it. Slow, strained, but ultimately a cooperative effort, the Chair handled the diverse group with diplomatic skill and patience and the outcome was accepted unanimously. The recommendations that we repeat the Dialogue, perhaps in two years' time and possibly in the Philippines, were not included in the statement but were clearly accepted by the majority of participants.

Despite the skill of the Chair and the positive outcome, the process did require significant compromise and effort, so that when, at the end of the session, it was announced that in less than one hour's time, before the buses departed for the Sultan's Palace for our final dinner, there would be a candle-lighting ceremony in honour of Chanukah in the foyer of the hotel, I was not hopeful that many would turn up.

One of my religious requirements that I outlined to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade before leaving Australia was Chanukah candle-lighting. I explained that not only was I required to light the first night's candle on the Tuesday evening but that the "mitzvah" (religious obligation)

was that it should be in public. Initially the DFAT representatives had thought it would be a pleasant addition to the program for the final dinner at the Palace but it transpired that the Sultan was less keen on the idea. The compromise reached was that the candle would be lit, with brachot (Hebrew blessings), at the hotel and that I could say the blessings in English at the Palace preceding the dinner.

And so it transpired. Rabbi Weisser uplifted delegates with his cantorial renditions of the brachot before we departed. Delegates from across the region wished the two of us "Happy Chanukah". When the official welcome to the Palace had been conveyed by both the Australian Embassy representative and the Sultan of Yogyakarta, His Highness Sri Sultan Hamengkubuwono X, I was invited to offer Chanukah blessings. I expressed my awe and appreciation of the moment in the following words:

We offer thanks, O Lord Our G-d, for the miracles that You have performed for us – in the past, in the present, in every generation.

We thank You for allowing small minorities to flourish – even in the face of large, powerful forces.

We thank You for allowing us to celebrate our faiths, in our own ways. On this first night of Chanukah, our candle burns symbolically for the miracle of survival and for the joy of reaching this season.

Blessed are You, O Lord our G-d, Who has enabled us to reach this season of joy, Who has extended us favours and granted us life.

These were the last formal words of the Dialogue. After the formal dinner, (where, once again, I was provided with a separately prepared meal with new utensils), with Javanese dancing and music, we posed for a group photograph and returned to the hotel. As we were leaving the Palace, a number of delegates thanked me for the moving words, with many Christians explicitly thanking me for the "Grace".

The final day in Indonesia was spent debriefing with the Australian Embassy and DFAT staff and then shopping and sight-seeing. Kindly, the organisers provided me with a driver to see Borobudur, a huge Buddhist Temple complex, one of the Wonders of the World, which I had missed on the Sunday. It was breath-taking.

My final act as Jewish delegate to the Dialogue came at Jakarta airport. It was second night Chanukah and the obligation to light candles was no less than the previous night. A bemused barman and customer in the airport lounge looked on as I lit the candles, with brachot, in the presence of my fellow delegates, all of whom were happy to support me. Our Australian delegation consisted of strong, committed advocates of their faiths who personified the principles of Dialogue: mutual respect, from a position of security in one's beliefs and in the freedom to express them.

There are two post-scripts to this report. The first relates to the journey home. Former Indonesian President, Abdurrahman Wahid travelled to Australia on our flight. It was my pleasure a week later to meet him at a talk jointly sponsored by the Executive Council of Australian Jewry and tell him personally of how welcoming I found his country.

The second relates to the media. Since my return, I have spoken on ABC radio in a variety of formats and reported about the Dialogue on the Hebrew program on SBS radio. By chance, a journalist from Israel's Kol Yisrael radio was listening to the Hebrew program from Australia on line. He was fascinated by the story, contacted me and, after a lengthy interview with me, intends to present a story for Israeli listeners about the positive relationships the Jewish community has with others, particularly with Muslims, in our region.

Appendix:

Statement

Dialogue on Interfaith Cooperation
Yogyakarta, 6-7 December 2004

1. The delegates to the International Dialogue on Interfaith Cooperation, held in Yogyakarta on 6-7 December 2004, expressed their strong commitment to fostering peace and respect for religious diversity in the Asia-Pacific region. Delegates affirmed their strong condemnation of violence and terrorism. Participants committed themselves to taking action in their own communities to further promote interfaith and inter-communal harmony. Delegates undertook to discuss with their own national governments a range of recommendations designed to strengthen interfaith unity and co-operation.
2. Delegates expressed their strong appreciation of the Governments of Indonesia and Australia and the Central Board of Muhammadiyah and to those participating countries for their support for the Interfaith Dialogue meeting and underlined their support for further interfaith dialogue initiatives.
3. We noted the important statement made by the President of the Republic of Indonesia, in his opening remarks, stating that when ethnic and religious prejudice was compounded by economic and political rivalry, conflict was inevitable. The President stressed that the solution was not to deny the reality of our differences, but to affirm a deeper, greater and more important reality – our common humanity.
4. We believe the meeting has achieved its main objective as a forum to promote understanding and to foster harmony between faith communities across our region. We see this Dialogue on Interfaith Cooperation as the beginning of a process of more direct and frequent communication between regional faith leaders in solving problems and building a more harmonious and peaceful future for the region.
5. We are of the view that the promotion of a culture of peace and acceptance based on relationships of justice should be promoted through education as a way to enrich dialogue.
6. We call upon governments to support such initiatives in the future as a way to promote and strengthen people-to-people contact.